



LIFE SINT-MAARTENSHEIDE DE LUYSEN



Out and about

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



Approximately 250 years ago, Sint-Maartensheide was an open area with vast moors and fens. The moors were used as a communal grazing area for cows, sheep and goats. The cuttings from the moors were used in the "poststoel" (deep litter bars). The region had an open character due to the grazing and the mowing of the moors. Near the present Luysenijuffers the Abbeek spread out into a wide system of transition mires.

The region was systematically mined starting at the end of the 18th century. The driest parts were planted with Scots pine. The Belgian government decided to drain the transition mires to make it possible to farm the region, which is why a deep drainage ditch



We occupy a meadow in Sint-Maartensheide that borders the Natuurpunt property. We planted deciduous trees along the ditches over 20 years ago. Later, Natuurpunt planted more trees on the moor, which I occasionally go out and prune. Plus, Natuurpunt has a large meadow where we can graze our stock. There's a small nature reserve on the Vlasroterbeek near the farm. We help the city of Bree, the Vrije Basisschool Don Bosco-Gerdingen (public primary school) and Natuurpunt to manage this. My wife and I are nature lovers and we like to go for walks in Sint-Maartensheide. We are happy to stand up for the environment. I think it's nice that farming and nature are interwoven here. Trust between us and Natuurpunt is important to achieve this.

Jaak Geraerts, farmer

'Nature and farming are woven together'



V.U.: Chris Steenwegen • Conestmaat 11 • 2800 Hechelen. Foto's: - shutterstock.com: Luc Mertens, Ewan Chrisis, Leo Voes, Marleen Mousmees, Wim Dirckx, François Van Bauwel, Alex Ballet



Galidokan

Luys

Theepit

was dug in 1865. This caused a portion of the fens to disappear and the groundwater level dropped drastically, but the mires remained around the Luysen and Stamprooterbeek.

After these changes, the small-scale landscape that is so characteristic of Sint-Maartensheide gradually began to develop. The meadows and farmland in a small-scale landscape are threaded through with wood edges, rows of trees and small forests. A local group of enthusiasts started studying local nature in 1972. As their involvement grew steadily, this led to their first purchases in Sint-Maartensheide in 1991. It has since grown into one of the largest nature reserves in Flanders. You can find a unique mix of wet and dry nature, cultural elements and wild nature.

Thanks to the years of effort from volunteers and the financial support from the European LIFE project, numerous rare plants and animals will be able to survive in Sint-Maartensheide - De Luysen.

New opportunities for dragonflies

In addition to many marsh birds, the dragonflies are the most remarkable residents in the De Luysen pond complex. Several of the dragonfly species only appear at a few other places in Flanders. The western part of the pond complex, a former recreational area, was restored a dozen years ago. The region began to develop quickly into one of the species-richest ponds complexes in Flanders. Thanks to the LIFE project, we could now also deal with the eastern portion of the pond complex: Marsh and aquatic plants are given more chances to survive by opening up and levelling the banks.

We must teach students, especially those in the 5th and 6th years of secondary school in the nature & environment department, how to work in nature. They must show respect for the environment and discover how they can create nature. This is why it's useful to have them go along with Natuurpunt volunteers to carry out management jobs. Plus, Sint-Maartensheide is very close to our school. For example, our students learned how to use a chainsaw and cut down trees at the Mariahof visitors centre. We also do research in the pools and try to name the plants and animals that we see. The students always look forward to getting out into nature; it's so much better than sitting in class.

Toon Schouteden, teacher at the Biotechnicum in Bocholt



An ingenious system ensures that the water level in each pond can now be regulated separately. The high quality of the water, the alternating speed of the flow, and the varying depths all offer great chances for many species of dragonflies. This allows every species to find the perfect place to lay its eggs and allow its larvae to develop. You can enjoy their beautiful aerial acrobatics from boardwalks.

More forests

There is a mosaic of ponds and forests along the banks of the Abbeek. During the project, we restored 25 hectares of wetland forests by filling in recreational ponds and converting popular plantings into native woodlands. Wetland forests are forests that have their roots underwater during certain winter periods. Thanks to the work being done, the habitat of the black woodpecker has expanded significantly. "The wetland forests in the valley of the Abbeek are some of the prettiest in Flanders, and even in Europe," says Robin Rotsaert, the LIFE project coordinator.

Purple moors

Sint-Maartensheide was once, as its Dutch name implies, a vast moor ("heide") landscape. Thanks to the LIFE project, we were able to restore the moors in several places by excavating the topsoil. The soil contained too much fertiliser due to long-term agricultural use, which meant that the moors could no longer grow there. After the restoration, it wasn't just the moors that returned, but other rare species such as the sand rush and pillwort. Sheep and cows graze the moors just as they used to.

Spotting the red-backed shrike

Sint-Maartensheide - De Luysen is unique because the small-scale landscape has remained so well-conserved here. Endangered plants and animals, like the red-backed shrike, the Eurasian white admiral butterfly and dragonflies, live in the jewels of the region. The region can also be easily accessed using the cycle route interchange network.

I live close to Sint-Maartensheide - De Luysen and often come here to photograph things. There is no lack of subjects to photograph here; birds, plants, the moors... Plus, dragonflies, red deer, boar and even a stoat may appear in front of your lens. The observation huts that are here are a blessing for a photographer; you won't find this kind of luxury anywhere else in Belgium. The work that has been done here in the context of the LIFE project seems drastic at times, but I can see the good outcomes. The dykes at the Mariahof have been restored. You can see much further now and other plants and mushrooms are growing there. The restoration of the Sint-Maartensheide moors was also a success. More moorland plants are appearing every year.

Koen Wellens, nature photographer



Playground for the shrike and tree frog

Many large insects inhabit this small-scale landscape with a lot of wood edges, oligotrophic grasslands and moors. These are important sources of food for the rare red-backed shrike. We find multiple pools spread across this landscape. These are incredibly important for dragonflies and other aquatic insects. The tree frog, a small, bright green frog, feels quite at home here. It especially loves the pools that occasionally run dry because fish cannot survive in these. Back in 2005 the tree frog could only be found in handful of places in Flanders. In recent years its population has significantly increased in Sint-Maartensheide - De Luysen.

"Marsh birds are drawn to the De Luysen ponds; the Eurasian bittern, bluethroat and common kingfisher and other birds nest here;"

Many helping hands

Various partners from the surrounding area have joined forces in Sint-Maartensheide - De Luysen. For example, Natuurpunt works together with local farmers, who graze their cattle in the region and in doing so, help keep the grass maintained. The region also provides opportunities for locals. Firewood is offered regularly to the local residents for a small fee or in exchange for helping around in the nature reserve. Every year, students from the Biotechnicum in Bocholt help manage the reserve: gathering hay, planting trees, etc. It is thanks to this cooperation that we have succeeded in conserving so much of the local plants and wildlife in this region.



Variety is the spice of life

The Sint-Maartensheide - De Luysen nature reserve has a lot of variety to offer, from large ponds to small pools. From wetland forests to purple moors. The yellow walk gives you a good idea of all the beauty the region has to offer. You can also enjoy the ever-present peace and quiet there.



Meadow, Soultroge

'Walking in Grandpa's woods'

Jean Vanheeswijk, Natuurpunt Bree handyman

When they asked me to become a volunteer, I immediately said that dragging branches around in forests definitely wasn't something for me. But I really like to do all sorts of odd jobs. I'm proudest of the renovation of the Mariahof, which is our visitors centre. I laid the flooring, build a wall, installed the heating system, and built cabinets and a bar. Having a visitors centre is a major advantage. This provides income and we can organise activities. I also worked on a new bird observation hut for a year and a half, which is now getting a lot of visitors. I come on regular walks here with my kids and grandchildren. They think it's magnificent and they always say, 'come on, let's go to Grandpa's woods'.



Sint-Maartensheide - De Luysen is a part of the Kempen-Broek border park.

Logyman's report LIFE08NAT/B/000035

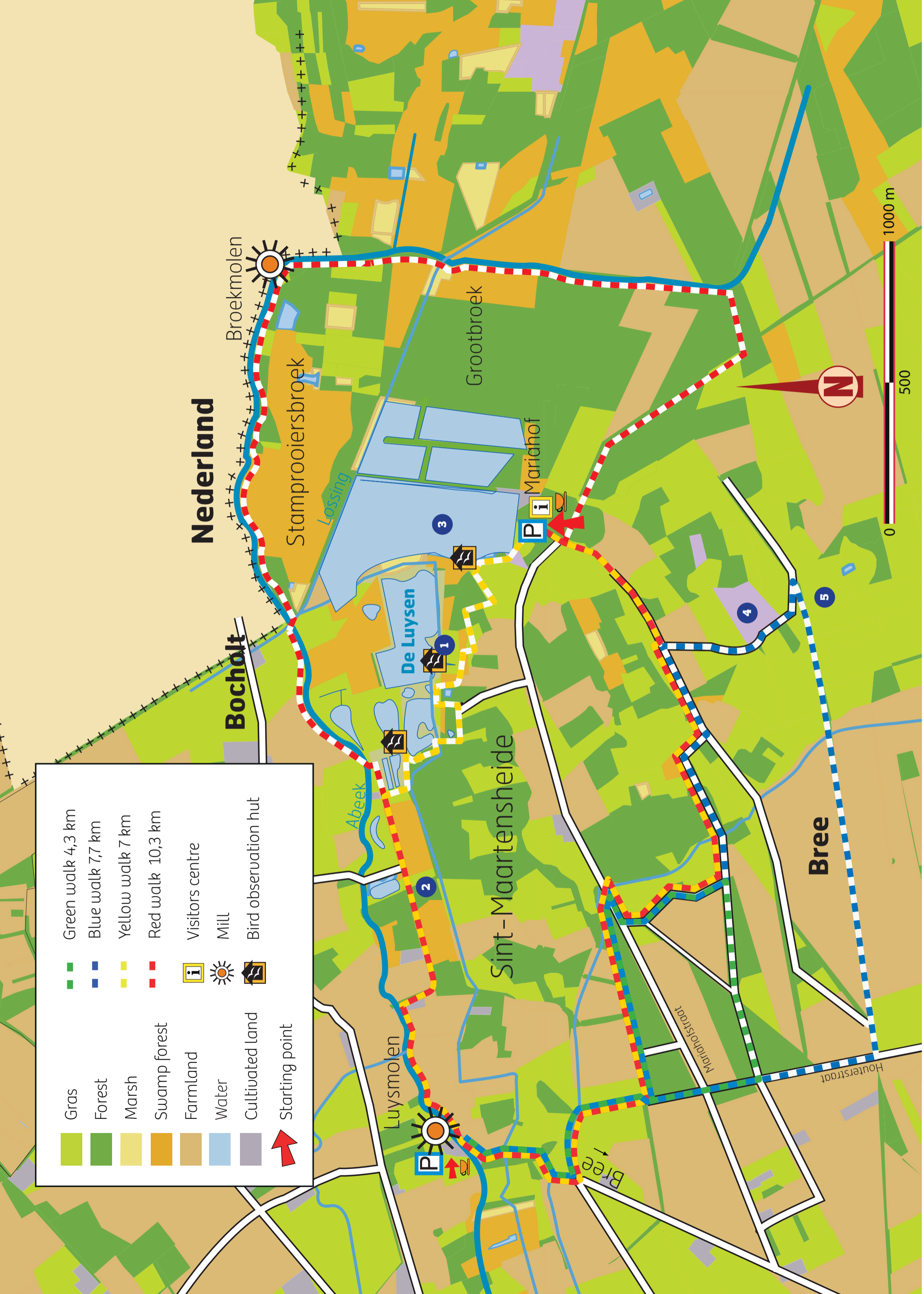
Natuurpunt, can request a LIFE project for the strengthening of this network. as the Birds and Habitats Directives areas. Together, these form European Member State for the protection of these species. These special protection zones have been delineated in every fund for the protection of endangered European habitats and financially supported by the LIFE fund. LIFE is a European nature restoration project in Sint-Maartensheide - De Luysen is

European project

This region is a part of the Natura 2000 network of important European nature reserves and benefits from the financial support of the European Union's LIFE fund.

MORE INFO: WWW.LIFE-ABEEK.BE





Gras	Green walk 4,3 km	Visitors centre
Forest	Blue walk 7,7 km	Mill
Marsh	Yellow walk 7 km	Bird observation hut
Swamp forest	Red walk 10,3 km	Starting point
Farmland	Starting point	
Water		
Cultivated land		



1

You can view the birds nesting in the reeds and on the water from three beautiful observation huts in De Luysen. Volunteers built the Roerdomp/Bittern observation hut all by themselves. With a bit of luck, you will spot a common kingfisher, Eurasian bittern or osprey there. The boardwalks take you through the wetland forests and ensure that you can get from one observation hut to another without getting your feet wet.



2

We restored several areas of wetland forest in the vicinity of the Abeeek. The paths between these serve as sheltered, sunny 'forest fringes'. They are the perfect places for many insects to rest and raise their body temperature. A special resident is the Eurasian white admiral butterfly.



3

The ponds in De Luysen underwent a thorough metamorphosis during the LIFE project. We created a more open landscape with more space for marshlands. We hope that this will attract nesting Eurasian bitterns, among others. You won't be able to see this bird easily because the heron-like appearance is perfectly camouflaged in the reeds.



4

During the LIFE project, we removed the nutrient-rich topsoil in certain locations. In addition to this, we cleaned up several fens and planted a few new fens as well. Rare plant species, including sand rush, pillwort and inundated club moss, soon began to appear next to the moors.



5

The field cricket is a relative of the grasshopper. It lives primarily on and in the soil. In order to protect itself, it digs a vertical tunnel underneath clumps of grass or plant roots using its strong jaws. It is 18 to 27 mm long. The field cricket can be seen (and heard) from early May to late July. It lives in grassy, oligotrophic, sunny locations, just

Red-backed shrike

The many wood edges, small forests and brambles in the Sint-Maartensheide enrich the region. Together with the small pools, they are the habitat for species like the tree frog and the red-backed shrike. We tried to increase the food supply for these species by carrying out peat-cutting works during the LIFE project. It was an obvious success as the tree frogs increased significantly.

