

1 **Five years of citizen science and standardized field surveys reveal**  
2 **a threatened urban Eden for wild bees in Brussels, Belgium**

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4 Nicolas J. Vereecken<sup>1\*</sup>, Timothy Weekers<sup>1</sup>, Leon Marshall<sup>1</sup>, Jens D’Haeseleer<sup>2</sup>, Maarten  
5 Cuypers<sup>2</sup>, Pieter Vanormelingen<sup>2</sup>, Alain Pauly<sup>3</sup>, Bernard Pasau<sup>4</sup>, Nicolas Leclercq<sup>1</sup>, Alain  
6 Tshibungu<sup>1</sup>, Jean-Marc Molenberg<sup>1</sup> & Stéphane De Greef<sup>1</sup>

7

8 <sup>1</sup> Agroecology Lab, Université Libre de Bruxelles, Brussels, Belgium.

9 <sup>2</sup> Natuurpunt Studie, Mechelen, Belgium.

10 <sup>3</sup> Directorate Taxonomy & Phylogeny, Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences, Brussels,  
11 Belgium.

12 <sup>4</sup> Natagora Bruxelles, Mundo-B, Bruxelles , Belgium.

13

14

15 \* Correspondence to: N.J. Vereecken, Agroecology Lab, Université libre de Bruxelles  
16 (ULB), Avenue F.D. Roosevelt 50, B-1050 Bruxelles, Belgium. E-mail:  
17 nicolas.vereecken@ulb.be

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19 **Manuscript title**: Five years of citizen science and standardized field surveys reveal a  
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**Short communication**

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25

26 **Abstract. 1.** Urbanisation is often put forward as an important driver of biodiversity loss,  
27 including for pollinators such as wild bees. However, recent evidence shows that the mosaics  
28 of urban green spaces, and in particular certain categories of informal urban green spaces  
29 (IGS), can play an important role to help native wild bees thrive in cities.

30 **2.** Here, we describe the results of five years of citizen science and standardised field surveys  
31 of wild bees conducted at the Friche Josaphat, a 24-ha urban wasteland in the Brussels-  
32 Capital Region (Belgium). These field surveys were initiated following the planned  
33 restructuring and partial destruction of this site by the regional authorities.

34 **3.** We recorded a total of 2,507 specimens belonging to 127 species of wild bees, i.e. 60.5%  
35 of the 210 species recorded regionally, including nine that are threatened with extinction at  
36 national or European scales. The Friche Josaphat encompasses a significant share of the  
37 functional and phylogenetic diversity of wild bees known from the Brussels-Capital Region  
38 and is one of the most species-rich localities known to date for wild bees in Belgium.

39 **4.** Collectively, our results highlight the strong complementarity of citizen science and  
40 academic approaches in biodiversity surveys, and they reaffirm that wastelands are essential  
41 components of urban biodiversity. Our study stresses the need to provide biodiverse IGS with  
42 a formal status within the mosaic of urban green spaces, but also to acknowledge and  
43 safeguard their natural capital and the multiple ecosystem services they provide.

44

45 **Key words.** Urban planning, urban green spaces, biodiversity, wastelands, vacant lands,  
46 brownfields, pollinators, wild bees.

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52 **Introduction**

53

54 Urbanisation as a spatial process is *a priori* expected to have deleterious impacts on  
55 biodiversity, through its contribution to habitat fragmentation and the irreversible conversion  
56 of green spaces into impervious surfaces (e.g., McDonald *et al.*, 2008; Vimal *et al.*, 2012).  
57 Yet, parallel evidence suggests that some groups of organisms might actually thrive in cities  
58 (Miller & Hobbs, 2002; Araujo, 2003; Kühn & Klotz, 2006). By and large, our cities and  
59 megapolises are still home to relatively high numbers of native and sometimes rare or  
60 threatened species (e.g. Aronson *et al.*, 2014), and also many exotic taxa (Fitch *et al.*, 2019;  
61 de Souza e Silva *et al.*, 2021; Taggar *et al.*, 2021). These urban ecological networks are key  
62 to ecosystem function and resilience in cities under global change scenarios, but they also  
63 actively support the mental health, physical well-being and social interactions of present-day  
64 populations of urban dwellers (Barton & Grant, 2013; Bratman *et al.*, 2019). Indeed, the  
65 benefits of regular access to (large) urban green spaces (UGS) were particularly exacerbated  
66 across the world urban centres during the recent COVID-19 pandemic and its associated  
67 travel restrictions (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020; Xie *et al.*, 2020; Ahmadpoor & Shahab,  
68 2021). For all these reasons, urban areas have become increasingly recognized as important  
69 targets for wildlife conservation (Goddard *et al.*, 2010; Dearborn & Kark, 2010; Kowarik,  
70 2011; Shwartz *et al.*, 2014), as well as to comply with the UN Sustainable Development  
71 Goals aiming “to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and  
72 sustainable” (United Nations, 2015; Apfelbeck *et al.*, 2020).

73

74 The added value of cities for biodiversity conservation lies in their mosaics of typologically  
75 diverse urban green spaces (UGS), from playing fields to highly manicured environments  
76 such as managed forests, parks or cemeteries, to semi-natural landscapes, including urban

77 nature reserves (Lepczyk *et al.*, 2017). However, besides these formally acknowledged and  
78 managed UGS, a multitude of so-called informal urban green spaces (IGS) such as “vacant”  
79 lots, street or railway sidings, utility easements, corridors between buildings and riverbanks  
80 are typically deprioritized and often represent an underrated piece of the urban nature and  
81 urban planning puzzle (Rupprecht & Byrne, 2014). Among these neglected IGS, urban  
82 wastelands (or “brownfield” lands) come in all sizes and shapes, and unlike the coherently  
83 managed urban parks, they often meet the diverse “nature needs” of their users who, contrary  
84 to urban planners, do not view IGS as being “vacant” or as an “empty space” that should be  
85 developed (Rupprecht *et al.*, 2015; Botzat *et al.*, 2016). In their meta-analysis spanning across  
86 37 independent studies, Bonthoux *et al.* (2014) show that wastelands are indeed an essential  
87 component of urban biodiversity, particularly for birds (see also Villaseñor *et al.*, 2020) and  
88 plants (e.g., Godefroid *et al.*, 2007), but also for beetles (Coleoptera) (Small *et al.*, 2002;  
89 Small *et al.*, 2003). To date, the explicit contribution of wastelands to the diversity of other  
90 groups of organisms relevant to urban ecosystem services provision, such as wild bees  
91 (Hymenoptera, Apoidea), remains relatively poorly understood (but see Fischer *et al.*, 2016;  
92 Twerd & Banaszak-Cibicka, 2019).

93

94 In this study, we assess the contribution of the Friche Josaphat, the largest urban wasteland in  
95 Brussels, to the diversity of wild bees at the scale of the Brussels-Capital Region. We  
96 compiled five years of field surveys to characterize the fauna of this site, and we compare it  
97 to the regional checklist of wild bees. Specifically, we use taxonomic, traits-based functional  
98 and phylogenetic diversity metrics, as well as null models of community assembly to test if  
99 the wild bee species assemblage recorded at our study site is functionally and  
100 phylogenetically clustered or over-dispersed (i.e., with significantly less or more similarities  
101 among co-occurring species than in a random community, respectively). The importance of

102 environmental filtering as a driver structuring the wild bee community of the Friche Josaphat  
103 is discussed, as well as the implications of our results for the conservation of urban bees and  
104 urban biodiversity.

## 105 **Materials and methods**

106

### 107 *Study site*

108

109 The 24-hectare Friche Josaphat (Figure 1) is currently one of the few remaining wastelands in  
110 the Brussels-Capital Region (Belgium; N50.863224, E4.395417), and by far the largest in  
111 size. This site is a former railway marshalling yard extending across the Schaerbeek and  
112 Evere municipalities; in other words, it is a post-industrial urban fallow now turned into a  
113 semi-natural meadow, and one of the largest unfragmented green spaces entirely enclaved in  
114 the dense urban matrix of Brussels (Figure 1). After the closure of the Schaerbeek-Josaphat  
115 marshalling yard along the Railway Line 26 (Mechelen-Etterbeek-Hal) in 1994, the railway  
116 infrastructure was dismantled and the site was subsequently cleaned up, levelled with soil and  
117 sand, and turned into a semi-natural grassland in 2013 (Figure 1).

118

119 The site is currently owned by the Urban Development Corporation of the Brussels-Capital  
120 Region (Société d'Aménagement Urbain, SAU) and according to present-day development  
121 plans, the semi-natural meadow will be largely destroyed and turned into impervious  
122 surfaces, perhaps at the exception of seven hectares converted into biodiversity-focused  
123 embankment (3.0ha), an active linear park (2.8ha) and a relaxation space (1.1ha). This public  
124 announcement has stimulated collaborative research among citizens, researchers and local  
125 non-profit organisations to document the wildlife conservation value of the Friche Josaphat  
126 for a variety of taxonomic groups, with the overarching goal to propose alternative,

127 biodiversity-inclusive and participatory management approaches for the Friche Josaphat site.

128 Our contribution to this collective endeavour was to conduct new field surveys and collect all

129 available and verified records relevant to the wild bees of the Brussels-Capital Region.

130 *Data collection*

131

132 Our dataset encompasses abundance records of wild bees obtained between 10.vi.2015 and

133 31.x.2020 through opportunistic observations, as well as through standardized, targeted

134 biological surveys using a combination of pan traps and insect netting (transect walks)

135 (Westphal *et al.*, 2008; Normandin *et al.*, 2017; Leclercq *et al.*, unpublished; Weekers *et al.*,

136 unpublished). The methodology on the use of pan traps for bee surveys is detailed in

137 Vereecken *et al.* (2021).

138

139 Opportunistic surveys at the Friche Josaphat by amateur naturalists started in 2015 up to the

140 present day; we compiled all validated observations available through the citizen science

141 platforms Observations.be/Waarnemingen.be (2021), including the date, time, geographic

142 coordinates, field notes, as well as photographs as supporting evidence. Individual records

143 obtained through citizen science surveys relate to a single species, yet they can include the

144 number of specimens of the species observed locally which can amount to several hundreds

145 in the case of a nesting aggregation.

146

147 Standardized field surveys consisted in combining insect netting and pan traps (Westphal *et*

148 *al.*, 2008; Leclercq *et al.*, unpublished). All bees were then pinned and labelled, then

149 identified down to the species level. Individual records here correspond to pinned specimens.

150

151 *Statistical analyses*

152

153 We first prepared a species accumulation curve by randomly assigning the order of  
154 specimens observed (Gotelli & Colwell, 2001) and the *specaccum* function in the “vegan”  
155 package (Oksanen *et al.*, 2020) to visually assess the adequacy of our wild bee field surveys.  
156 This and all following analyses were conducted in RStudio (2020) for R (R Core Team,  
157 2020). We then calculated the total expected species richness (or the number of unobserved  
158 species) using a bootstrapping procedure with n=999 random reorganizations of sampling  
159 order. Total expected species richness was assessed using Chao (1984), Jack1 (First order  
160 jackknife), and Jack2 (Second order jackknife) estimators with the *alpha.estimate* function in  
161 the “BAT” package (version 2.5.0.) (Cardoso *et al.*, 2015) (see Normandin *et al.*, 2017 for  
162 details).

163

164 For functional community structure approaches, we used the methodology described in  
165 Vereecken *et al.* (2021): the taxonomic classification and functional traits of wild bee species  
166 in the Brussels-Capital Region used in this study are available in Table S1. The mixed matrix  
167 of qualitative and quantitative functional traits (between the columns “ITD” and  
168 “Diet.breadth”) was converted into a Gower distance matrix with the *gowdis* function in the  
169 “FD” package (version 1.0–12) (Laliberté & Legendre 2010; Laliberté *et al.*, 2015). We then  
170 used the *pcoa* function from the “ape” package (version 5.0) (Paradis & Schliep, 2019) to  
171 perform a principal coordinates analysis (PCoA) based on the Gower distance matrix above,  
172 and we used the first two principal coordinates to plot the functional space of the Friche  
173 Josaphat and the Brussels-Capital Region wild bee communities as convex hulls, following  
174 the framework described by Mouillot *et al.* (2013). We excluded species in the subgenus  
175 *Micrandrena* (*Andrena*, Andrenidae) from the analyses as they are notoriously challenging to  
176 identify and still await a proper revision, and we also excluded *Hylaeus paulus* (Colletidae)

177 (1 specimen collected at the Friche Josaphat) and *Nomada pleurosticta* (Apidae) (1 specimen  
178 collected in Brussels outside the Friche Josaphat) because we failed to compute their inter-  
179 tegular distance (ITD). We used the *multidimFD* function by Mouillot *et al.* (2013) to  
180 characterize the functional  $\beta$ -diversity between the wild bee community of the Friche  
181 Josaphat and that of the Brussels-Capital Region by computing the proportion of the nested,  
182 multi-dimensional convex hull of the Friche Josaphat (*FRic*, in %, as functional richness or  
183 the proportion of functional space filled by species present in the assemblage).

184

185 To compare the phylogenetic structure of the Friche Josaphat community to that of the  
186 Brussels-Capital Region, we adopted the approach described in Vereecken *et al.* (2021) by  
187 building a polytomous, ultrametric tree based on the Linnaean taxonomic hierarchy of wild  
188 bees, and we used the “ggtree” package (version 3.12) (Yu *et al.*, 2017; Yu, 2020) to  
189 visualize the resulting phylogenetic tree with its associated location data.

190 Last, for both the traits-based functional and phylogenetic approaches, we have computed the  
191 Mean (Functional or Phylogenetic) Distance (M(F/P)D), an average for the pairwise  
192 (functional or phylogenetic) distances values across all pairs of taxa in a community (in the  
193 functional space or across the phylogeny). We also computed a traits-based functional and  
194 phylogenetic Mean Nearest Taxon Distance (MNTD), a metric that provides an average of  
195 the (functional or phylogenetic) distances between each species and its nearest (functional or  
196 phylogenetic) neighbor in the community (Webb *et al.*, 2002; see also Dorchin *et al.* 2018).  
197 Specifically, we computed the Standardized Effect Sizes (SES; Gotelli & Cabe, 2002) to  
198 compare the functional and phylogenetic scores for M(F/P)D and MNTD obtained from the  
199 observed community with a randomized null community (n=999). These variables were  
200 calculated with the “picante” package (Kembel *et al.*, 2010).





## 202 **Results and discussion**

### 203 *The wild bee fauna of the Friche Josaphat in Brussels*

204

205 Our dataset for the Friche Josaphat comprises 2,507 individual records, representing 7,188  
206 specimens and 127 species of wild bees, as well as the honey bee (*Apis mellifera*) (Table S1).

207 The highest estimation of species richness for the Friche Josaphat was associated with the  
208 second order Jackknife estimator (168.84 species), while the lowest was the first order  
209 Jackknife estimator (150 species). The Chao estimator indicated the probable presence of  
210 153.67 species at our study site. Collectively, these results, along with the shape of the  
211 species accumulation curve reaching a plateau (Figure 2), indicate that we have observed  
212 75.81-85.33% of the estimated species richness at the Friche Josaphat. In terms of taxonomic  
213 diversity, the wild bees recorded at the Friche Josaphat belong to six families and 26 genera  
214 (Figure 2), and they account for 60.6% of the 210 species recorded in the Brussels-Capital  
215 Region between February 1999 and March 2020, or 34.5% of the 345 species assessed  
216 recently in the Belgian Red List of Bees (Drossart *et al.*, 2019).

217

218 The 12 most common species are illustrated and listed in Figure S1 along with their  
219 abundance in the dataset; they represented 74.9% of all samples recorded. Our records  
220 encompass seven wild bee species of conservation concern at the scale of Belgium: these  
221 include the nationally “Vulnerable” species *Eucera longicornis* (Apidae) and the “Near  
222 threatened” species *Andrena bimaculata* (Andrenidae), *Bombus hortorum* (Apidae),  
223 *Coelioxys rufescens* (Megachilidae), *Osmia aurulenta* (Megachilidae), *Osmia spinulosa*  
224 (Megachilidae) and *Stelis phaeoptera* (Megachilidae) (Drossart *et al.*, 2019). The Friche  
225 Josaphat is also home to species threatened with extinction at the European scale, such as the  
226 “Vulnerable” *Colletes fodiens* (Colletidae) and the “Near threatened” *Lasioglossum*

227 *sexnotatum* (Halictidae) (Nieto *et al.*, 2014) (Table S1). We also noted the presence of four  
228 species recorded in the Brussels-Capital Region that are only known from the Friche Josaphat  
229 so far, namely *Hylaeus paulus* (Colletidae), *Anthidium punctatum* (Megachilidae) and *Osmia*  
230 *aurulenta* (Megachilidae). Moreover, the record of *Anthidium septemspinorum*  
231 (Megachilidae) through citizen sciences surveys was not only unique to the Friche Josaphat,  
232 but also a new addition to the Belgian checklist of wild bees (Vereecken *et al.*, unpublished).

233

234 A total of 72 bee species were recorded both through citizen sciences and standardised field  
235 surveys at the Friche Josaphat. The citizen sciences records included another 33 additional  
236 wild bee species not detected through standardized field surveys, whereas the standardised  
237 field surveys helped adding 23 species not detected through the citizen sciences surveys  
238 (Figure 2).

239

240 We hypothesize that the high biodiversity of wild bees highlighted at the Friche Josaphat  
241 stems from several important factors, including (i) the biodiversity-friendly management of  
242 the Friche Josaphat since 2013, (ii) the strong complementarity of citizen science and  
243 standardised methods in biodiversity surveys, particularly when they aim at maximizing the  
244 number of species recorded in a check-list format, and (iii) the proximity of the railway and  
245 railway edges to the Friche Josaphat (Figure 1). Indeed, Linear Transport Infrastructures such  
246 as railways, but also highways, waterways and power transmission lines are increasingly  
247 acknowledged as important biodiversity corridors for invertebrates, including for pollinators  
248 and wild bees in particular (e.g., Wojcik & Buchmann, 2012; Wagner *et al.*, 2014; Hill &  
249 Bartomeus, 2016; Steinert *et al.*, 2020).

250

251 Our results on the traits-based functional community structure illustrate that the Friche  
252 Josaphat represents 92.21% of the functional space occupied by all wild bee species recorded  
253 in the Brussels-Capital Region (Figure 2 & Figure S2). Our analysis of the community  
254 structure of bees indicates that, compared to the Brussels-Capital Region, the diversity of the  
255 Friche Josaphat community is significantly reduced taxonomically (211 vs. 128 species),  
256 functionally (FD observed = 19.847 vs. 14.304;  $p$ -value=0.03) and phylogenetically (PD  
257 observed = 10.365 vs. 8.759;  $p$ -value=0.0280) (see also Figure 2). However, we found no  
258 significant difference between the Brussels-Capital Region and the Friche Josaphat  
259 communities when we computed the Mean (Functional or Phylogenetic) Distance (M(F/P)D)  
260 (MFuncD z-score=-0.027 and  $p$ -value=0.461; MPhyloD z-score=-1.536 and  $p$ -value=0.077),  
261 or the traits-based functional and phylogenetic Mean Nearest Taxon Distance (MNTD)  
262 (MNTD<sub>traits</sub> z-score=-1.130 and  $p$ -value=0.124; MNTD<sub>phylo</sub> z-score=-1.228 and  $p$ -  
263 value=0.115). These results illustrate that the Friche Josaphat encompasses a randomly nested  
264 subset of the wild bee fauna of the Brussels-Capital Region from a functional and  
265 phylogenetic perspective, and also suggest a negligible role of environmental filtering  
266 towards certain combinations of traits or taxonomic groups in the community assembly  
267 process. As such, the Friche Josaphat is therefore currently the richest semi-natural site at the  
268 regional level, and the fact that its functional and phylogenetic structure is not significantly  
269 different from random communities makes it an ideal site to “showcase” the diversity of  
270 urban bees in Brussels.

271

272 To date, the most biodiverse site in the Brussels-Capital Region for wild bees was the flower-  
273 rich, 5.3 ha “Jean Massart” botanical garden, a Natura 2000 site at Auderghem, which is  
274 home to 112 species (Pauly, 2019; surveyed between 1975-2016). Other formally recognized  
275 UGS relevant for wild bee diversity include several nature reserves such as the

276 Vogelzangbeek (Anderlecht, 20 ha, 51 spp.), the Scheutbos (Molenbeek, 66 ha, 80 spp.) or  
277 the Moeraske (Evere, 14 ha, 69 spp.) according to the citizen science online platforms  
278 Observations.be/Waarnemingen.be. The Friche Josaphat also turns out to be one of  
279 Belgium’s most diverse sites for wild bees, since the only other known “hotspots” at the scale  
280 of Belgium include sites with comparable species counts, but that are much larger nature  
281 reserves and/or sites that have been surveyed for several decades (e.g. the Belvédère and  
282 Fond-Saint-Martin nature reserve at Han-sur-Lesse with 131 spp. surveyed between 1951-  
283 2017 (Pauly & Vereecken, 2019), or the 500+ ha nature reserves Most (a peaty depression)  
284 and Keiheuvel (a land dune area) at Balen, with 136 spp. surveyed between 2012-2017 (M.  
285 Jacobs, unpublished report).

286

287 *The future of urban wastelands and other informal urban green spaces*

288

289 Collectively, our results have allowed us to confirm recent findings by Twerd & Banaszak-  
290 Cibicka (2019) that urban wastelands represent a hitherto underrated and largely overlooked  
291 category of UGS with a high potential for the conservation of wild bees in metropolises.  
292 More coordination is required among stakeholders to identify the local factors contributing to  
293 the high biodiversity of wild bees at the Friche Josaphat: for example, Strauss & Biedermann  
294 (2006) have provided evidence that phytophagous insects in biodiverse urban brownfields  
295 have clear preferences for certain successional stages of the vegetation. The conservation of a  
296 rich local species pool within a city therefore requires coordinated and evidence-based  
297 management of the vegetation, and perhaps the maintenance of a mosaic of (all) successional  
298 vegetation stages that provide the key host plants of ecologically specialized and generalized  
299 species alike. In the case of the Friche Josaphat, addressing these challenges requires an  
300 integrated landscape approach tailored to the ecological requirements of the targeted species

301 (see Table S1) (Wilson & Jamieson, 2019) within the ecological network of important UGS  
302 (Ayers & Rehan, 2021) such as the neighbouring cemetery of Brussels and the Josaphat Park.  
303 Another category of IGS or “vacant land” that received increasing attention over the past  
304 decade are urban agriculture plots such as community gardens. Results from recent studies  
305 indicate that they too have the potential to harbour particularly high levels of species richness  
306 for wild bees and other components of wildlife in urban centres (Normandin *et al.*, 2017;  
307 Turo *et al.*, 2021; Vereecken *et al.*, 2021).

308

309 “Formal” or “conventional” UGS such as parks are (increasingly) expensive to maintain, and  
310 they often fail to satisfy the urban dwellers’ diverse needs. In a context of ever-increasing  
311 urbanisation pressure, where spatial (conservation) prioritization using appropriately chosen  
312 objectives is a pressing priority, biodiverse and highly multi-functional IGS should therefore  
313 be urgently provided with a formal status within the mosaic of UGS. Indeed, their uncertain  
314 legal, socio-economic, and ecological status represent major obstacles in realizing these IGS’  
315 full societal and environmental potential (e.g., Rupprecht & Byrne, 2014) and severely limit  
316 our capacity to develop wildlife-inclusive urban designs (Apfelbeck *et al.*, 2020). Envisioning  
317 participatory management approaches of IGS for urban environmental planning and  
318 recreation is of pivotal importance if we are to safeguard their natural capital and the multiple  
319 ecosystem services they provide, including for the physical and mental well-being of urban  
320 citizens.

321

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323

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336

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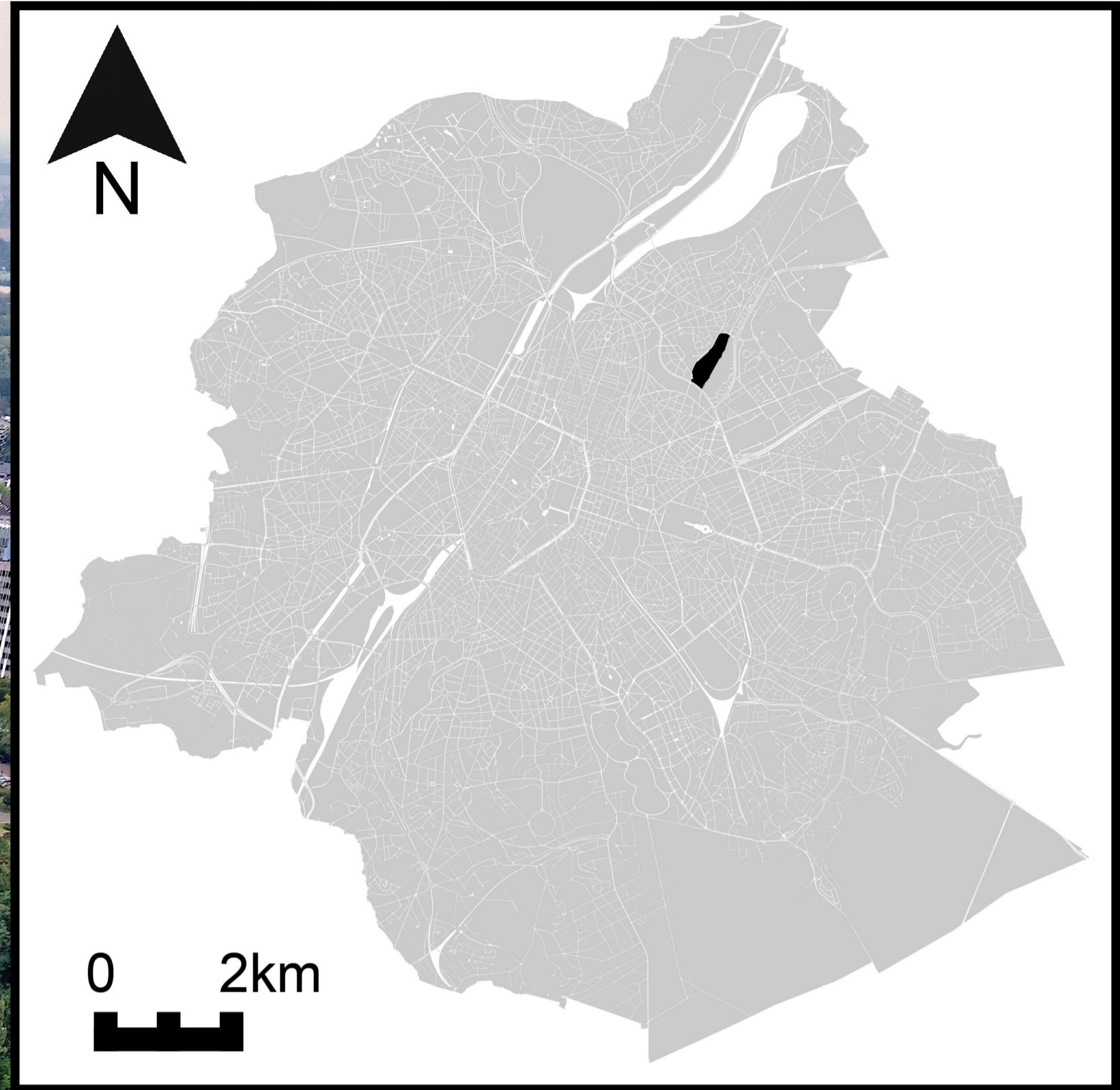
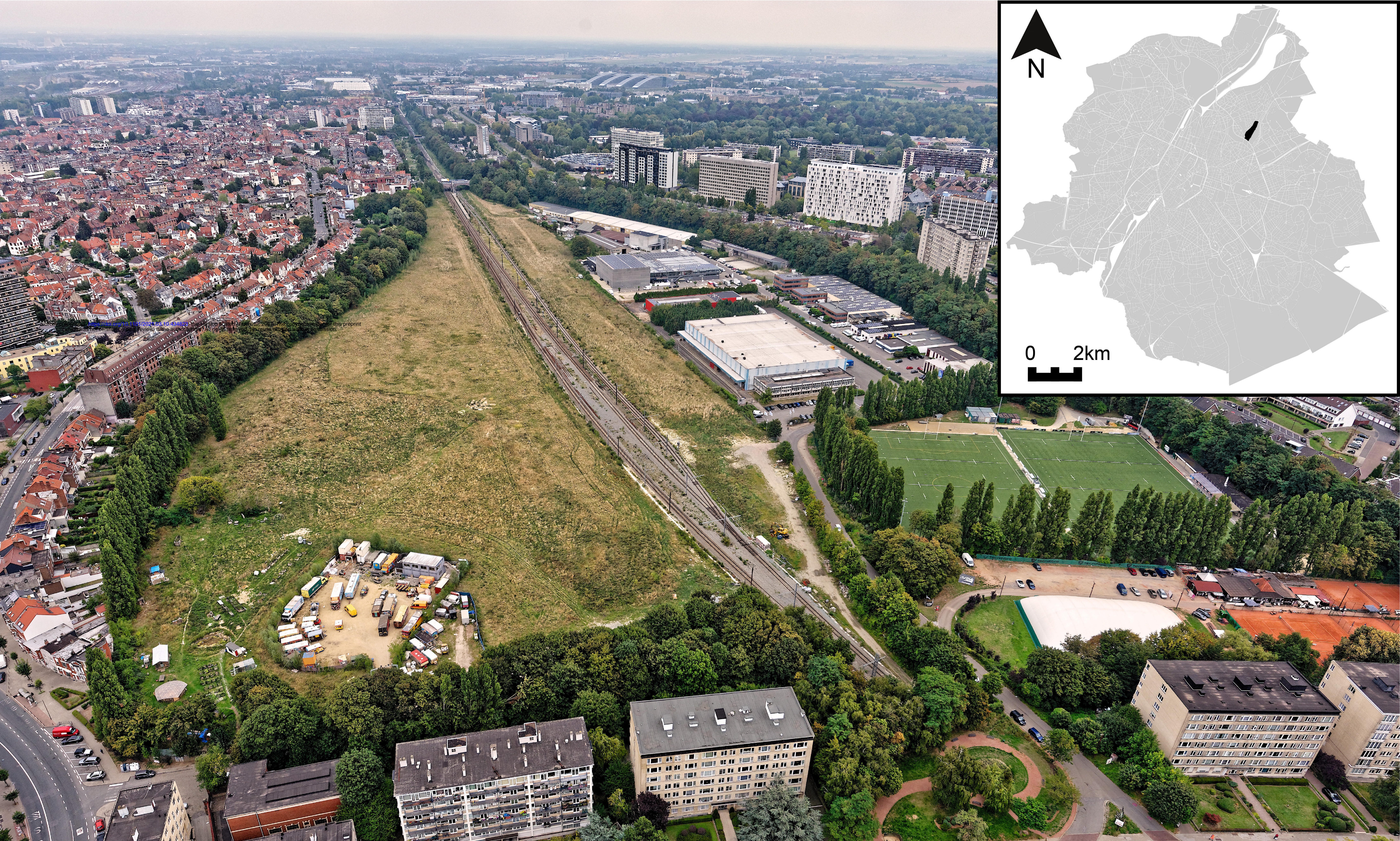
534 **Figure captions.**

535

536 **Figure 1.** Aerial view of the Friche Josaphat wasteland in Brussels (Belgium) surrounded by  
537 a row of tall trees and the railway tracks (Photo © S. Schmitt/Global View - Photographie  
538 aérienne), and its location in the Brussels-Capital Region (in the top right corner).

539

540 **Figure 2.** Analysis of the wild bee community structure associated with the Friche Josaphat  
541 and the Brussels-Capital Region. **Top left:** Species accumulation curve using a bootstrapping  
542 procedure with n=999 random reorganizations of sampling order. The mean species  
543 accumulation curve of the Friche Josaphat reaches a plateau, and estimators indicate that we  
544 have observed 75.81-85.33% of the estimated local species richness, which confirms the  
545 adequacy of our field surveys. The Venn diagram indicates the number of unique and shared  
546 species recorded by citizen science and standardized surveys. **Bottom left:** The pink convex  
547 hull represents 100% of the multi-dimensional functional space occupied by all species  
548 recorded in the Brussels-Capital Region, and the blue convex hull represents 92.21% of the  
549 multi-dimensional functional space occupied by species from the Friche Josaphat. Pink and  
550 blue circles are species of wild bees associated with each community; the arrow indicates the  
551 position of *Coelioxys aurolimbata* (Hym. Megachilidae), a uniquely large cuckoo bee species  
552 associated with a host (*Megachile ericetorum* (Hym. Megachilidae) displaying strong  
553 preference (i.e., oligolecty) for host plants in the family *Fabaceae*. All other *Coelioxys*  
554 species found in the Brussels-Capital Region or in the Friche Josaphat are associated with  
555 pollen generalist (i.e., polylectic) hosts. **Right:** Phylogenetic classification of wild bees  
556 belonging to the six families recorded in the Brussels-Capital Region (black and white  
557 squares) and in the Friche Josaphat (black squares only).



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