



Brussels Studies

La revue scientifique pour les recherches sur Bruxelles /
Het wetenschappelijk tijdschrift voor onderzoek over
Brussel / The Journal of Research on Brussels

Collection générale | 2026

Reconstructing the disappearance of amphibians in Brussels

Raconter les disparitions d'amphibiens à Bruxelles

Verhalen over de verdwijning van amfibieën in Brussel

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/brussels/9586>

DOI: 10.4000/16ova

ISSN: 2031-0293

This article is a translation of:

Raconter les disparitions d'amphibiens à Bruxelles - URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/brussels/9555> [fr]

Other translation(s):

Verhalen over de verdwijning van amfibieën in Brussel - URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/brussels/9584> [nl]

Publisher

Université libre de Bruxelles - ULB

Provided by Université catholique de Louvain



Electronic reference

Ariane d'Hoop, "Reconstructing the disappearance of amphibians in Brussels", *Brussels Studies* [Online], General collection, no 219, Online since 26 August 2026, connection on 17 September 2026.
URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/brussels/9586> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/16ova>

This text was automatically generated on August 26, 2026.



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Reconstructing the disappearance of amphibians in Brussels

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EDITOR'S NOTE

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1. Stories of extinction

- 1 What do we know about animal extinction in Brussels? Regional inventories and atlases classify species as present, abundant, rare or extinct. Among the groups of species which have been documented, Bruxelles Environnement [2021] identifies butterflies, reptiles and amphibians – frogs, toads and newts – as having suffered the most severe declines, largely as a result of the drainage of the landscape and the disappearance of forest habitats. All regional studies of amphibians report a decline [Percsy, 1998; Weiserbs and Jacob, 2005; Graitson *et al.*, 2022], reflecting the widespread extinction of amphibians observed across many parts of the world [Kemp, 2021: 118]. According to surveys conducted in Brussels, five of the fourteen species once recorded in the city are now locally extinct and are not expected to return. What happened to these lost species? At a time when biodiversity loss has become part of everyday vocabulary, what concrete situations and individual histories are concealed behind these familiar terms?
- 2 This article seeks to break the silence surrounding extinction in Brussels by reconstructing, as far as possible, what became of these vanished amphibians. Their

histories are inseparable from broader territorial issues concerning the place of water within the city. As animals which lead a dual existence – living first as aquatic larvae and later as terrestrial adults (amphi-bios) – amphibians once inhabited the wetlands (ponds, pools, marshes and wet meadows) which were still widespread two centuries ago throughout the Senne valley and along its tributaries [Weiserbs and Jacob, 2005: 6–7]. The five stories recounted below should be understood as small episodes within the much broader history of the disappearance of surface water. This process began to reshape Brussels as early as the 15th century, accelerated dramatically during the 19th century with the construction of hydraulic systems [Deligne, 2003: 215–219] and the embellishment of bourgeois neighbourhoods [Leblicq, 1983: 264], and continued during the 35 years following World War II, when the city experienced “unchecked building expansion” and the “considerable development of the road network” [Leblicq, 1983: 278]. Today, questions surrounding water in Brussels have returned to the forefront of public debate through opposition to soil sealing in response to flood and heatwave risks affecting predominantly working-class neighbourhoods; through initiatives to restore open waterways and improve their ecological quality; and through campaigns led by residents’ groups to protect marshes threatened by property development or transport infrastructure projects¹. Against the backdrop of these regional struggles and transformations, stories of extinction introduce new ways to reflect on our capacity to actually make room for other living beings whose survival depends upon the urban landscape.

- 3 An attempt to give historical depth to these animals and to the places where they disappeared reveals a second issue: the enduring silence which surrounds these extinctions. These losses are marked by both territorial and documentary blindness. In other words, the lives which have been lost are no longer perceptible, either within the physical landscape or in the available documentation. When we observe the city, we see what exists: the built environment and the living beings which inhabit its infrastructures or the empty spaces around them, rather than the traces of ecological destruction brought about by urbanisation. This is evident, for example, in the disappearance of place names which once testified to the presence of amphibians². Likewise, the memory of their disappearance is absent from almost all material intended for the general public, which celebrates nature in Brussels while overlooking the living beings which paid the price of urban development³.
- 4 This concrete invisibility is compounded by the difficulty of recognising extinction itself as a catastrophe. For what is an isolated loss – a small local tragedy – within a diffuse process “shaped by an infinity of micro-decisions” which, one degradation after another, culminates in much larger waves of extinction [Semal, 2013: 11]? This article addresses the problem by drawing on the field of Extinction Studies. Rather than adopting a global perspective on extinction, scholars in this field advocate detailed case studies which illuminate the “quieter processes of loss” unfolding within particular communities and places long before the death of the last individual [Rose *et al.*, 2017: 1; author’s translation]. Using ethnographic and microhistorical approaches, they examine how extinction brings into play ways of living and dying, as well as relationships between humans and other living beings [van Dooren, 2014: 1–18]. They invite us to tell situated histories of extinction and to explore the distinctive social, cultural and ethical questions raised by these disappearances, beyond their biological consequences [Garlick and Symons, 2020]⁴.

- 5 The disappearance of amphibians first attracted my attention during my anthropological research in urban ecology with nature, conducted alongside naturalists – most of them amateurs – who are actively engaged in the conservation of threatened animals in Brussels. Regional atlases [Graitson *et al.*, 2022; Weiserbs and Jacob, 2005] revealed the submerged part of the iceberg: the species which had vanished from the situations I am studying today. These disappearances called for a historical dimension to be incorporated into my ethnographic work, although doing so proved challenging. How can value be restored to individual lives when they disappear in large numbers? Or when sensory experience, embodied knowledge and first-hand testimony of their loss are, in most cases, unavailable [Guidée, 2021]? It became necessary to examine a sparse and fragmented body of knowledge and to reconstruct, as far as possible, a fuller account. Doing so involves scrutinising the available documentation in order to establish what can be known, while acknowledging its limitations; identifying the ways in which missing traces themselves generate indifference; and compensating for these absences by drawing on related sources to tell the story nonetheless⁵. Using regional atlases and the references they contain, together with interviews conducted between 2019 and 2025 with four biologists, I traced these disappearances beyond statistical records and as close as possible to what can still be reconstructed. This required bringing together an eclectic range of sources: biological and ethological studies of the species concerned; studies of specific sites; archives and historical maps (for the 19th century); aerial photographs (for the 20th century); and published field observations by local naturalists, the latter proving particularly invaluable. Each source earned its place in the investigation by contributing, however modestly, to the reconstruction. Ultimately, it became clear that much of what allows these stories to acquire substance derives from the work of two naturalists: Georges Albert Boulenger (1858-1937) and Hellin de Wavrin (1946-2016). Thanks to the publication of their field observations, we are able to come much closer to understanding what may have happened to these vanished amphibians.

2. Natterjack toads: revisiting a construction site (1876)

- 6 We know that natterjack toads (*Epidalea calamita*, formerly *Bufo calamita*) once inhabited the Brussels region thanks to a handful of specimens preserved at the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences [Graitson *et al.*, 2022: 49]. In June 1876, Georges Boulenger, then a young assistant naturalist at the Institute, deposited a male and a gravid female which he had collected in Bois de la Cambre (Figure 1). He had most likely been passing near the lake at dusk when he was drawn by the loud, rolling chorus of mating calls emitted by the males – calls which can carry for over a kilometre, yet are abruptly silenced when other listeners approach [Boulenger, 1897: 63]. At the time, Boulenger was probably assembling a reference collection, refining his ability to identify particular groups of species. This pair of toads was simply another addition to the many specimens he deposited in the museum.

Figure 1. Specimens of natterjack toads brought to the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences by G. Boulenger in 1876



Preservation in alcohol and prolonged exposure to light have caused the skin of these specimens to fade.

Source: photograph by the author, March 2025

- 7 The story might have ended there had Boulenger not returned to it four decades later in a lecture he published [Boulenger, 1922a and 1922b] after a career at the Natural History Museum in London which established him as an internationally renowned taxonomist. In this publication, he lamented the lack of scientific interest in Belgium's amphibians and in their relationship with the country's landscapes. He recalled that natterjack toads had been common around the lake in Bois de la Cambre when he collected them but had since disappeared. Boulenger did not attempt to explain the causes of their disappearance. Instead, he called for a better understanding of the habitats these amphibians had once occupied and subsequently abandoned, unnoticed by almost everyone.
- 8 What were these habitats like? In 1876, when the young Boulenger collected his specimens, naturalists recorded natterjack toads across much of Belgium, inhabiting wet meadows, woodland edges, gardens and heathland [Dubois, 1873: 173]. At that time, they were not yet recognised for their affinity with landscapes shaped by industrial and extractive activities – quarries, brownfield sites and spoil heaps – even though such environments were already widespread in Belgium [Graitson and Denoël, 2007: 145-147]. Current ecological knowledge, which links natterjack toads to disturbed ground and construction sites, allows us to reinterpret the history of the population which lived in Bois de la Cambre. If, as Boulenger reported, they were common there, they must have occupied the site for several generations. Their ancestors probably arrived as early as the 1820s, following the clearance of this outlying section of the Sonian Forest, then managed by the Société Générale to supply timber for the

industrial expansion of Belgium [Duquenne, 1989: 10]⁶. They subsequently followed successive episodes of tree felling and coppicing carried out by the state before the land was transferred to the city for the creation of the park [Duquenne, 1989: 9]. During periods of hibernation or aestivation, the toads were likely to have dug burrows throughout the site while earthworks were under way and during the excavation of the lake between 1862 and 1866 [Duquenne, 1989: 28-31]. Because natterjack toads are able to adjust their breeding periods in response to flooding, they probably benefited from the shallow, temporary pools of standing water – largely free from tadpole predators – which were created as the park's new topography altered natural drainage patterns⁷. By the time Boulenger collected the pair which entered the museum's collections, the construction of roads and leisure facilities was nearing completion, while tree felling, coppicing and the sowing of lawns were still in progress⁸.

- 9 What happened during the decades which followed to prevent Boulenger from ever finding them there again? It is reasonable to suppose that natterjack toads were better suited to the loose soils of an active construction site – and to the ruts and shallow depressions created during the works – than to the completed park and the activities it was designed to accommodate. From 1866 onwards, vegetation rapidly colonised the site [Pierron, 1973: 168], reducing the open, sunlit ground favoured by these amphibians. At the same time, Bois de la Cambre became an increasingly busy destination. It was criss-crossed by carriage roads and developed into a major venue for strolls, leisure, public celebrations and sporting events. The disappearance of the natterjack toads was therefore probably the outcome of these new dynamics, shaped both by the physical transformation of the site and by the growing numbers of visitors it attracted. It may also have been hastened by seemingly minor alterations, such as the reinforcement of the lake's banks with masonry, rubble and paving stones in the late 1880s [Duquenne, 1989: 82], which would have made it difficult – or even impossible – for toads to leave the water. As a highly mobile pioneer species, natterjack toads almost certainly attempted to disperse beyond the margins of Bois de la Cambre in search of more favourable habitats. By the end of the 19th century, however, the surrounding hamlets had been absorbed by urban expansion. The park had become enclosed on all sides by broad avenues and, beyond them, by a dense network of streets which had scarcely existed before the park was created (Figures 2a and 2b).

Figure 2a. Bois de la Cambre, extract from a map of Brussels published in 1857 [Dubois]

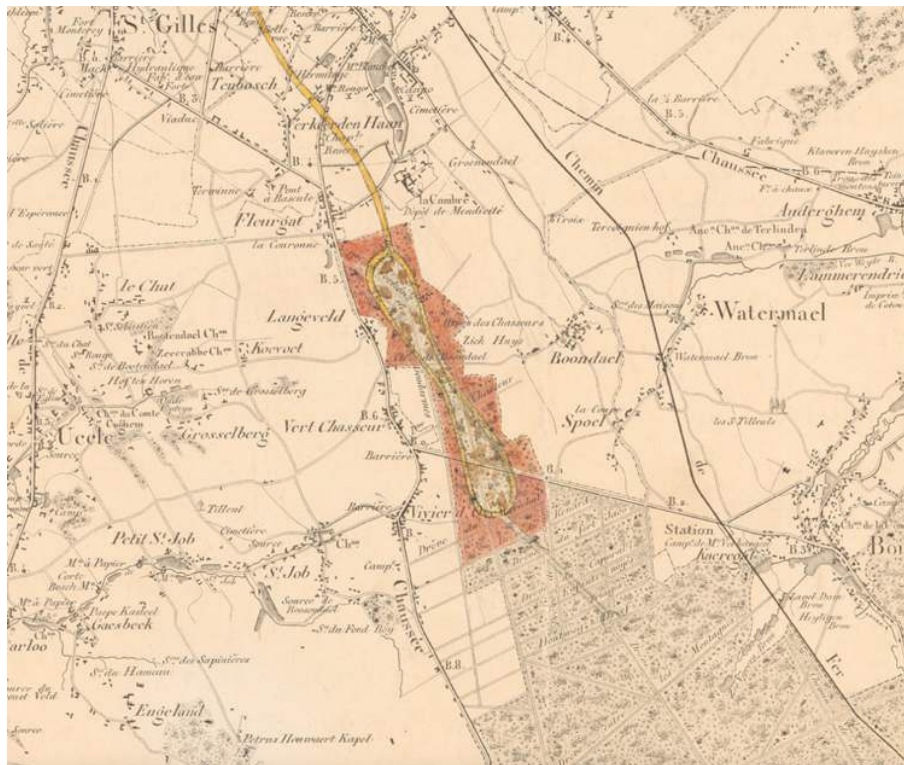
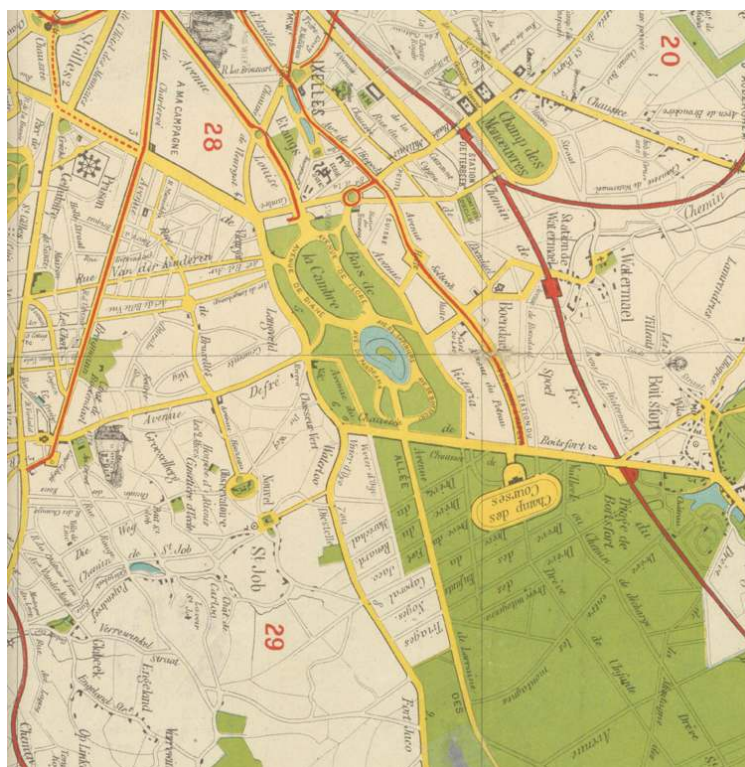


Figure 2b. Bois de la Cambre, extract from a map of Brussels published in 1900



These maps illustrate the urbanisation surrounding Bois de la Cambre during the two periods.

Sources: DUBOIS, F., 1857. *Carte des environs de Bruxelles pour les promeneurs à pied, à cheval et en voiture : avec les renseignements utiles à ces promeneurs*, gravée par J.B. Blasseau et P.J. Doms.

Établissement géographique de Bruxelles; KIESSLING & CIE (ed.) (1900). *Carte pittoresque des environs de Bruxelles*. Brussels: Librairie Kiessling & Cie. Available from the Royal Library of Belgium (KBR)

3. European tree frogs: the uncertain history of land reclamation (1970s)

- 10 European tree frogs (*Hyla arborea*), small climbing frogs with bright apple-green skin and golden irises, spend most of their lives concealed among the foliage of shrubs [de Witte, 1948: 141; Figure 3]. Writing in the late 1980s, Hellin de Wavrin noted that they had once occurred “throughout much of the area surrounding the Sonian Forest” but now appeared to be “on the brink of regional extinction” [de Wavrin, 1988: 132]. A passionate amateur naturalist since childhood, de Wavrin’s commitment to wildlife had become second nature – a way of life which never wavered⁹. From the 1960s until his death in 2016, he tirelessly surveyed sites across Brussels, concentrating particularly on the southern part of the city, in Uccle and along the edge of the Sonian Forest, where he lived. Despite repeated evening listening surveys, he never again heard the distinctive breeding calls of the tree frog – a rapid succession of clear, staccato notes – reputed to be among the loudest produced by any amphibian in Belgium. In addition to sites around the city, de Wavrin had formerly heard tree frogs at a pond in a marshy valley in Uccle, which was infilled in 1964, and in a marsh in Anderlecht which was infilled in 1962 [de Wavrin, 1988: 133]. He also records that an acquaintance had heard them at the Étang des Pêcheries in Watermael-Boitsfort, where, according to an

anonymous source, they persisted until the 1970s, and in Etterbeek, based on “an old record from a site which has since disappeared” [de Wavrin, 1988: 132]. It is difficult to say much more about the habitats these tree frogs occupied. When de Wavrin gives the year in which a wetland was infilled, he identifies the site only by municipality. Conversely, when he specifies a particular location (the Étang des Pêcheries), he provides no precise date. An examination of the ponds which disappeared from Uccle suggests that the site in question was probably the Lecomte pond at the foot of the Kauwberg, which was infilled in 1964, connected to the sewer network and buried beneath new housing. It is also likely that the large apartment blocks constructed around the Étang des Pêcheries during the 1970s and 1980s substantially altered the grassy and shrubby habitats where these tree frogs lived¹⁰.

Figure 3. Illustration of European tree frogs based on photographs



FIG. 143. — *Hyla arborea arborea* (LINNÉ).
La Rainette verte ou Graisset (1 : mâles; 2 : femelles) (réduit de 1/5).

Source: illustration published in de Witte [1948: 143]. Reproduced with permission of the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences

4. Retracing the fragmented nomadism of the midwife toad (1970s)

- 11 Until the late 1950s, during his nocturnal surveys, de Wavrin could also distinguish the distinctive calls of the common midwife toad (*Alytes obstetricans*), sometimes even provoking them in order to locate the toads more easily: “If they stop calling after being disturbed – for example, if one stamps on the ground – they can be induced to begin again by imitating their whistles” [de Wavrin, 1978: 160]. He conducted these surveys entirely by ear, as these little toads remained hidden in crevices in the ground. At that time, midwife toads could be heard at the Étangs des Enfants Noyés in

Watermael-Boitsfort, in gardens in Uccle, and at an active sand quarry in Rue de Percke. As de Wavrin observed, this latter site lay within the same catchment as the ponds occupied by these toads in Linkebeek [de Wavrin, 1978: 165].

- 12 He discovered the last wild population remaining within Brussels among the rockeries overlooking the pond in Parc de la Sauvagère, Uccle, where it persisted until the 1970s [de Wavrin, 1988: 162; Figure 4]. This final colony probably colonised the pond after 1910, following its creation by a wealthy industrialist. The toads may either have been deliberately introduced or have dispersed from the ponds which dotted the former hamlet of Petit Saint-Job, less than half a kilometre away¹¹. During World War II, the site was occupied by military forces before being abandoned. Towards the end of the 1960s it was purchased by the municipality of Uccle and converted into a public park [Pons-Rotbardt, 2021]. Increased public use of the park probably weakened the colony, which disappeared in the following years. Yet its vulnerability appears to have stemmed above all from its isolation.

Figure 4. Photograph taken by H. de Wavrin when he located the last colony of midwife toads among the rockeries in Parc de la Sauvagère



Source: [de Wavrin, 1978: 162]. Reproduced with permission of the journal *Les Naturalistes Belges*

- 13 The relationship between midwife toads and their habitats differs markedly from that of other toad species. Mating takes place on land rather than in water. After fertilising the eggs, the male wraps the string of eggs around his hind legs – hence the species' common name – and carries them for several weeks, periodically moistening them during nocturnal visits to water. As a result, midwife toads can breed in a wide variety of aquatic habitats, provided these remain close to rocky refuges where they shelter communally, such as quarries, industrial wasteland, old walls, cemeteries, sunny embankments, parks and gardens with rockeries, or piles of roof tiles [Graitson *et al.*,

2022: 52]. These artificial habitats are especially vulnerable to redevelopment or natural reforestation when left unmanaged¹², although midwife toads remain faithful to them as long as conditions are favourable. If those conditions deteriorate, however, they may disperse in search of another suitable site up to one kilometre away [de Wavrin and Graitson, 2007: 106-107]. Their well-known capacity for such movements shifts our attention towards the connections – or the breakdown of connections – between the sites they occupy.

- 14 In Brussels, these small, scattered colonies became isolated as the ponds they depended on were progressively filled in. During the 1980s, de Wavrin recorded several colonies in the suburban municipalities south of Brussels (Braine-l'Alleud, Rhode-Saint-Genèse and La Hulpe), leading him to suggest that only a few decades earlier these populations were still nomadic within a less urbanised landscape containing many more ponds. In other words, the spread of suburban development from the 1960s onwards weakened these colonies by isolating them from one another. This explains why de Wavrin associated the sand quarry in Rue de Percke with the Linkebeek catchment: he speculated that midwife toads may once have dispersed through this corridor to reach Uccle. Likewise, the former ponds of Saint-Job probably served as stepping stones enabling colonisation of Parc de la Sauvagère. What emerges here is therefore not simply the infilling of individual ponds, but the fragmentation of entire chains of wetlands. De Wavrin [1988: 131] links the ponds of Rhode-Saint-Genèse, Enfants Noyés, Linkebeek and Uccle, observing: “Here the ponds are further apart, but how many sites occupied by the midwife toad must already have disappeared before I began looking for them!” Today, within Brussels, midwife toads survive only in a handful of private gardens [Graitson *et al.*, 2022: 52].

5. The metamorphosis of the pool frog (1975)

- 15 The history of the pool frog (*Pelophylax lessonae*) is fraught with uncertainty. De Wavrin last observed these small green frogs in 1975 in the valleys of the Vuilbeek and Enfants Noyés in the Sonian Forest. But were they really pool frogs? The authors of the regional atlases published after his observations express doubts. Yet de Wavrin [1988: 138] wrote: “The green frogs in these valleys were rarely found along the water’s edge outside the breeding season, suggesting that they were *Rana lessonae*.” He knew that green frogs spend most of their lives in water – the larger individuals even hibernate there – and typically bask in the sun along the banks or on floating vegetation. Among the green frogs, only pool frogs regularly move away from ponds to seek terrestrial hibernation sites, making their presence in these valleys a plausible inference. Elsewhere, green frogs were also recorded on the Foresterie plateau (Watermael-Boitsfort) during the 1960s and at the Rouge-Cloître ponds until the 1950s, where the spring choruses of calling males were sufficiently remarkable to be mentioned in tourist guidebooks [de Wavrin, 1988: 138]. But were these really the calls of pool frogs? Only a distribution map covering Belgium as a whole provides supporting evidence [Parent, 1997: 269-270]. It shows that populations occurred in the south-east of Brussels, where they disappeared one after another between the 1960s and the 1980s. According to de Wavrin [1988: 139], the deterioration of their ponds played an obvious role in their disappearance. Carp introduced for recreational fishing devastated aquatic and riparian vegetation, and the increasing public use of the pond banks further

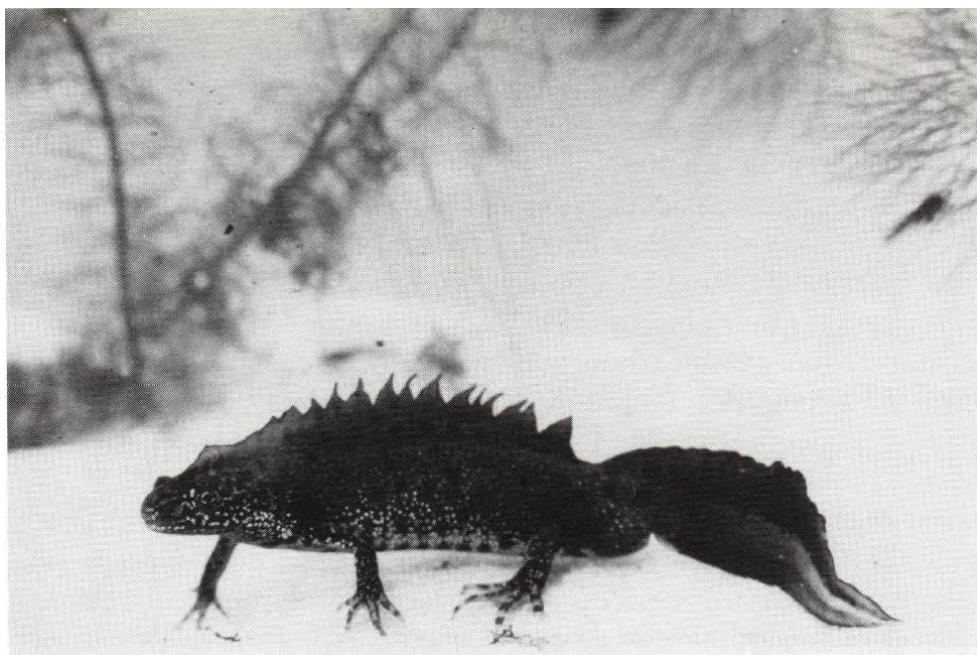
degraded their habitat. Yet, he argued, another process – far more difficult to detect in the field – probably hastened their disappearance, or perhaps more accurately, their metamorphosis.

- 16 To understand this process, our attention must shift to another species of green frog: the marsh frog (*Pelophylax ridibundus*). Sometimes twice the size of the pool frog, the marsh frog is well known for its chuckling calls. Native to Central and Eastern Europe, it was introduced into Western Europe from the 1950s onwards for culinary purposes and laboratory use, where it was bred commercially [Perrot, 2017: 38]¹³. Whether these frogs escaped or were deliberately released remains unknown, but these remarkably agile amphibians soon became established throughout the major river catchments of France. In Wallonia, aquatic plant nurseries sold them to ornament garden ponds, after which they appeared throughout the Senne and Dyle catchments [Percsy and Percsy, 2013: 250]. Marsh frogs are therefore a feral species: their spread results from the unintended consequences of human projects and infrastructures. Through cascading, uncontrolled effects, such feral species transform ecological environments and thereby contribute to the creation of the more-than-human Anthropocene [Tsing *et al.*, 2025]. In Brussels, a naturalist first recorded marsh frogs in 1968 near Parc de la Woluwe [Parent, 1974: 101]. They were subsequently found in the Jette marshes in 1992 and, a decade later, at 17 sites extending from the north of the city (Parc Royal de Laeken and wetlands near Bois du Laerbeek), to the west (Wilder and the Moeraske) and the south (Parc de Woluwe, Val Duchesse, Parc de la Héronnière in Watermael-Boitsfort and a private garden in Uccle) [Weiserbs and Jacob, 2005: 83]. During the surveys conducted for the most recent atlas, they had expanded further north to Neder-Over-Heembeek, south-east to Rouge-Cloître and Jardin Massart, west to Neerpede in Anderlecht, south to Forest, and even to sites in the city centre, including Parc Josaphat, the Botanical Garden and Square Marie-Louise in Schaerbeek and Saint-Josse [Graitson *et al.*, 2022: 68]. It is difficult to imagine how they could have crossed such distances without human assistance, unless their spawn had become attached to the feathers or legs of waterbirds¹⁴. What is certain is that marsh frogs are sufficiently adaptable to thrive in a wide variety of water bodies, including habitats of poor ecological quality such as sewage treatment basins, roadside puddles and polluted streams [Graitson *et al.*, 2022: 69].
- 17 Beyond competing for food and habitat, marsh frogs contribute to the disappearance of pool frogs through hybridogenesis. This mechanism was discovered in the 1960s by the Polish zoologist Leszek Berger. The two species can interbreed, but their offspring belong to a third species – the edible frog (*Pelophylax esculentus*) – whose size is intermediate between the other two and which retains only the marsh frog's genetic lineage [Perrot, 2017: 37]. Moreover, when an edible frog subsequently breeds with a pool frog, all of the offspring are edible frogs. In other words, alongside the degradation of their ponds, pool frogs very probably disappeared from Brussels through a gradual process of intergenerational transformation. Today, edible frogs remain little known in Brussels, whereas marsh frogs have become common.

6. Great crested newts: shade and land reclamation (1987)

- 18 Standing in darkness beneath the trees, Hellin de Wavrin walked in the pond in chest waders, lowered his net into the water and searched the pond bed by the light of his head torch alone¹⁵. In the spring of 1987, he had spent four years trying to determine whether great crested newts (*Triturus cristatus*) still inhabited the ponds of the Sonian Forest which he had been visiting for more than two decades (Figure 5). Only one population survived, in a pond in the Petite Flosses valley in Tervuren, less than a kilometre from Brussels. The colony had been seen there since at least the 1930s. These large newts, whose males are distinguished by their prominent dorsal crest, are difficult to detect because they spend most of their time in deeper water, with only the females returning to the shallows to lay eggs among the vegetation. By this time, however, the pond had become increasingly shaded as surrounding beech trees matured and blanketed it with fallen leaves. It had become a less suitable habitat for these particularly demanding newts. Yet de Wavrin could not understand why none had colonised another pond, barely one hundred metres away, which remained open to sunlight and was fringed with emergent marsh vegetation. “The survival of this colony,” he wrote, “is of great interest, as it represents one of the last, if not the last, surviving remnant of a population once widespread throughout the region” [1988: 121]. The reason was straightforward: the ponds inhabited by great crested newts had been infilled one after another. During the 1960s, the pond alongside Drève du Tambour in Watermael-Boitsfort disappeared, as did another in a meadow in Uccle. De Wavrin does not explain why these ponds were reclaimed. Great crested newts have never since returned to Brussels. The Ring Road and the E411 motorway, separating the Petite Flosses valley from the remaining ponds in Brussels – too small, too shaded and too heavily stocked with fish – now constitute insurmountable barriers preventing recolonisation [Weiserbs and Jacob, 2005: 72].

Figure 5. Male great crested newt photographed by H. de Wavrin at Wodecq (Hainaut)



This photograph was originally published in de Wavrin's article on amphibians in the Sonian Forest. Source: [de Wavrin, 1988: 120]. Reproduced with permission of the journal *Les Naturalistes Belges*

7. Those which remain

- 19 Why tell the story of animal extinction through its Brussels landscapes? Why reconstruct these histories rather than simply stating, as is customary in both scientific and everyday language, that these amphibians disappeared from the city because of habitat degradation, loss or fragmentation? Why not rely on these abstractions, which apply equally to so many species and so many places?
- 20 These stories are first and foremost about territory. They direct our attention towards the significance of construction sites, parks and their patterns of use, the management of ponds and their surroundings, the dispersal routes linking wetlands, the maintenance of vegetation, and the impacts of feral species. In doing so, they invite us to reflect on our capacity to coexist with other living beings – a capacity which can never be settled once and for all but must continually be refined through sustained observation in the field. Such ways of seeing are nourished above all by detailed, place-based knowledge accumulated over many years, most often through the voluntary efforts of dedicated naturalists. Yet, according to the naturalists whom I work with today, this intimate understanding of local conditions is frequently discounted in favour of environmental consultancy firms advising development projects, despite the fact that such firms cannot claim comparable knowledge.
- 21 Today, frogs, toads and newts are most visible in Brussels between February and April, when their pre-breeding migrations prompt local residents to help them cross roads which would otherwise prove fatal. This takes place along the edge of the Sonian Forest, in the Geleytsbeek valley in Uccle, the Tweebeek valley in Neder-Over-Heembeek, and around Parc de Woluwe and Parc du Vogelzang in Anderlecht¹⁶. The

observation most frequently shared by residents who return to these sites year after year is unequivocal: fewer amphibians cross the roads with each passing season. Amphibians are also found in protected and actively managed wetlands, including those in Jette and Ganshoren, the Broek marsh in Uccle, the Moeraske in Evere and Hof ter Musschen in Woluwe. Here too, residents and volunteer site managers tell the same story: the spring choruses which once filled these wetlands have become little more than murmurs. Meanwhile, residents' groups campaigning to protect threatened marshes – such as Wiels and Bempt in Forest, or Biestebroek in Anderlecht – continue to encounter amphibians there. These struggles highlight the vital role of urban wetlands in an era of climate change, both as permeable landscapes which help absorb floodwaters and as cooling refuges within densely built neighbourhoods. The vegetation of these aquatic environments is also increasingly recognised for its capacity to purify water and, over the longer term, to contribute to the remediation of polluted sites [Bastin, 2025: 8]. In the context of the current biodiversity crisis, the stories of the disappearance of the natterjack toad, European tree frog, common midwife toad, pool frog and great crested newt confer an additional significance upon the remaining wetlands in Brussels. They remind us that the amphibians observed and protected there today are not simply the species which happen to be *present*: they are those which *remain*. Without appealing to a nostalgic vision of a more authentic past, these stories reveal that the continuing decline in their numbers takes place against the backdrop of earlier disappearances. The amphibians and the habitats which still survive in Brussels therefore matter not only because of their present existence and vulnerability – and certainly not merely as components of “biodiversity”, a term which obscures their histories – but because they are the survivors of a landscape shaped by profound and cumulative losses whose underlying processes remain far from arrested.

- 22 In this sense, these narratives of extinction contribute to an urban political ecology which brings forgotten histories back into view. By reconnecting us with neglected living beings and the vulnerabilities they recall, they deepen our understanding of the transformations unfolding around us and open new ways of attending to the places in which we live¹⁷. This is why it is necessary to recover little-known histories despite the lack of available evidence. Doing so runs counter to prevailing tendencies in academic research, where projects are typically defined by the availability of sufficiently extensive source material to guarantee their feasibility, thereby excluding subjects which cannot meet this expectation. Yet, in some cases, the only way to approach the lived experience of these losses and to explore their implications is to work patiently with a small body of knowledge – in this case, a handful of writings by two experienced naturalists who continued to care about these disappearances over many decades – and to enrich it with every other document capable of adding another piece to the puzzle. This requires directing attention towards the limits of what can still be known, searching there for traces, and patiently weaving together different forms of knowledge without sacrificing scholarly rigour¹⁸.
- 23 For the history of the city is also the history of the particular losses of these living beings, of their often poorly understood affinities with specific habitats, of their worlds – not least their acoustic worlds – and of the possibilities for us to visit them. If, half a century from now, it becomes necessary to recount the persistence or extinction of the amphibians which still survive today, the vernacular and scientific knowledge available will almost certainly be richer and more accessible than it was in the past. Yet those future histories will themselves need to be set within a broader tapestry, one woven

from the quieter, sparser and almost forgotten stories of those whose voices once animated places which have now fallen silent.

For their contribution to the study, I would like to thank Yves Barette, Anne Devillers and the journal Les Naturalistes Belges, Alain Paquet, Olivier Pauwels, Christiane Perscy, Didier Rabosée, Guy Rotsaert, Marie-Louise Van den Wyngaerts, the Archives of the City of Brussels, the Archives of ULB, and the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences. I would like to thank Bernadette Smeesters, Benedikte Zitouni, the editorial team and the evaluators for their proofreading.

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NOTES

1. For a critical overview of these cases, see D'Haenens [2025].
2. According to the municipal almanacs, Rue de la Grenouille (Frog Street) in Molenbeek became Rue de Ganshoren in 1873; Rue des Crapauds (Toad Street) in Schaerbeek became Rue Teniers in 1905; and the street of the same name in Laeken became Rue Gustave Demanet in 1914. Jacowick's map (1812, Archives of the City of Brussels) also shows a Rue du Chant de la Grenouille (Frog Song Street) in Molenbeek, which appears as Rue du Chien Vert (Green Dog Street) on Popp's map (1866, Archives of the City of Brussels). In the 19th century, Forest included a locality known as Vorschenzang/Au Chant des Grenouilles ("To the Frogs' Song") [Verniers, 1949]. By contrast, the municipal almanacs show that in 1953, Avenue des Tritons (Newt Avenue) was created in the Floréal Garden City development in Watermael-Boitsfort. See: BRUSSELS ARCHIVES. *Almanacs* [online]. [Accessed on 30/03/2026] Available at: <https://archives.bruxelles.be/almanachs>; JACOWICK, G., 1812. Plan routier de la Ville de Bruxelles et ses environs à l'usage des habitants et des étrangers. In: *Archives de la Ville de Bruxelles, Plan de Bruxelles* no 39a.; POPP, P.C., 1866. Commune de Molenbeek-Saint-Jean. Plan du développement de l'aggloméré. Atlas cadastral de Belgique. Province de Brabant. Arrondissement de Bruxelles, canton de Molenbeek-Saint-Jean. In: *Archives de la Ville de Bruxelles, Plan de Bruxelles* no 81.
3. This tendency is evident in communications produced by the regional administration, as well as in Crutzen's film [2013], both of which encourage audiences to marvel at the unexpected presence of so-called wild animals in the city.
4. This approach challenges the assumption that extinction is a distant, global phenomenon. It is regarded as global because biodiversity has become a central concept within global environmentalism, gaining prominence since the 1980s with the rise of conservation biology [Tsing, 2020: 257-259]. Within this framework, attention focuses on the last surviving individuals of a species: it matters little if a species has disappeared here, so long as it survives elsewhere. Extinction is therefore imagined as taking place in distant landscapes – for example, in Elizabeth Kolbert's celebrated account, which ranges from cave sites and the Amazon rainforest to the slopes of the Andes, the depths of the ocean and the enclosures of zoos [Kolbert, 2015]. As a consequence, conservation programmes have often perpetuated colonial forms of violence, for example by justifying the criminalisation and displacement of local communities [Blanc, 2020].
5. This research project is driven by the need to restore significance to living beings which have been eliminated and subsequently forgotten, in the hope of fostering a future less inclined to overlook the value of their existence. It draws on Saidiya Hartman's concept of critical fabulation [2023] and its potential contribution to political ecology, since it requires us to make the loss of lives, habitats and the traces they leave behind matter [d'Hoop and Grandjean, 2025].
6. Between 1822 and 1842, the Sonian Forest was substantially reduced when the Société Générale converted this landed and forested estate into financial capital and invested the proceeds in industry, thereby opening up land for agriculture and urban development [Maziers, 1994: 119-124].

7. Heavy rainfall in 1865 and 1866 caused runoff to flow towards the hamlet of Boendael, while in 1882 stagnant water accumulated in a large depression near the entrance to Avenue Louise. These events are documented in reports and correspondence by Edouard Keilig, the park's architect, preserved in the Archives of the City of Brussels. KEILIG, E., 1864-1883. Various reports and correspondence. In: *Archives of the City of Brussels*, Public Works and Urban Planning Collection, Technical Department of Public Works, Buildings Division, "Bois de la Cambre. Development", file Nos. 26914, 26915 and 26919.
8. Duquenne [1989: 82] together with Keilig's requests relating to these works. KEILIG, E., 1864-1883. Various reports and correspondence. In: *Archives of the City of Brussels*, Public Works and Urban Planning Collection, Technical Department of Public Works, Buildings Division, "Bois de la Cambre. Development", file No 26914.
9. This portrait is based on interviews conducted with two people who knew him well.
10. Based on a comparison of aerial photographs available through Bruciel, dating from 1961, 1977 and 1987. URBAN.BRUSSELS. *Bruciel* [online]. [Accessed on 03/07/2025] Available at: <https://bruciel.brussels>.
11. Midwife toads were already being recorded near Uccle at the beginning of the 20th century [de Witte, 1948: 113]. The former Saint-Job ponds are visible on the map published by Dubois in 1857. The largest was filled in around 1920 during the widening of Chaussée de Saint-Job. DUBOIS, F., 1857. *Carte des environs de Bruxelles pour les promeneurs à pied, à cheval et en voiture: avec les renseignements utiles à ces promeneurs*, engraved by J.B. Blasseau and P.J. Doms, Établissement géographique de Bruxelles.
12. As Brussels lies at the northern limit of the species' geographical range, midwife toads are particularly sensitive to increasing shade [Percsy, 2000: 22].
13. The importation of frog legs into Europe – including live frogs, of which approximately 70 % enter through Belgium – remains an industrial activity which raises significant concerns. See Altherr *et al.* [2022: 4].
14. This hypothesis remains speculative. First proposed by August Thienemann in 1950 [Fonte *et al.*, 2019: 3], it does not appear to have gained widespread acceptance among scientists. A more detailed examination of the development of this theory and its intellectual context would be needed in order to assess its validity.
15. This reconstruction is based on de Wavrin's article [1988] and a commemorative tribute published following his death [Rabosée, 2016].
16. The first amphibian rescue operations during seasonal migrations began in the 1980s with the creation of the association Raîne and are now coordinated by Natagora. To this day, some migration routes along the Brussels road network remain unprotected and consequently highly lethal, such as Drève de Lorraine. Being less visible and less integrated into the urban fabric, these sites are particularly difficult to staff with volunteers.
17. See Hache [2024] on this way of becoming terrestrial again, and Solnit [2016] on the transformative potential of marginal histories when they resurface. In urban studies, this effort to reconnect past and present draws both on environmental history – notably Cronon's landmark study [1991] – and on contemporary ethnography, for example Cahn *et al.* [2018] on urban gardening practices and Stoetzer [2022] on the ecologies which emerge among urban ruins.
18. It is worth noting that the first case study, drawing on official archival sources relating to a single site, provides a much richer reconstruction of place than the other four. These latter cases concern multiple sites whose locations and dates of transformation are often only approximately known.

ABSTRACTS

What do we know about animal extinction in Brussels? The inventories commissioned by Bruxelles Environnement identify species which are present, abundant or rare, as well as those which have become extinct. But what actually happened to these vanished species? What individual histories lie behind these labels? This article seeks to reconstruct the extinctions, recorded during the 19th and 20th centuries, of five amphibian species which disappeared from the city. It interweaves field-based naturalist observations with a diverse body of knowledge in order to revisit the places where toads, frogs and newts once lived but have since vanished, while coming as close as possible to these concrete extinctions and to the experiences of those who were concerned about them. These five stories are tied to the contemporary issue of urban wetlands. They offer new perspectives which allow us to reflect on our capacity to coexist with other living beings in urban environments. They also show that the amphibians identified and cared for in these habitats today are not simply those which are present, but those which remain. They persist within a landscape marked by extensive losses which have accumulated over time and whose underlying processes have yet to be halted. More broadly, this study of local extinctions highlights the need within political ecology to recover forgotten histories, despite the limited documentary evidence available.

Wat weten we over de uitsterving van diersoorten in Brussel? De inventarissen die in opdracht van Leefmilieu Brussel opgemaakt zijn, geven aan welke diersoorten er aanwezig zijn, welke er talrijk of zeldzaam voorkomen en welke er uitgestorven verklaard zijn. Maar wat is er dan precies gebeurd met die verdwenen soorten? Welke verhalen gaan er achter die vaststellingen schuil? Dit artikel vertelt het verhaal van vijf amfibiesoorten die in de negentiende en twintigste eeuw verdwenen zijn uit Brussel. Aan de hand van waarnemingen op het terrein en uiteenlopende kennisbronnen keert het terug naar de plaatsen waar padden, kikkers en watersalamanders ooit leefden. Zo probeert het deze uitstervingen zo concreet mogelijk te benaderen, evenals de ervaringen van degenen die zich om deze diersoorten bekommerd hebben. Deze vijf verhalen haken in op het hedendaagse debat over natte leefgebieden in de stad. Ze nodigen uit om na te denken over hoe we in een stedelijke omgeving kunnen samenleven met andere levende wezens. De verhalen maken ook duidelijk dat de amfibieën die nu nog in deze leefgebieden waargenomen en ondersteund worden, niet alleen de soorten zijn die er voorkomen, maar vooral de amfibiesoorten die nog overblijven. Ze leven voort in een gebied dat getekend is door grootschalige verliezen, een proces waarvan het einde nog niet in zicht is. Tot slot wijst deze studie van lokale uitstervingen erop dat er binnen de politieke ecologie ook aandacht moet zijn voor de reconstructie van een vergeten geschiedenis, zelfs wanneer de beschikbare bronnen beperkt zijn.

INDEX

Subjects: 8. environnement – énergie – développement durable

Keywords: land use planning, environment, ecology, history, knowledge, urban struggles

Trefwoorden: ruimtelijke ordening, leefmilieu, ecologie, geschiedenis, kennis, stedelijke strijd

Mots-clés: aménagement du territoire, environnement, écologie, histoire, connaissance, luttes urbaines

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Que sait-on de l'extinction animale à Bruxelles ? Les inventaires commandités par Bruxelles Environnement renseignent les espèces présentes, abondantes ou rares, et celles déclarées éteintes. Mais qu'est-il arrivé à ces espèces disparues ? Quelles histoires singulières ces mots recouvrent-ils ? Cet article tente de raconter les extinctions, constatées au 19^e et 20^e siècles, de cinq espèces d'amphibiens ayant été éliminées de la ville. Il tisse des observations naturalistes menées *in situ* à un ensemble de savoirs éclectiques pour revisiter les lieux où des crapauds, grenouilles et tritons ont disparu, tout en se rapprochant au mieux de ces extinctions concrètes et de leurs expériences pour ceux qui s'en sont souciés. Ces cinq histoires se greffent à la question actuelle des milieux humides en ville. Elles y ajoutent des prismes d'attention qui interrogent nos capacités de cohabitation avec d'autres vivants en territoire urbain. Ces récits montrent aussi combien les amphibiens qui sont repérés et soutenus dans ces milieux aujourd'hui ne sont pas simplement ceux qui y sont présents, mais sont aussi ceux qui restent. Ils subsistent sur un territoire marqué par des pertes massives, ayant pris cours sur la durée et dont le processus n'est pas encore enrayé. Enfin, cette étude d'extinctions locales soulève la nécessité, au sein de l'écologie politique, de restituer des histoires oubliées malgré la modestie des sources disponibles.

TRANSLATORS

JANE CORRIGAN