

The 'Vuurtoerenweiden' and the 'Barnse Vaartje' score well as nesting grounds for water rail, moorhen, coot, mallard, northern shoveller, greylag goose, reed bunting, reed warbler, sedgeworker and bluethroat, and since 2001 also for the exotic Canada goose. During the winter and migration periods the pools and water meadows around the old light-house are a favourite spot for quite a number of water birds, including northern shoveller, common teal, garganey, gad-wall, mallard, common shelduck and common snipe.

## FAUNA

'Vuurtoerenweiden'



The abundance of species in the 'Vuurtoerenweiden' is largely due to a series of small differences in level and the resulting gradual transitions from wet to dry. The ponds turn white in spring when the common water-crowfoot comes into flower, and red in late summer when the water fern, originating from tropical America, flowers. The pools are bordered with marsh plants, including reed, bulrush, common spikerush, blue water-speedwell, water mint, common fleabane, great willowherb, water plantain and fool's water-cress. The salt-loving marsh arrowgrass is found in the depressions, close cropped by the cattle. The higher, drier bumps display attractive polder grasslands with dogtail grass and meadow barley.

## WHAT GROWS AND FLOWERS IN THE 'VUURTOERENWEIDEN'?

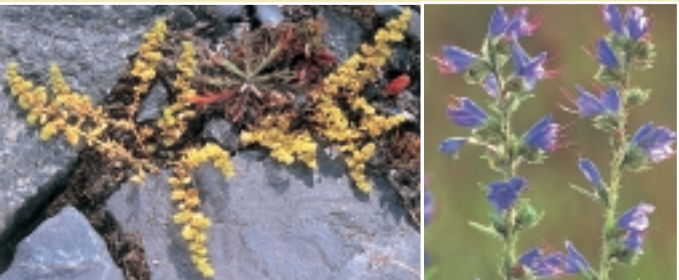
## SASHUL AND VUURTOERENWEIDEN NATURE DOMAIN

# Nature

our concern

### THE SASHUL: AN ARTIFICIAL LIME-RICH DUNE LANDSCAPE

The raised soil of the 'Sashul' mainly consists of shell-rich calcareous sand. The – admittedly artificial – physical environment of the 'Sashul' is therefore quite similar to the natural physical environment of the young, calcareous coastal dunes. This is clearly reflected in the vegetation. The shallow depressions, which are mostly flooded in winter and spring and dry in late summer, are covered with a type of pioneer vegetation normally found in moist dune valleys. Here you can find *knotted pearlwort*, *lesser centaury* and *brookweed*, along with species reminiscent of the salty origin of the raised sand: *sea pearlwort*, *strawberry clover*, *buck's-horn plantain* and *sea aster*. The moderately or very dry 'dune' ridges are covered with dune grassland vegetation with *rue-leaved saxifrage*, *sea mouse-ear*, *lesser hawkbit*, *bearded fescue*, *bulbous bluegrass*, *bird's foot-trefoil*, *blue fleabane*, *rough clover* and *field madder*. These moderately wet to dry dune grasslands also host attractive fungi, including various species of the brightly coloured *waxcap*. An outsider is the *smooth rupturewort*, a calcareous plant probably imported with



Smooth rupturewort

Viper's bugloss



Caterpillars of the cinnabar

Twisted moss

Sea buckthorn

## MORE INFORMATION

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The Nature Division of the Ministry of the Flemish Community is responsible for the preparation and implementation of Flemish nature policies and the management of nature reserves owned by the Flemish Region. It also provides financial assistance for the purchase and management of land by recognised nature associations.

The nature domain is managed by the Nature division of AMINAL in accordance with Flemish and European legislation on nature conservation. The main rules governing public access to the nature domain are displayed at the entrances. The flora and fauna in the 'Sashul and Vuurtoerenweiden' nature domain are very fragile. In order to protect this valuable wildlife, we ask visitors to abide by the following code of conduct:

- DO NOT PICK FLOWERS OR DAMAGE PLANTS
- DO NOT DISTURB ANIMALS
- DO NOT TOUCH OR FEED PONIES, CATTLE AND HORSES
- KEEP TO THE PATHS
- DO NOT LIGHT FIRES
- DO NOT DROP LITTER
- DO NOT DIG HOLES
- KEEP DOGS ON A LEASH
- DO NOT MAKE NOISE
- MOTOR VEHICLES PROHIBITED

The nature domain is freely accessible via the footpaths. A footpath also crosses the grazing unit. Visitors are kindly requested not to touch or feed the ponies. The pools and surrounding grasslands can best be observed from the permanently accessible bird observation hut.



## DUNES AND OTHER NATURE AREAS BETWEEN BLANKENBERGE AND BRESKENS



- |    |                                       |    |                                       |
|----|---------------------------------------|----|---------------------------------------|
| 10 | Blinkaartbos                          | 10 | Blankebergse polder                   |
| 11 | Inner dunes of the old Hazegraspolder | 16 | Verdronken zwarte                     |
| 12 | Zwinbosjes                            | 15 | Reygartsruiet (De Vrede)              |
| 13 | Zwin                                  | 14 | Dievegat                              |
| 14 | Zwinbosjes                            | 13 | Zwin                                  |
| 15 | Reygartsruiet (De Vrede)              | 12 | Zwinbosjes                            |
| 16 | Verdronken zwarte polder              | 11 | Inner dunes of the old Hazegraspolder |
| 17 | Willemspark                           | 10 | Blinkaartbos                          |
| 18 | Park 58                               | 9  | Golf course                           |
| 19 | Brabantse Panne)                      | 8  | Park 58                               |
| 20 | Fonteinjes                            | 7  | Willemspark                           |
| 21 | Baai van Heist                        | 6  | Palingpotweiden                       |
| 22 | Baai van Heist                        | 5  | Clay Pits of Heist                    |
| 23 | Baai van Heist                        | 4  | Vuurtoerenweiden                      |
| 24 | Baai van Heist                        | 3  | Sashul                                |
| 25 | Baai van Heist                        | 2  | Baai van Heist                        |
| 26 | Baai van Heist                        | 1  | Fonteinjes                            |

## SITUATION

From the coastal road a sharp contrast in landscape is immediately noticeable between Heist and Zeebrugge. The low pastures and ponds surrounding the old lighthouse ('De Vuurtoerenweiden') are in sharp contrast to the new, more westerly artificial plateau ('De Sashul'), which stands a full five meters higher. They are separated by the 'Barnse Vaartje', a tree-lined drainage ditch carrying runoff from the coastal road.

'De Vuurtoerenweiden' are a vestige of the historical polder grasslands of Heist and Ramskapelle. They have known a turbulent history: after a period of peat formation, silt was deposited when the sea broke through and flooded the area (3rd-4th century), then, from the 11th century onwards, the land was gradually reclaimed from the sea, and finally peat was extracted (from the Middle Ages until the beginning of the 20th century). This gave these microclimate-rich, low pastures their typical pattern with a multitude of pools and ditches. When the technique of reclaiming land by building dikes was developed in the 11th century, the Eendijk was thrown up between Uitkerke and Blankenberghe and Heist respectively). A vestige of the Eendijk still crosses the low meadows (see map). The As one of the first high-rise constructions in reinforced concrete in Belgium, it is, together with the small light signal standing closer to the sea, now a protected monument.



Photos: Michiel Decker - Jean-Louis Herrier

Welcome TO THE 'SASHUL AND VUURTOERENWEIDEN' NATURE DOMAIN



# 'SASHUL AND VUURTORENWEIDEN' NATURE DOMAIN



Bee orchid

Southern marsh orchid

limestone debris from Walloon stone quarries. The 'Sashul' and the old railway line between Heist and Zeebrugge are the only places where this plant has so far been found along the Flemish coast. The most striking plants in the dry dune grasslands are the more vigorous calcareous plants *viper's bugloss*, *common ragwort*, and *common and small-flowered evening primrose*. Along the embankments you can find *bee orchid* and *wild teasel*, which are typical for (disturbed) lime-rich soils. When the nature reserve was created, small dunes were created and planted with *marram grass*. At the foot of the 'Sashul', along the 'Barse Vaartje', lime- and iron-rich groundwater seeps up from the sand mass. In this wet seepage zone a significant population of *southern marsh orchid* is to be found. *Sea buckthorn* and *willow* bushes shoot up spontaneously on the plateau of the 'Sashul'.



Little ringed plover



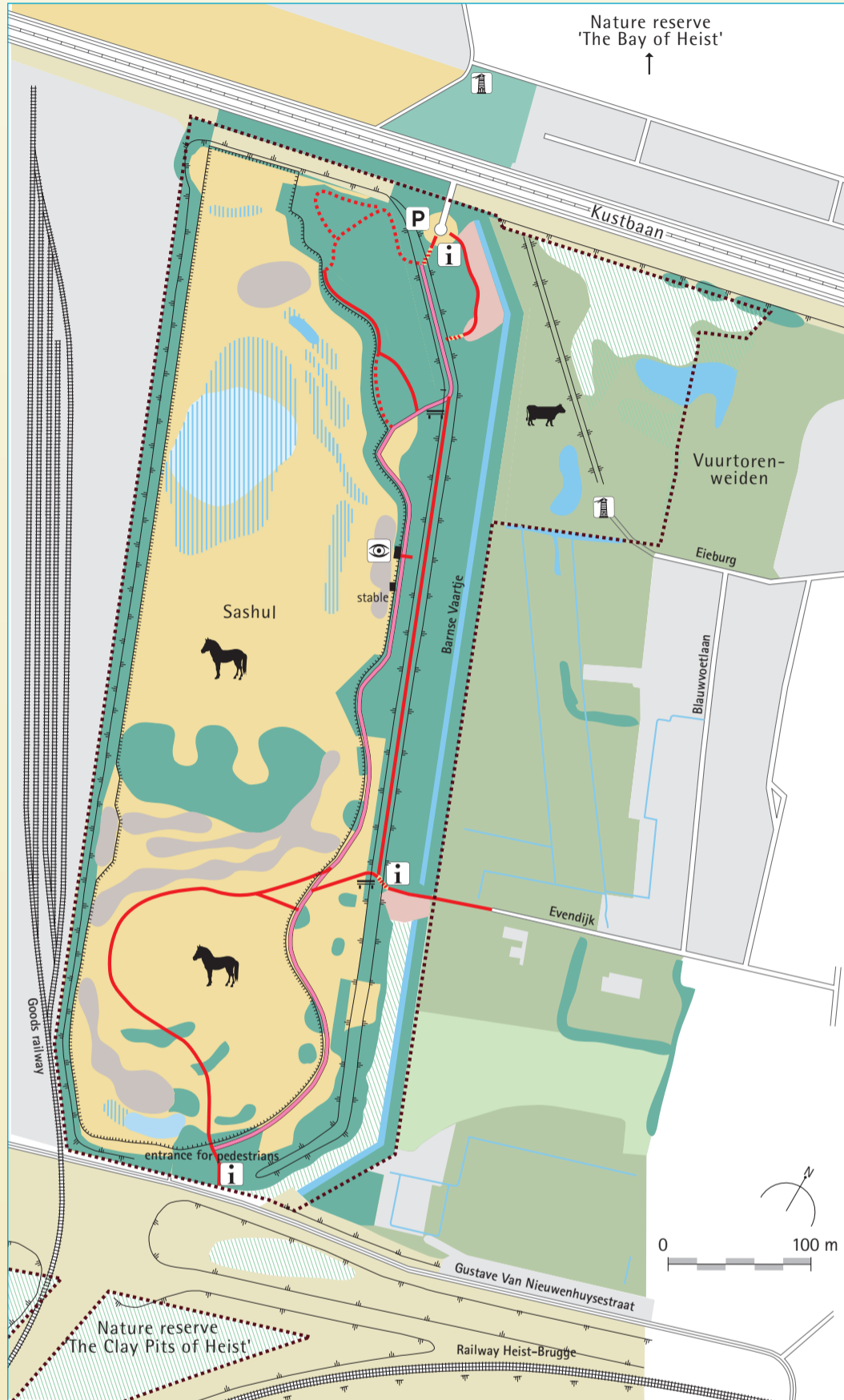
Northern lapwing



Common snipe

## FAUNA

During winter the 'Sashul' looks rather desolate. The stony sand bed of the pools contains too little food to attract many water birds and waders. Nevertheless, the inconspicuous *jacksnipe* often stops here to feed, while his much sturdier cousin, the *woodcock*, takes a rest in the undergrowth and bushes. From early spring to midsummer the shallow pools and surrounding open land covered in short grass witness an explosion of insect life, which in turn attracts many birds. The 'shingle beaches' around pools become very popular with the *little ringed plover* and the *piebald wagtail*, while the short vegetation of the banks and shallow pools attract meadow birds (*northern lapwing*), coastal birds (*oystercatcher* and *common redshank*), and water birds (*mallard* and *coot*). The seagulls love to preen themselves in the numerous pools. With a bit of luck you can observe not only the common *black-headed gull*, *herring gull* and *lesser black-backed gull*, but also the rather rare *Mediterranean gull*. The thickets of *sea buckthorn* and *willow* are also much in demand: *turtledove*,



*linnet*, *stonechat*, *rufous nightingale*, *common white-throat*, *willow warbler*, *grasshopper warbler*, *marsh warbler* and *icterine warbler* come here to breed. The *fan-tailed warbler*, originally a southern species, breeds more and more often in the clumps of wood smallreed. The *grey partridge* also regularly breeds at the 'Sashul'.

Since the 'Sashul' lies on an important migration route for coastal birds, its thickets and bushes make an ideal resting-place for many songbirds during the spring and autumn migrations. Regular travellers on the open plain are the small *Turdidae*, *northern wheatear* and *whinchat*, while *piebald flycatcher*, *firecrest* and even *wryneck* are regularly observed in the thickets and bushes.

*Rabbits* also thrive on the 'Sashul' and help to keep the grass cropped short. Their natural enemy, the *weasel*, is also present. Many amphibians have also been observed in the 'Barse Vaartje', the ponds of the 'Vuurtorenweiden' and the 'Sashul', including the *common toad*, *common frog*, *European water frog* and *smooth newt*.



Rabbit

Shetland pony

## MANAGEMENT

During the winter of 1999-2000, AMINAL-Nature division transformed the former goods marshalling yard into the 'Sashul' nature domain. Traces of the industrial occupation and illegal dumping sites were removed, pools deepened and relief added in the form of marram dunes made of sea sand. Clay-shell footpaths, a bird observation hut and benches were also provided. The previously planted exotic *white poplars*, whose root suckers endangered the valuable spontaneous vegetation, were removed and replaced with indigenous shrubs and trees.

Shetland ponies keep the major part of the 'Sashul' landscape open by grazing. Originating from the Shetland Islands (off the northern coast of Scotland), they are accustomed to a rough climate and a meagre diet. An open landscape is essential for several species of birds which breed here in summer, such as *little ringed plover*, *northern lapwing*, *oystercatcher* and *common redshank*, and in order to maintain the species-rich dune vegetation. The grasslands outside the grazing unit and hayfields are regularly mown. The root-propagating *sea buckthorn* also has to be cut back and mown every year to keep it under control.

The 'Vuurtorenweiden' are extensively grazed by cattle and horses.