



ees. But we also called upon engineering firms to carry out a thorough preliminary study, as well as collaborating with the Flanders Environment Agency for measures concerning the flow of water. Local schools regularly helped to plant tree seedlings and experienced contractors carried out the larger works. The support we received from the province of Limburg was also essential. We created four new walking routes in cooperation with the municipalities and the Regional Landschap Kempen en Maasland. This way, everyone can enjoy the restored natural environment.



'Triumphant return of the tree frog'

Sylvain Peeters, manager for the Valley of the Itterbeek, has been a driving force behind the valley's restoration

I'm very proud that the tree frog has returned. I even heard the first tree frog call in 2006. There are currently more than 1,000 calling males here, which is the largest population in Flanders. Foreigners come here because they want to know how we got the tree frogs back. They're sometimes derogatory towards the brushwood and soft rush here, but these plants are incredibly important for amphibians. We also help these with our grazing management and the creation of meres. I focused on the animals from the beginning. I got a lot of resistance, but I just kept doing what I thought was best. And the results speak for themselves!



The Batuen is a mere again

The Batuen, which lies in Kinrooi within the Valley of the IJtberbeek, was a natural area that completely dried up in the course of the previous century due to excessive drainage. Because of this, the were able to restore the majority of the mere by late 2014 and the the neighbouring lots (a study was done initially to ensure that the neighbouring lots) as compounds and agricultural fields) pond not flood as well. It was a true metamorphosis: an open body of water the size of seven football pitches appeared within a relatively short span of time. A high variety of rare birds, amphibians, dragonflies, and plants inhabited the area almost immediately.

A LIFE project = cooperation

Large-scale nature restoration requires precise planning, preparation, execution, and follow up. Firstly, there is continuous dialogue between the Natuurpunt volunteers and the professional employment.

for the Campine region. The dry heathland used to be everywhere beyond the village-centres, but quickly disappeared in the 20th century. The lesser-known wet heathland, which occurs on soils that are wet in the summer, suffered the same fate. There wasn't even a square metre left in the Valley of the Bosbeek, but we knew where these wet heathlands were and previously located. So we removed the shrubs and birches in these locations, as well as getting rid of the humus covering the soil. The result surpassed all expectations; no less than 11 plant species, which were extinct in the region, started to sprout from the old seeds. This landscape will be maintained by letting sheep graze here. One of the typical plants here is the common sundew. These feed on insects that stick to the plant's mucilaginous glands.

'Getting **kids** involved with nature'

Gertie Bergmans, teacher at
De Beverburcht nursery school in
Maaseik

I grew up in the Valley of the Bosbeek and played there quite often as a child. Kids today don't get to play outside as often, which is a real shame. That's why Ms Sanne and I weekly head into the Valley of the Bosbeek behind our school. This is how I intend to get the schoolchildren involved with nature and get them experimenting. The first trip teaches them to really look at nature. During the second trip, we study prickly plants, like nettles, thistles, thorn-bushes, and holly. This way, they won't get stung or poked so much the next time. We also look for insects, we make an autumn crown, we catch water bugs, and so much more. The kids look forward to it every week.



The wet heathland is back in a big way!

More forest in the Valley of the Bosbeek

In the past century, the forests in the Valley of the Bosbeek have never been more abundant than they are now. Residents, like the black woodpecker, Brandt's bat, and even beavers, are benefiting from this. In addition to restoring lost open natural areas, Natuurpunt is also significantly focussing on forests. Nearly 17 hectares of new forests were planted or occurred after conversion of the poplar plantings. Moreover, we have been combatting parasitic plants on no less than 36 hectares of forest. They were brought here by people, for example by hauling spruce out of dumped garden waste. They are considered parasitic because they are non-native species and therefore have no natural predators here.

the initial results were strengthened thanks to the support from the LIFE project starting in 2011. The 'resurrection' of the rare tree frog is nothing short of spectacular: numbers have risen from just 5 mating males in 2006 to more than 1,000 in 2015.

**'Keep going
strong'**

Sil Janssen, driving force behind the Natuurhulpcentrum (Nature Help Centre) in Opglabbeek

I started the division in the valleys of the Bosbeek and the IJterbeek so that the first plots of land could be purchased. My role was primarily behind the scenes. There are a lot of hands out in the field that have worked much harder. Although I am proud that we were able to stop the weekend homes from being built here. Thanks to the management efforts, the areas are now really lovely and many new animal species are showing up. This keeps me going strong.

Even though I'm no longer active as a volunteer, I still come here regularly to enjoy nature. Many of the Natuurhulpcentrum's animal rescues find a new home here.



The IJderbeek, a unique landscape relic

the boundaries of the plots to allow them to flourish and expand. However, the natural environment suffered under the intrusion. For example, the natural environment and populations of plants and animals, and the influx of invasive exotics. We were able to locate these problems through the LIFE project.



'The nature of
yore is **returning**'

Frank Ressler, filmmaker
focusing on LIFE Itter & Oeter

We're filming to show people that beautiful, natural areas are still alive and well in Flanders. We hope that this will also generate more respect for these areas. We also explained why we took certain measures. For example, why were trees cut down? In addition, we put a number of the project's volunteers in the limelight. Thanks to the collaboration between the professional employees and the volunteers, Natuurpunt has achieved some wonderful results here.

I have a special bond with the region. One of the hay meadows belonged to my great-grandfather and my grandmother enjoys telling stories about it. So it's really satisfying to see this nature from days gone by, including the tree frogs and floating water-plantain, returning now!

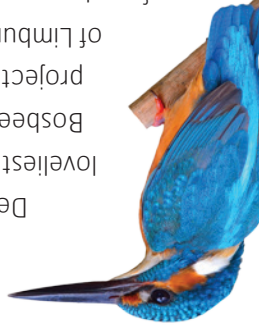


The Bosbeek, completely changed landscape

The Bosbeek originates in and carves a deep path through the Campine Plateau eastwards towards the Meuse River. The Bosbeek was much more economically important in the early 20th century than the sandy soils of the plateau. Now the landscape is rural. Up to this point, hay and some farmed and peat was used as fuel to heat homes.

When modern agriculture came into play, the sandy soils were utilised. The incredibly wet Valley of the Bosbeek, which was considered to be, became important to the human inhabitants. These places were abandoned. The typical hay

A LIFE project has been in full swing since 2011 (and is set to continue until at least 31 December 2016) in two of Limburg's loveliest river valleys, the valleys of the Bosbeek and the IJterbeek. This European project, co-sponsored by the province of Limburg, provides incredible stimuli for forests, meadows, swamps, and ponds in this green oasis. We would like to introduce you to this Kingfisher

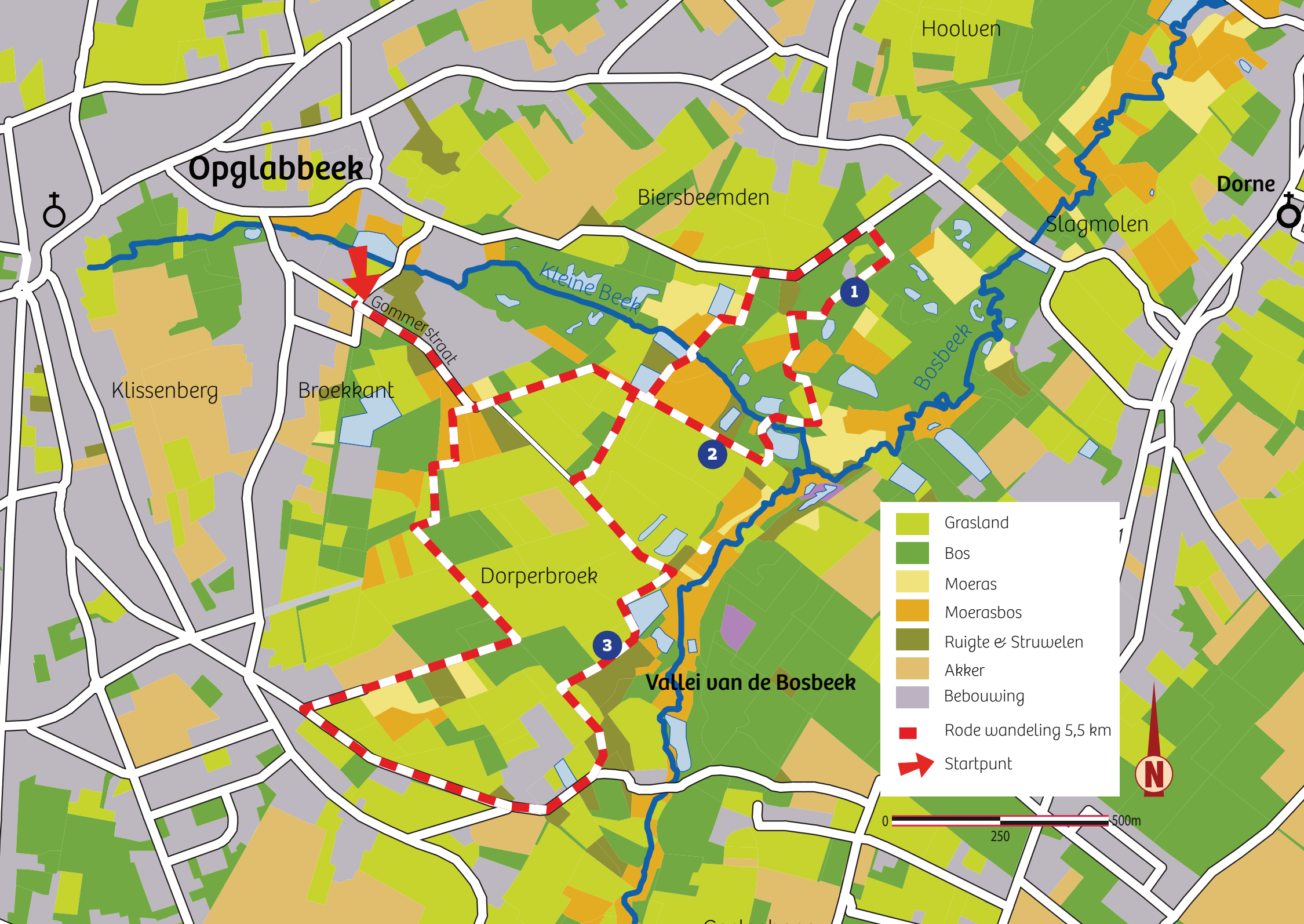
A close-up photograph of a blue kingfisher perched on a brown branch. The bird has vibrant blue plumage on its head and back, a long, sharp, dark beak, and a small patch of white on its throat. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green, suggesting a natural habitat.

դո՞ւք քսե՞ք



LIFE
BITTER & SWEETER
North East Limburg





1

Here is an example of a restored hay meadow. Up to 2013, this area was full of shrubs, after the former hay meadow had been abandoned. The panorama you will see here is similar to one that would have been seen in many places throughout the valley. At the start of the summer, a portion of the grasslands blush brilliantly thanks to the blooming **valerian**.



2

Holiday homes and recreational ponds started popping up everywhere in the 1970s. Most of these have been neglected in the meantime. Where possible, Natuurpunt has transformed these into meres full of life. The **small red damselfly** has already been spotted here.



3

We cut up the peat here, and then dozens of lost plant species started to return. One of these is the **marsh St John's-wort**, with its bright yellow blooms peeking out along the edges of the water and earth.



4

Walk along the trail a bit to see the swamp that Natuurpunt has restored. We removed the topsoil, which had been polluted with phosphates. It is under water for a large part of the year, but in the summer, the water sinks back underground.



5

Flower-rich grasslands return to the region. You can still see the meadow saxifrage here, as well as listen to the **yellowhammer's** distinctive song, floating out from a shrub off to the side.

Dreams of the red-backed shrike

Despite the many improvements in the Itterbeekvallei, the management team still cherishes one big dream: the return of the red-backed shrike. This bird still appeared in the region as a breeding bird in the 1990s, but never returned after this. If Natuurpunt continues to focus on the restoration of the Itterbeekvallei's nature, then this rare bird might just return one day.

