



You can still clearly see on the old topographic maps that the Abeek was almost completely surrounded by hay meadows in past centuries. These were kept at the ideal saturation humidity conditions for the highest hay yields using shallow drainage ditches. The increased agriculture caused the hay to lose importance and the hay meadows were abandoned one by one. As a result, the valley was gradually overgrown by wetland forests. A lot of weekend homes and popular plantings started appearing. Thanks to the LIFE project, we were able to restore the hay meadows at several locations along the Abeek. You can invariably enjoy a vast sea of flowers in the spring.

A LIFE project was launched in 2010 to guarantee a sustainable future for the nature in the valley of the Abeek. Thanks to this European support, you can now enjoy the grasslands strewn with carpets of flowers, sparkling ponds, and wetland forests with spring blooms. Come and discover the major changes that have made many rare plants and animals feel at home here.

## Out and about



## VALLEY OF THE ABEEK



An area so rich in water as this is equally rich in aquatic life forms. Many extremely special fish species live in the Abeek thanks to the high quality of the water there. The most notable is the brook lamprey. The population in the Abeek and its side brooks is one of the largest of this threatened species in Flanders. Large populations of amphibians (frogs, toads and salamanders) and dragonflies live in the waters of the valley. For these animals the weekend homes are usually less suitable for these animals due to their steep banks. During the LIFE project, we made 15 of these ponds more natural so that littoral plants can grow there once again. These are the perfect habitat for amphibians and dragonfly larvae.

### Unique aquatic residents

You'll find a mosaic of hay meadows, bogs, ponds and wetland forests in the valley of the Abeek. Wetland forests are forests that have their roots underwater certainly during winter. "The wetland forests in the valley of the Abeek are some of the prettiest in Flanders, and even in Europe," says Robin Rotsaert, the LIFE project coordinator. During the project, we restored 25 hectares of wetland forests by filling in recreational ponds. We thinned the poplars in order to convert them into native woodlands. The dead wood was left so that bats, birds, small mammals, and other wildlife can find additional shelter.

### More forests



## ‘We help each other out’

**René Leysen,**  
farmer

We work well together with Natuurpunt and try to help each other as much as possible. For example, we work together on the mowing management, among other things. But we also help each other out with other jobs that need doing. If a crawler crane has to be moved, for instance, I'll do it. And if I need some help, the Natuurpunt volunteers are happy to lend a hand. Even when it's for a farmer who isn't always completely in tune when it comes to living in harmony with nature. But this close partnership with Natuurpunt allows us to achieve something after all. If you ask for something, you'll it'll get answered.



VOU: Chris Steenwegen • Covertstraat 1 • 2800 Michelen. Pictures: shutterstock.com: Jankees Schwebbe, Freddy Janssens, Dione Appels, Ewan Christis, Leo Vans, Mariëtte Mossommeit, Wim Dirckx, Jan Hendrickx, Alex Ballet

The valley of the Abeek is unique due to its wetland forests with many types of spring flowers. Endangered plants and animals, like the beaver, the Queen of Spain fritillary and dragonflies, live in this nature reserve. Various walking routes take you through the jewels of the region. The region can also be easily accessed using the cycle route interchange

### Enjoying the valley landscape

### Many helping hands

The Abeek acts as a blue artery for the region. It is one of the most intact river valleys in Flanders. The beaver has become a permanent resident once again. The many wetland forests, which provide abundant food sources, definitely have something to do with this. The beaver in turn, through its industrious woodcutting activities, creates open places in the willow copses. This is good for the flora. The beaver is able to find enough peace and safety here because the Abeek is inaccessible in many places. Moreover, beavers are primarily nocturnal. Because of this you won't see them very much.

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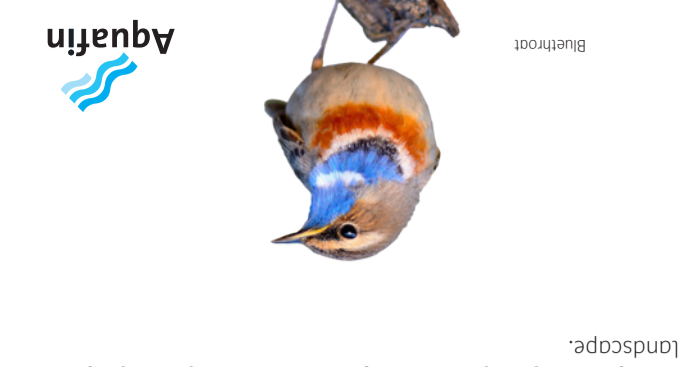
### Flower-stream grasslands

to develop. You can enjoy their beautiful aerial acrobatics from inside the observation hut or atop one of the new boardwalks.

## ‘Successful partnership’

**Frans Creemers,**  
secretary for the Vereniging van Vlaamse Polders en Wateringen

We manage the Abeek together with the Province of Limburg and try to do this in a way that is as environmentally friendly as possible. For example, we allow deadwood and trees to remain downed in the water circuit in places where this cannot lead to flooding or damage. We hope that this will create more places for the fish to find shelter. We also participate in projects of Natuurpunt in the valley of the Abeek. For example, we and Natuurpunt are combating the invasive Himalayan balsam, with success! Thanks to the LIFE project, Natuurpunt was able to purchase and restore numerous old and abandoned ponds, which definitely adds value to the region."



### Variety is the spice of life

## "The valley of the Abeek is incredibly attractive to permanent residents once again over the past several years."

The nature restoration project in the valley of the Abeek is financially supported by the LIFE fund. LIFE is a European nature fund for the protection of endangered European habitats and species. Special protection zones have been delineated in every European Member State for the protection of these species. These are the Birds and Habitats Directives areas. Together, these form the European Natura 2000 network. Organizations, such as Natuurpunt, can request a LIFE project for the strengthening of this network.

## ‘Kids and nature’

**Johan Loenders,**  
Ellikom primary school headmaster

We accepted the stewardship as godfather for the region reserve. and haveWe are committed to making the residents of Ellikom aware of the valley of the Abeek's value. For example, students from the 5th and 6th years put together a great brochure that we distributed in Ellikom. The students also wrote a very lovely song about the valley of the Abeek, along with a music video. In addition, the students got together with an artist to design a bronze statue that symbolises the biodiversity of the valley of the Abeek. It stands next to the church in Ellikom now. These initiatives succeed thanks to the enthusiastic Natuurpunt volunteers. Together, we want to inspire entrepreneurship in the kids. We believe that nature is valuable and we want to do something for it.



The valley of the Abeek walking area is a joint cooperation between Natuurpunt, the municipalities of Meeuwen-Gruitrode, Bocholt and Peer, and Regional Landschap Kempen en Maasland. Logman's report LIFE08NAT/B/000035

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### European project

The green walk (Ellikom) gives you a good idea of all the beauty the region has to offer.

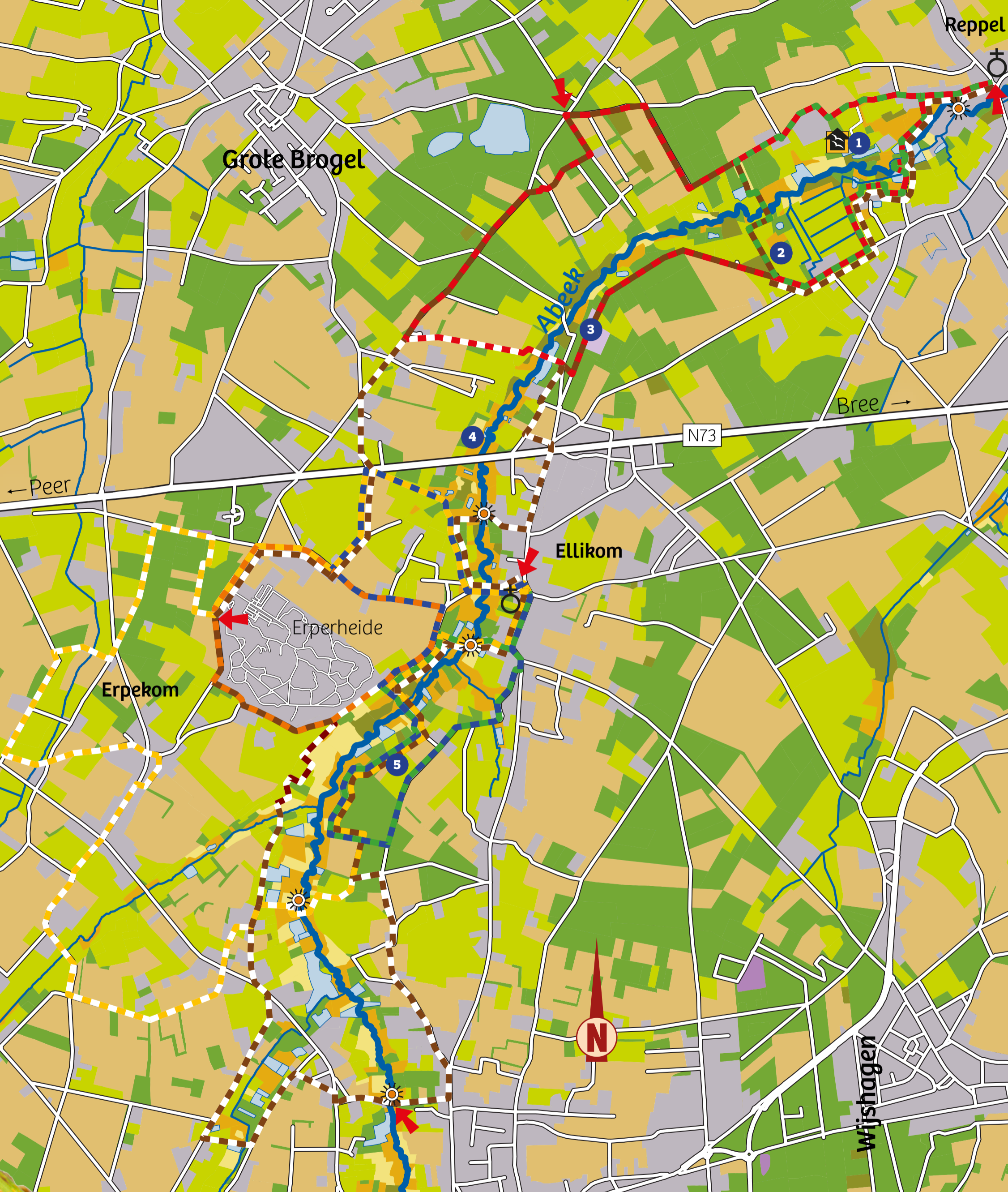


## ‘More accessible to the public’

**Freddy Janssens,**  
manager for the Valley of the Abeek

Thanks to the LIFE project, the valley of the Abeek has become much more accessible to the public. There used to be very few bridges crossing the Abeek. Now there are 5 additional bridges and approximately 700 metres of boardwalk through the valley. The public discovers these quite quickly due to the connections with existing walking routes. A large part of the valley had become overgrown, but the LIFE project allowed us to restore the open character of the valley in various places. The landscape now has an incredibly different appearance: you can see much further and the valley is open again in certain places, like it was before the 1970s. We expect the hay meadow restoration to have a positive influence on the variety of plants.





- Orange walk - 3,6 km
- Ellikom green walk - 4,2 km
- Reppel green walk - 4,7 km
- Blue walk - 6,4 km
- Red walk - 8,5 km
- Yellow walk - 12,8 km
- Mill walk - 24,5 km

- Grassland
- Tangled growth
- Marsh
- Forest
- Swamp forest
- Water
- Farmland
- Cultivated land

- Starting point
- Bird observation hut
- Water mill



Tree frog

### Minotaur beetle

The Minotaur beetle is black, rounded and just a mere 2 cm in length. It can be recognised by the three protruding 'horns', two long and one short one in the centre. This dung beetle can be found in sandy moors and open areas in pine forests. It feeds on cow, sheep or rabbit dung. After mating, the female digs a long tunnel to nest in, with several side tunnels for storing food for the larvae.



1

During the LIFE project, we redesigned a great many recreational ponds. We levelled out the banks and opened them up to allow more light in. Now they are the perfect breeding sites for amphibians. You can also watch birds there. Thanks to the new observation hut, you can do this without disturbing the animals. You will see tufted ducks or teal on the water. The common snipe hides in the grass and the black woodpecker nests in the wetland forests.

2

The increased agriculture caused hay to lose importance and the hay meadows were abandoned one by one. We removed the tangled growth and thickets that had grown up in several places. We restored the view of the valley as it had been everywhere in the 1970s. The large marsh grasshopper has benefited from all of these efforts.

3

We restored the small moors by removing the trees. Now sheep regularly graze there to prevent reforestation. Thermophilic insects such as grey-backed mining-bees live between the moorland plants.

4

People often used to plant poplars in the valley's wet soils. These turned difficult-to-farm soils into a reasonable source of income. However, poplar plantings are species-poor, which is why we removed a large portion of these. We will allow these to be reforested with species-rich wetland forests, including alder, marsh-marigold and golden saxifrage.

5

The valley of the Abeer was inaccessible for a long time. By building several long boardwalks, you can now enjoy the valley's beauty to the fullest: wet hay meadows, wetland forests and marshes. And all without getting your feet wet!

