CHAPTER 11
HEATHLAND, AN EVER CHANGING LANDSCAPE

Ten kilometres from the international port and the petrochemical industry of the city of Antwerp in Belgium; in the middle of one of the most densely populated areas of Europe; lies a quiet landscape of pine plantations and broadleaf woodland, of inland sand dunes and dwarf shrubs, pools of stagnant water, moorland, sandy tracks and grassland. Hundreds of thousands of city dwellers come here every year to walk, to cycle, to camp, to discover nature, to taste the delicacies of local restaurants, and to visit exhibitions and the arboretum. They come to relax and enjoy the heart of the region: the Cross-border Park De Zoom – Kalmthoutse Heide.

Renowned as one of the five Ramsar sites in Belgium, a wetland of international importance; designated as a European special protected area under the Birds and Habitat Directives and endowed with three strict nature reserves; the park is a regional high spot for biodiversity. However, in addition, the army and the police have their training-camp in the area; drinking water is produced from the pure groundwater; farmers earn a living; and a privileged few live on big estates.

This is the cross-border landscape of the heath and woods of Kalmthout and the neighbouring Dutch municipalities. It is situated on the nutrient poor Pleistocene cover sand region of north-west Belgium and the south-west of The Netherlands; adjacent to the low lying clay polders of the Scheldt estuary in the west. The soils in this region are poor in minerals and range from moderately buffered to highly acidic. Under natural conditions, podzolic soils prevail. Where continuous farming has been carried out over several centuries, anthropogenic soils are widespread: the so called plaggen-soils (plaggepts) with characteristically deep topsoil that is very rich in organic materials.