



Surface area: 4.383 hectares
Population: 2 millions residents
Region: Bruxelles

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The *Forêt de Soignes* - 4.383 hectares of woodland on the doorstep of Brussels. The location of the capital's green jewel makes it very popular, and it is much frequented by walkers, horse-riders and cyclists.

The natural aspect of the *forêt de Soignes* is a profoundly altered and transformed reflection of the primitive Brabantine wilderness. Historical records refer to a forest abounding in game, but the great *forêt de Soignes* has seen its larger fauna disappear over the centuries. Originally part of the ancient Charbonnière forest which covered a large part of Gaul, it was home to the aurochs and the elk, herbivores which no longer exist.

The current vegetation is strongly influenced by human activity; 80% of the trees are beech, inherited from the Austrian period of forest management.

A cathedral forest

The *forêt de Soignes* is well known in Belgium and abroad, by woodlands experts and tourists, for its lofty stands of beech trees, which only allow a little light through their foliage, in the same way as the stained glass windows of a cathedral. Maintenance and exploitation work – forest landscaping, pruning and felling, clearing and so on – is carried out by professionals, woodcutters and specialised workers, with machines devised specially for forest work.

Five nature reserves

The *forêt de Soignes* also contains five nature reserves. These include wetlands – located in the *vallée du Vuilbeek*, the *vallée des Enfants Noyés*, the *vallon de Trois Fontaines* and that of *Rouge-Cloître* – together with chalky slopes located in *Trois Fontaines* and *Rouge-Cloître*.

Once a forest abounding in game, the large fauna are nowadays reduced to fox and roe deer, reintroduced after being wiped out.

Amongst the smaller mammals, shrews and small rodents such as fieldmice, woodmice and rats constitute prey for small carnivores such as weasels and stoats and the birds of prey such as horned owls.

Two species of squirrel which occupy two different ecological niches and so, in principle, should not co-exist, can be admired: the native red squirrel and the Korean squirrel, an exotic species which was introduced accidentally in 1974.

The cromlech

A circle of menhirs, the cromlech, erected in honour of 11 forest guards killed in the First World War. Another stone monument, bearing the dates 1830-1930, commemorates the hundredth anniversary of Belgian independence. Apart from these, the *forêt de Soignes* has lots of other monuments, large and small: the Sylvan fountainhead, *le canton des Patriotes*, the Etienne Bossaert cross, etc.

The Information Centre

Located in a renovated granary of the old Priory of Rouge-cloître, in Auderghem, this centre features a permanent exhibition dedicated to forests in general and the *forêt de Soignes* in particular. In addition, the centre regularly holds exhibitions on different environmental themes and also arranges guided tours by a team of biologists.

