




**LIFE+ Vochtig Haspengouw (LIFE11 NAT/BF/001068)**

**LAFMAN'S REPORT**

**Project title:** Vochtig Haspengouw - Large-scale restoration of a complex of ground- and seepage water dependent habitats

**Coordinating beneficiary:** Natuurpunt

Co-financed by the LIFE+ programme, the EU's funding instrument for the environment and climate action

**Duration:** 2012 - 2019

**Project location:** Haspengouw, south east of Flanders, Belgium

**Websites:** [www.natuurpunt.be/hfc-vochtig-haspengouw](http://www.natuurpunt.be/hfc-vochtig-haspengouw)



# ‘We want to make this part of the Demer valley living again’

**Ward Cielen**, Voluntary manager Munsterbos and Demervallei

The Demer has carved its way through the landscape, 2 metres below ground level with steep banks that drain the meadows, since the 1960s. We want to turn the part of the Demer between Bilzen and Diepenbeek into a living river againthat can meander again through the landscape. Thanks to the LIFE+ project, we have already been able to purchase 20 hectares of nature in the valley. You can still see the old meanders on some of those plots. Together with the water manager, we want to restore the river. Of course, this takes time, but fortunately nature has plenty of that. This is how the typical valleys of meadows and alluvial forests from my youth will return.



The environmental restoration project in Haspengouw was financially supported by the European Commission's LIFE+ programme. LIFE+ is an environmental financial instrument for the protection of threatened European habitats and species. In order to do this, every Member State has designated protected zones, the so-called Habitats and Birds Directives, which together create the Natura 2000 network. In order to help strengthen this network, associations such as Natuurpunt can apply for a LIFE+ project.

European project

Go exploring

were restored, so that heath and heather will soon give Munsterbos a purple hue.

# ‘Children like to work in nature’

**Linda Machiels and Marleen Buckinx**, 6th-grade teachers at SBS De Bloesem

Every year, we cooperate with Natuurpunt's Educational Nature Management project. First, someone comes to the classroom to talk about Munsterbos, the nature, and the usefulness of nature conservation. After that, we go work half a day on site. We clean up cuttings, saw branches off, and remove them. At the end of the school year, we look at the results. For example, we worked on a butterfly area this year. It is very nice for the children to see that all this hard work was not in vain. The children are also very much looking forward to the 'lessons'; it has become an integral part of our programme. They used to say it was child labour, but now they're very enthusiastic. They're happy to be able to work in the woods



Munsterbos is located at the transition from the Campine region to Haspengouw. A large part of Munsterbos consists of old, light-rich oak woods in which the stately common oak tree dominates. The LIFE+ project combated the invasive, exotic plant species in the understory, such as black cherry trees, of over 35 hectares of the forest. Now, native species such as silver birch, European rowan, and older buckthorn are given light and space to form a diverse understory. In addition to valuable forests, this area also contains the remains of a once extensive heathland. As a result of progress-ive afforestation, these relics are in danger of disappearing. During the LIFE+ project, 3 hectares of this heathland vegetation

Transition to the Campine region

In order to give the mineral-rich seepage a better chance, deep ditches were filled in and small historical channels for draining the acid rainwater were restored. Because water does not stop at the border of our plots, we have also been actively involved in large-scale river restoration projects. These are long-term projects, the results of which are already visible in some places, and many more will follow soon.

One water is not the other

During the LIFE project, 25 hectares of forest were transformed into mixed deciduous forests and new forests were created by planting new trees or spontaneous reforestation. Alluvial forests are characterised by tree species that are resistant to high water levels, such as alders and willows. It is important that they are completely flooded in the winter. These wet forests have become very rare in Europe. Alluvial forests are home to many fungi and are important for spiders, ground beetles, and ladybird beetles. On the drier slopes we find forests with a beautiful flora: in spring, the forests are covered with a carpet of fresh green, bright yellow, and white. It's wild garlic, oxlip, and wood anemone that point the landscape with their beautiful early colour palette.

Forest with wet roots

# ‘Nature repairs itself’

**Pierre Vandersmissen**, Voluntary manager Mombeekvallei Alken

About 25 years ago, I had the opportunity to work with the local association 'Natuur en Landschap Alken' to create 'nature within walking distance' in the Mombeekvallei. After a few years, we became a branch of Natuurpunt and a nature reserve gradually grew in the border area between Alken and Sint-Lambrechts-Herk. The monotonous poplar plantations gradually made way for more variation and space to restore natural values.

The LIFE+ Vochtig Haspengouw project started in 2012. It was truly a blessing because thanks to the project, considerably more opportunities were created for flower-rich grasslands. Several farmers are now our allies to help manage these precious gems. Together with the alluvial forests, pools and brushwood, they form a varied whole, a source of LIFE+ in all its diversity.



And the rare species such as devil's-bit and orchids are already doing well in some recently restored areas.

# Marsh marigold, Ragged-Robin, and Cuckooflower are already splashing spring colours around in many places.

The LIFE+ project restored more than 35 hectares of grassland. Poplar plantations, old grasslands with scrub and tree seedlings, abandoned grasslands, fields, and intensive grasslands were restored to natural grasslands. The various starting situations resulted in a wide range of techniques: removing trees, milling stumps, chopping, mining, intensive mowing, etc. This was done with large machines in some places and with a lot of manual work in others in order to save the rare and vulnerable species present there.

tely, this landscape changed radically around the end of the 19th century as the drier grasslands were used more and more intensively as arable fields, and the wettest grasslands were abandoned and reclaimed by forests, or used for planting poplars. A biotope that had been managed by man for centuries almost completely disappeared.



# ‘Enter a plant paradise here’

**Jos Paulussen**, Voluntary manager at Natuurpunt Diepenbeek

Plants have always charmed me. But when I moved to Diepenbeek years ago and became a volunteer at Natuurpunt, I ended up in a real plant paradise. It's a pleasure to work in the Dorpsbenden: purple moor-grass meadows as you hardly find them in Europe anymore, with small scorzonera, whorled caraway, and lots of other rare plant species. The butterflies flutter all around you here. Each and every one of them is proof that we're doing a good job. The LIFE+ project created even more space for flower-rich meadows. They are mowed once a year; fortunately, we don't have to do it all ourselves. Several farmers are helping us to manage the beautiful nature.



P.E. Walter Ruyquint • Cwaeistraat 11 • 2800 Mechelen - photos shutterstock.com, Wim Dierckx, Richard Vuurstoek, Vidaphoto.net/ Yves Adams, Jeroen Mertens, Rollin Verinde, Jonas Dillen



Looking at old maps you can notice how grasslands have dominated the landscape in the river valleys in Vochtig Haspengouw for centuries. After all, hay ensured that more cattle could survive the winter. These grasslands were exceptionally rich in flowers thanks to years of small-scale management. Unfortunately

Grasslands

Come and visit it yourself!

this remarkable nature. But don't just take our word for it. LIFE+ Programme. This brochure will introduce you to and significantly extended with support from the European many special grassland and forest habitats were restored flowers. During the 'Vochtig Haspengouw' project, of flower-rich meadows and forests with spring focused on the restoration and conservation years now, Natuurpunt has successfully natural pearls across the region. For many orchards and fields. We can still find these meadows, bushes, traditional used to be a mosaic of hay region of south-east Limburg the landscape in the loamy

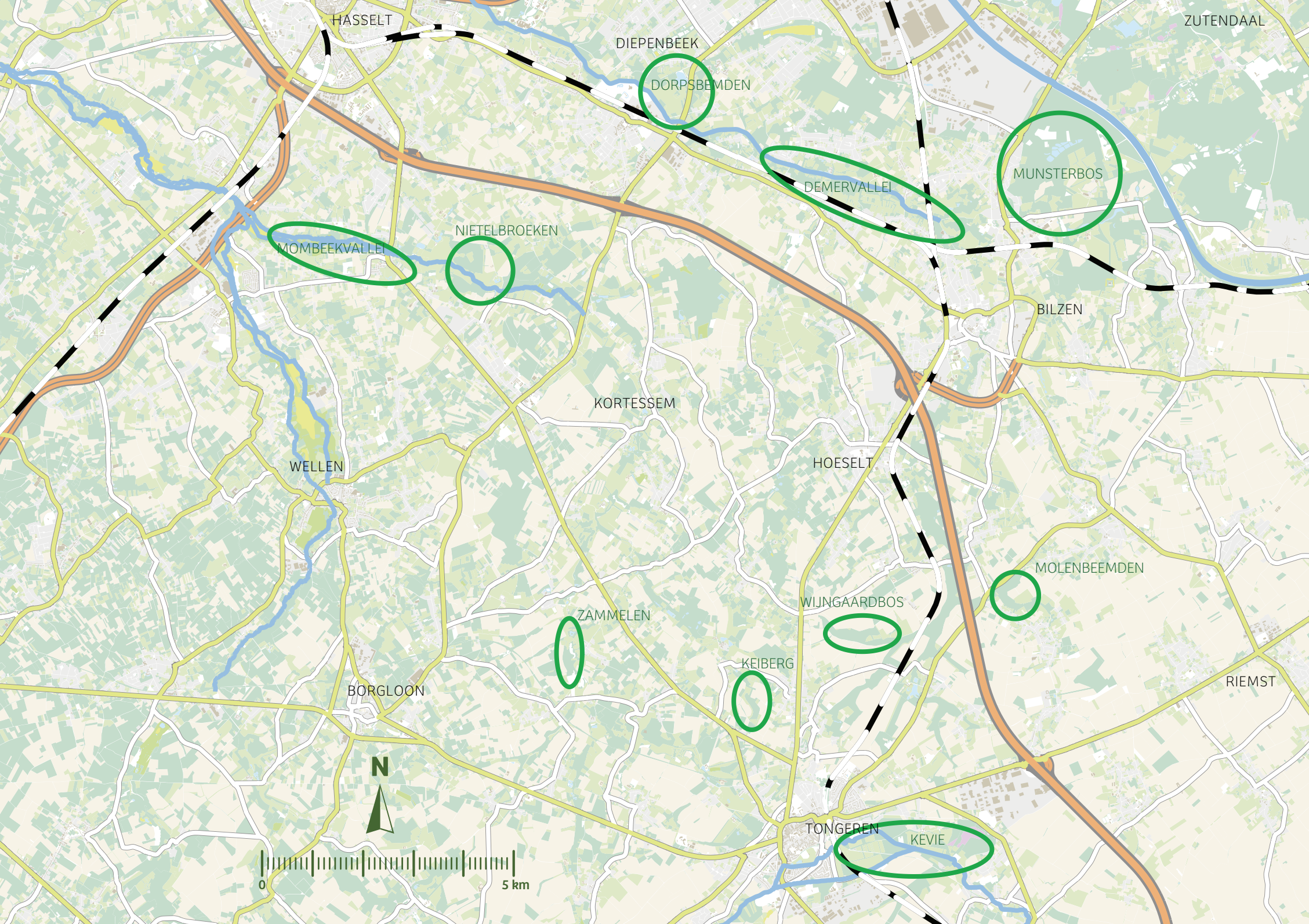
# Green gems



**LIFE+ VOCHTIG HASPENGOUW**  
Natural valleys







## GO EXPLORING

Walking trails in the  
LIFE+ nature reserves.

### DORPSBEMDEN

Mare L'Hoyeswandeling (6,5 km) and Dorpsbendenwandeling (red trail - 3 km)

**START:** Parking local sports hall Demerstrand

### KEVIE

Beemdenwandeling (2,6 km), Molenwandeling (5,3 km), Keviewandeling (8 km) and Jekerwandeling (6,7 km)

**START:** Oude Blaarstraat, Tongeren

### MOMBEEKVALLEI

Yellow trail (5km) **START:** Kapel Steenberg, Steenberg Sint-Lambrechts-Herk (Hasselt)  
Red trail (5km) **START:** Klinkstraat (nabij Oftingenstraat), Alken (with extra trail from Alken)

### MOLENBEEMDEN

Kalverpad (9,1 km)

**START:** 'Onder Ons' near the church of Grote Spouwen

### MUNSTERBOS

Blue trail (5km) and Rode aardgaswandeling (8 km)

**START:** Leroyplein, Munsterbilzen (Bilzen)

### NIETELBROEKEN

Verborgen moois Nietelbroeken (5,3km)

**START:** Parking Herbroekstraat next to nr 37, Kortesem or Nietelbroekstraat, Diepenbeek

### ZAMMELEN

Orange (6km) and red trail (6km)

**START:** Church of Zammelen, Kortessem



### Nature as a playground

Diepenbeek was given its own play forest called 'Ganzebroek', and a natural play area in the valley will be set up soon in Zammelen, where children can enjoy themselves in nature.



### Munsterbos

You can gaze out at the purple heather in the distance from the high benches next to the footpath. Who knows, you may even spot our summer grazers: ponies, sheep, or Galloway cattle. Or head behind the lookout wall or go up the lookout tower to spot a Eurasian hobby, kingfisher, or beaver on the hunt.

### Dreams of the red-backed shrike

With its hooked beak, the red-backed shrike looks like a small bird of prey. And not unjustly because it flies to its prey from its lookout perch. These are usually large insects, but red-backed shrikes also catch mice, lizards, or small birds. When it catches something 'too big', it stores it temporarily by impaling it on the thorns of a bush or on barbed wire.



### Dorpsbenden and Nietelbroeken

Purple moor-grass meadows are the pride of Diepenbeek: beautiful, flower-rich hay meadows with blue tones, consisting of various sedge species and flowers such as orchids and devil's-bit. For this reason, several hay meadows were restored within the LIFE+ project.



### Nietelbroeken

In order to give the Bechstein's bat every opportunity, it was decided, within the LIFE+ project, to replace various red oaks in Nietelbroeken with native trees. They allow a lot more undergrowth that is needed for many insects, and therefore, are an ideal source of extra food for these rare bats.



### Kevie and Munsterbos

By allowing a relatively small number of cattle to graze over a large area, a few scattered spots can be rewilded and reforested while others are kept short. This creates a mosaic landscape of flower-rich grasslands with scattered shrubs and groups of trees.



### Mombeekvallei, Zammelen, and Demervallei

The valleys on the loamy soil of Haspengouw offer the ideal conditions for wet, species-rich brushwood. These are areas of flower-rich vegetation with species as meadowsweet and the lime-loving cabbage thistle. In summer, they are very floriferous and attract numerous pollinators.



### Kevie

The Grootmeers is an old peat bog. Peat with calcareous seepage water provides a unique starting situation. Local people still told about the beauty of the flowers in the area in the past and the very rare Parnassus plant that bloomed here. The LIFE+ project reinstated the management of this formerly abandoned peat bog. In the meantime, marsh marigold, Cuckooflower, and Ragged-Robin colour the area in the spring and plant species come back locally, which indicates that we will be able to restore a valuable calcareous marsh here again.



### Boardwalks

During the LIFE+ project, several new footpaths were constructed and boardwalks were placed in wet areas. Haspengouw valleys are often wet in winter because the groundwater is very high locally and the rivers can flood during heavy rainfall. Boardwalks ensure that you can continue to discover nature even in those periods. Boots or sturdy walking shoes are still recommended in wetter periods.