

PERSPECTIVE

ForestClim—Bioclimatic variables for microclimate temperatures of European forests

Stef Haesen^{1,2}  | Jonas J. Lembrechts³  | Pieter De Frenne⁴  | Jonathan Lenoir⁵  |
 Juha Aalto^{6,7}  | Michael B. Ashcroft⁸ | Martin Kopecký^{9,10}  | Miska Luoto⁷  |
 Ilya Maclean¹¹  | Ivan Nijs³  | Pekka Niittynen⁷  | Johan van den Hoogen¹²  |
 Nicola Arriga¹³  | Josef Brůna⁹  | Nina Buchmann¹²  | Marek Čiliak¹⁴  |
 Alessio Collalti¹⁵  | Emiel De Lombaerde⁴  | Patrice Descombes^{16,17}  |
 Mana Gharun^{12,18}  | Ignacio Goded¹³  | Sanne Govaert⁴  | Caroline Greiser¹⁹  |
 Achim Grelle²⁰  | Carsten Gruening¹³  | Lucia Hederová⁹  | Kristoffer Hylander²¹  |
 Jürgen Kreyling²²  | Bart Kruijt²³  | Martin Macek⁹  | František Máliš²⁴  |
 Matěj Man⁹  | Giovanni Manca¹³  | Radim Matula¹⁰  | Camille Meeussen⁴  |
 Sonia Merinero^{21,25}  | Stefano Minerbi²⁶  | Leonardo Montagnani^{26,27}  |
 Lena Muffler²⁸  | Romà Ogaya^{29,30}  | Josep Penuelas^{29,30}  | Roman Plichta³¹  |
 Miguel Portillo-Estrada³  | Jonas Schmeddes²²  | Ankit Shekhar¹²  |
 Fabien Spicher⁵  | Mariana Ujházyová¹⁴  | Pieter Vangansbeke⁴  |
 Robert Weigel²⁸  | Jan Wild⁹  | Florian Zellweger³²  | Koenraad Van Meerbeek^{1,2} 

¹Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences, KU Leuven, 3001, Leuven, Celestijnenlaan 200E, Belgium²KU Leuven Plant Institute, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium³Research Group PLECO (Plants and Ecosystems), University of Antwerp, 2610, Wilrijk, Belgium⁴Forest and Nature Lab, Department of Environment, Ghent University, Geraardsbergsesteenweg 267, 9090, Melle-Gontrode, Belgium⁵UMR CNRS 7058 'Ecologie et Dynamique des Systèmes Anthropisés' (EDYSAN), Université de Picardie Jules Verne, Amiens, France⁶Finnish Meteorological Institute, P.O. Box 503, FI-00101, Helsinki, Finland⁷Department of Geosciences and Geography, University of Helsinki, Gustaf Hållströmin katu 2a, FIN-00014, Helsinki, Finland⁸Centre for Sustainable Ecosystem Solutions, School of Biological Sciences, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, Australia⁹Institute of Botany of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Zámek 1, CZ-25243, Průhonice, Czech Republic¹⁰Faculty of Forestry and Wood Sciences, Czech University of Life Sciences Prague, Kamýcká 129, Prague 6 - Suchbát, CZ-165 21, Czech Republic¹¹Environment and Sustainability Institute, University of Exeter, Penryn Campus, Penryn, TR10 9FE, UK¹²Department of Environmental Systems Science, ETH Zurich, Universitaetstrasse 2, 8092, Zurich, Switzerland¹³European Commission, Joint Research Centre (JRC), Ispra, Italy¹⁴Faculty of Ecology and Environmental Sciences, Technical University in Zvolen, T.G. Masaryka 24, 960 01, Zvolen, Slovakia¹⁵Institute for Agriculture and Forestry Systems in the Mediterranean, National Research Council of Italy (CNR-ISAFO), Perugia, Italy¹⁶Department of Ecology and Evolution, University of Lausanne, 1015, Lausanne, Switzerland¹⁷Musée et Jardins Botaniques Cantonaux, 1007, Lausanne, Switzerland¹⁸Institute of Landscape Ecology, University of Münster, Münster, Germany¹⁹Department of Physical Geography and Bolin Centre for Climate Research, Stockholm University, 106 91, Stockholm, Sweden²⁰Department of Forestry and Wood Technology, Linnaeus University, Växjö, 351 95, Sweden²¹Department of Ecology, Environment and Plant Sciences and Bolin Centre for Climate Research, Stockholm University, 106 91, Stockholm, Sweden²²Experimental Plant Ecology, Institute of Botany and Landscape Ecology, University of Greifswald, D-17487, Greifswald, Germany²³Wageningen University and Research, Wageningen, The Netherlands

²⁴Faculty of Forestry, Technical University in Zvolen, T.G. Masaryka 24, 960 01, Zvolen, Slovakia

²⁵Departamento de Biología y Geología, Física y Química Inorgánica, Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, C/Tulipán s/n, Móstoles, 28933, Spain

²⁶Forest Services, Autonomous Province of Bolzano, 39100, Bolzano, Italy

²⁷Faculty of Science and Technology, Free University of Bolzano, 39100, Bolzano, Italy

²⁸Plant Ecology, Albrecht-von-Haller-Institute for Plant Sciences, Georg-August University of Goettingen, Untere Karspuele 2, 37073, Goettingen, Germany

²⁹CSIC, Global Ecology Unit CREA-FCI-UAB, Bellaterra, 08193, Catalonia, Spain

³⁰CREAF, Cerdanyola del Vallès, 08193, Catalonia, Spain

³¹Department of Forest Botany, Dendrology and Geobiocoenology, Mendel University in Brno, Brno, Czech Republic

³²Swiss Federal Institute for Forest, Snow and Landscape Research WSL, Birmensdorf, Switzerland

Correspondence

Stef Haesen, Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences, Celestijnenlaan 200E, 3001, Leuven, Belgium.

Email: stef.haesen@kuleuven.be

Funding information

Academy of Finland, Grant/Award Number: 337552; Agence Nationale de la Recherche, Grant/Award Number: ANR-19-CE32-0005-01; Agentúra na Podporu Výskumu a Vývoja, Grant/Award Number: APVV-19-0319; Akademie Věd České Republiky, Grant/Award Number: RVO 67985939; Biodiversa+, Grant/Award Number: ANR-20-EBI5-0004; Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Grant/Award Number: Défi INFINITI 2018: MORFO; ETH Zürich, Grant/Award Number: FEVER / ETH-27 19-1; Fonds Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek, Grant/Award Number: G018919N, G0H1517N and WOG W001919N; Grantová Agentura České Republiky, Grant/Award Number: GAČR 20-28119S; H2020 European Research Council, Grant/Award Number: 757833; KU Leuven, Grant/Award Number: 3E190655; Schweizerischer Nationalfonds zur Förderung der Wissenschaftlichen Forschung, Grant/Award Number: 193645, 20FI20_173691 and 20FI21_148992; Spanish government, Grant/Award Number: TED2021-132627B-I00; Structure Fédérative de Recherche Condorcet, Grant/Award Number: FR CNRS 3417: CREUSE; University of Helsinki, Grant/Award Number: 7510145; Flemish Government

Abstract

Microclimate research gained renewed interest over the last decade and its importance for many ecological processes is increasingly being recognized. Consequently, the call for high-resolution microclimatic temperature grids across broad spatial extents is becoming more pressing to improve ecological models. Here, we provide a new set of open-access bioclimatic variables for microclimate temperatures of European forests at 25 × 25 m² resolution.

KEYWORDS

biodiversity, boosted regression trees, climate change, ecosystem processes, forest microclimate, SoilTemp, ForestTemp, species distributions

1 | ON THE IMPORTANCE OF MICROCLIMATE

Bioclimatic variables are used in a wide range of disciplines, from biogeography over community ecology to the study of ecosystem functioning, to better represent climate conditions relevant to ecological processes. Especially within the field of species distribution modelling, these variables take up a prominent place as they allow us to assess, for example, the effects of climate change on species habitat suitability. To infer a species' climatic niche, species distribution models often use a standard set of bioclimatic variables,

mostly available at a coarse spatial resolution of 30 arcseconds (ca. 1 km), such as CHELSA (Karger et al., 2017) or WorldClim (Fick & Hijmans, 2017). However, a substantial part of life on Earth (e.g., tree seedlings, forest floor herbs, pteridophytes, bryophytes, ground invertebrates, and fungi) as well as many key ecological processes (e.g., litter decomposition) respond to climate at much finer scales below tree canopies. Bioclimatic variables currently lack the ability to capture this high spatial variability in microclimatic conditions. For instance, high spatial heterogeneity in vegetation cover, canopy structure, and terrain complexity is strongly connected with high temperature variability, up to 6°C within a single 1-km² pixel of

mean annual temperature (Lenoir et al., 2013). Consequently, high-resolution climate data are urgently needed to increase ecological model performance (Ashcroft et al., 2008) and, additionally, should be matched to the biological scale of the organism under study (Potter et al., 2013). Many studies already downscaled the existing climatic grids using both mechanistic (i.e., physics-based) and correlative (i.e., statistics-based) approaches (Lembrechts et al., 2018). However, applying these methods on a broad spatial extent is computationally intensive, which has been limiting the development of such microclimate grids up until now.

Another key issue arising with long-term climatologies as used in most species distribution models is the fact that climate data are derived from standardized meteorological stations, which poorly capture climate-forcing factors operating near the ground by measuring the temperature at 2 m height above short vegetation. In this traditional set-up, the influence of local vegetation or topography is minimized, although it is well-known that these can substantially alter temperature conditions relevant for most species (Geiger, 1950). First, vegetation characteristics (e.g., vegetation height, density, or composition) are key drivers in shaping microclimates within the landscape matrix. Especially forests alter the conditions underneath their canopy significantly by means of shading and evapotranspirative cooling. Additionally, forest structure substantially affects wind patterns leading to less turbulent mixing of the air. Second, topographic factors (e.g., aspect or inclination) modulate many physical processes such as airflow and incoming solar radiation, which additionally increases the heterogeneity in temperature conditions within and between habitats composing the landscape. This is especially important for cold-adapted species in the face of climate change, as they might be able to find stable cool spots in the landscape. In these so-called microrefugia, they are able to persist for a longer time as these places can be buffered from contemporary macroclimate warming (Lenoir et al., 2017).

It is, thus, clear that accounting for sub-canopy temperature differences and increasing the spatial resolution of conventional bioclimatic variables to capture fine-scale microclimate variability would be a major step forward for global change biology. Solving this mismatch between the climate data currently available for ecological modelling and the climate experienced by organisms should be seen as a crucial step toward better ecological models and predictions.

2 | FORESTCLIM

Here, we present a set of high-resolution bioclimatic variables of forest microclimate temperature variables based upon the model presented in Haesen et al. (2021), where we provided the proof of concept for the derivation of monthly mean temperature offset (ΔT) values (difference between macro- and microclimate in forest understories) at a spatial resolution of 25 m $\times$ 25 m across Europe. Additionally, we used these offset values to calculate mean annual temperature (ForestClim1). We now derived analogous maps of monthly minimum and maximum temperature offset values

and calculated the remaining ForestClim variables (ForestClim2–ForestClim11; Figure 1). In short, we relied on the SoilTemp database, which provided 1273 temperature time series from 1197 distinct logger locations spread across European forests (Lembrechts et al., 2020). We first calculated daily minimum and maximum temperature offsets as the difference between the daily minimum/maximum microclimate temperature, as measured by the sensors, and the corresponding daily minimum/maximum macroclimate air temperature value for exactly the same day, month, year, and grid cell from spatially downscaled E-OBS data at 1 km $\times$ 1 km (Moreno & Hasenauer, 2016; Pucher & Neumann, 2022). Note that, prior to calculating the daily offsets, we performed an altitudinal temperature correction using CHELSA v2.1 lapse rates for the corresponding grid cell (Karger et al., 2017; personal communication). Next, the daily minimum and maximum temperature offset values were aggregated into monthly averages. Second, we used boosted regression trees to relate ΔT to explanatory variables describing topography, vegetation characteristics and macroclimate conditions. The model was used to estimate the difference between microclimate (temperature loggers placed within forests) and macroclimate (weather stations outside forests) across European forests and across seasons. For more information regarding the different covariates and the ForestTemp model itself, we refer to Haesen et al. (2021).

Finally, the resulting maps of the monthly offsets between mean, minimum and maximum sub-canopy and free-air temperature were used to calculate bioclimatic variables following the definition used in WorldClim (Fick & Hijmans, 2017). First, we calculated the monthly mean, maximum and minimum sub-canopy temperature by adding monthly temperature offsets to the respective monthly mean, maximum and minimum temperature from TerraClimate (spatial resolution ca. 4 km $\times$ 4 km; Abatzoglou et al., 2018). Next, we used these sub-canopy temperature layers to compute sub-canopy bioclimatic temperature layers, representative of the 2000–2020 period. Wettest and driest quarters were identified for each pixel based on TerraClimate's monthly values. However, note that all temperature offset layers are freely available, meaning that the end-users are able to convert macroclimatic data themselves. All calculations were performed in R version 4.1.1 (R Core Team, 2021).

We found considerable differences between ForestClim (forest microclimate) and TerraClimate (macroclimate) bioclimatic variables, owing to biome and local forest stand characteristics (e.g., canopy density). As expected, the minimum temperature of the coldest month was higher within European forests (ForestClim6; mean = -3.8°C) in comparison with TerraClimate (mean = -4.4°C). Surprisingly, the maximum temperature of the warmest month was, overall, slightly higher in forests (ForestClim5; mean = 24.6°C) compared with its TerraClimate counterpart (mean = 24.3°C). However, ForestClim covers a wide range of different biomes (i.e., boreal, temperate, and Mediterranean) and microclimatic conditions in each of them are governed by different processes (De Frenne et al., 2021). Indeed, when we further explored regional patterns in each of these biomes, ForestClim did follow expected patterns with maximum temperatures being, on average, 0.9°C lower in temperate forests,

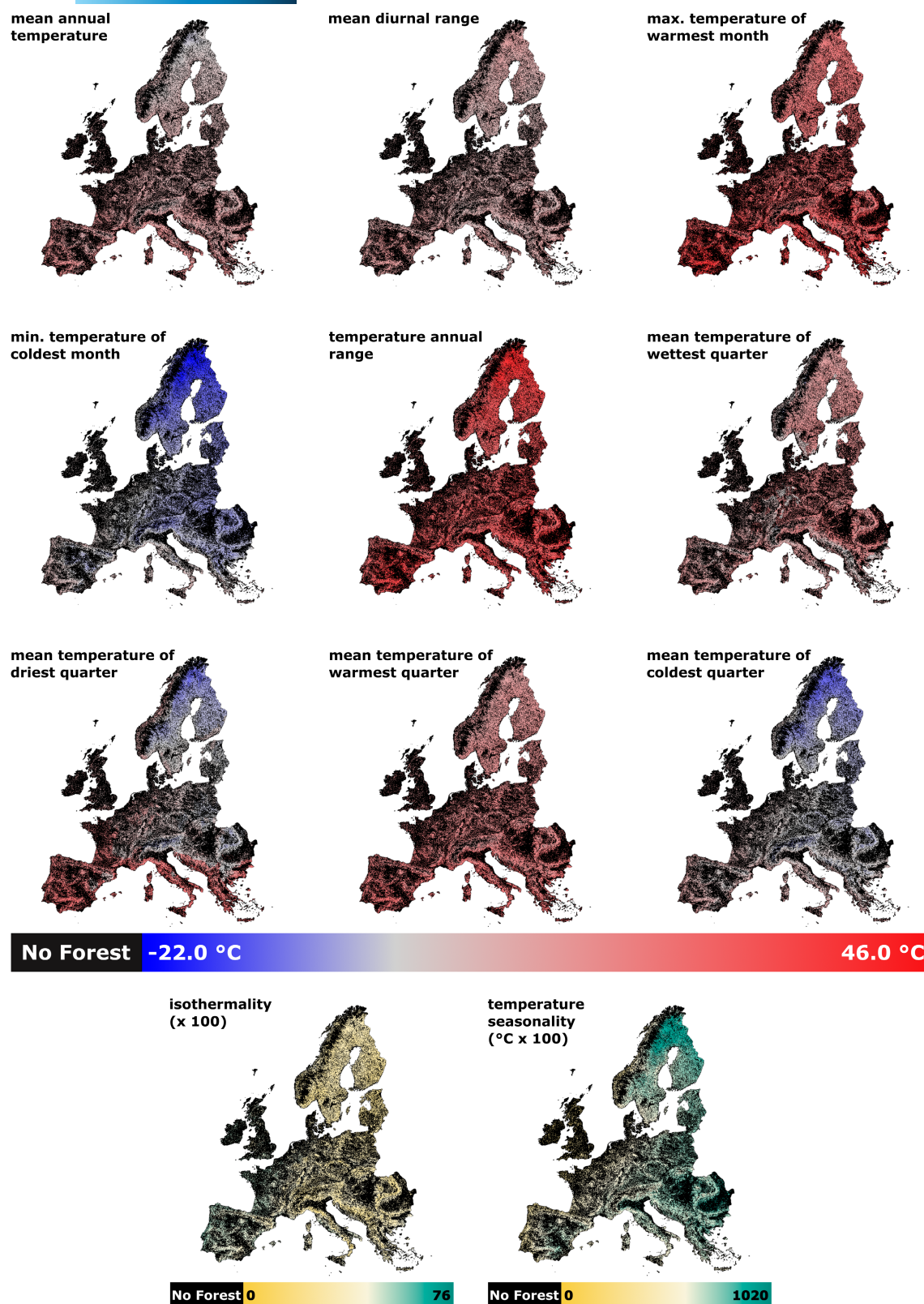


FIGURE 1 Forest bioclimatic variables below tree canopies at 15 cm above ground in European forests with a spatial resolution of 25×25 m², representative of the 2000–2020 period. Bioclimatic variables include mean annual temperature (ForestClim1; °C); mean diurnal range (ForestClim2; °C); maximum temperature of the warmest month (ForestClim5; °C); minimum temperature of the coldest month (ForestClim6; °C); temperature annual range (ForestClim7; °C); mean temperature of the wettest quarter (ForestClim8; °C); mean temperature of the driest quarter (ForestClim9; °C); mean temperature of the warmest quarter (ForestClim10; °C); mean temperature of the coldest quarter (ForestClim11; °C); isothermality (ForestClim3; $\times 100$); and temperature seasonality (ForestClim4; $^{\circ}\text{C} \times 100$). Note that isothermality is a unitless variable.

1.6°C higher in Mediterranean forests, and 0.7°C higher in boreal forests. On the other hand, minimum temperatures were consistently warmer in temperate (0.6°C), Mediterranean (0.5°C) and boreal (0.4°C) forests. Furthermore, canopy density plays a crucial role in terms of shading and evapotranspiration, and a certain turn-over point in canopy density has been put forward where the buffering effect of forests is converted to an amplifying effect (Gril et al., 2023; von Arx et al., 2013). Indeed, when we only considered forests with a closed canopy (> 90%) in these three biomes, expected patterns were confirmed. Forest maximum temperatures were consistently cooler in temperate (−2.2°C), Mediterranean (−2.1°C) and boreal (−0.9°C) forests, and minimum temperatures consistently warmer in temperate (0.5°C), Mediterranean (0.2°C) and boreal (3.5°C) forests. Our results thus underpin an important role for canopy density, with potentially important implications for forest management.

3 | FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

Our European, high-resolution ForestClim bioclimatic temperature products will open a new avenue for future research within a wide range of disciplines. For high-latitudinal and high-elevational regions, it is, however, important to note that the ForestTemp model is extrapolating beyond the range of the training data, and, therefore, we advise users to cautiously explore the associated extrapolation map. Furthermore, forests are dynamic systems, regularly subjected to natural and anthropogenic disturbances (e.g., pest outbreaks, windstorms, fires, and logging). ForestClim is based on the 2015 forest-type map of the Copernicus project and is thus not valid for pixels that experienced significant forest cover change since then. However, annual remote sensing-derived products (e.g. Hansen et al., 2013) or data on local management can be used to mask out areas with substantial changes in forest cover. Yet, it is especially this dynamic character of certain variables (e.g., canopy cover), which currently hampers the development of similar products for future scenarios under different shared socioeconomic pathways (De Lombaerde et al., 2022).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

SH received funding from a FLOF fellowship of the KU Leuven (project nr. 3E190655). The SoilTemp network received funding from the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) (grant nr. WOG W001919N). JJL and IN received funding from the FWO grant nr. G018919N and from the ASICS project (ANR-20-EBI5-0004, BiodivERsA, BiodivClim call 2019–2020). PDF, PV, EDL and CM received funding from the European Research Council (project FORMICA; <http://www.formica.ugent.be>; grant nr. 757833). JA received funding from the Academy of Finland Flagship (grant nr. 337552) and the University of Helsinki (project MicroClim; grant no. 7510145). MK, MM, JW, LH, JB, and MM received funding from the Czech Science Foundation (grant nr. GAČR 20-28119S) and the Czech Academy of Sciences (grant nr. RVO 67985939). JL received funding from (i) the Agence Nationale de la Recherche (ANR) (project IMPRINT;

<https://microclimat.cnrs.fr>; grant nr. ANR-19-CE32-0005-01); (ii) the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) through the MITI interdisciplinary programs (Défi INFINITI 2018: MORFO); (iii) and the Structure Fédérative de Recherche (SFR) Condorcet (FR CNRS 3417: CREUSE). NB and MG received funding from the Swiss National Science Foundation (grant nr. 20FI21_148992 and grant nr. 20FI20_173691). SG received funding from the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) (grant nr. G0H1517N). FM received funding from the Slovak Research and Development Agency (grant nr. APVV-19-0319). RO and JP acknowledge funding from the Spanish government grant TED2021-132627B-I00, MCIN, AEI/10.13039/501100011033 European Union NextGenerationEU/PRTR. AS received funding from ETH Zürich (project FEVER ETH-27 19-1). FZ received funding from the Swiss National Science Foundation (grant no. 193645). We thank dr. Dirk Karger for providing us with CHELSA v2.1 lapse rates. JL and FS acknowledge Manuel Nicolas and all forest officers from the Office National des Forêts (ONF) who are in charge of the RENECOFOR network and who provided help and local support for the installation and maintenance of temperature loggers in the field. The computational resources and services used in this work were provided by the VSC (Flemish Supercomputer Center), funded by the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) and the Flemish Government – department EWI.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The processed input data (i.e., monthly temperature offset values) that support the findings of this study as well as all raster layers (GeoTIFFs) produced in this study are openly available on figshare at <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.14618235> (offset layers for minimum, mean and maximum temperature) and <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.22059125> (ForestClim) while the raw temperature time series necessary to process monthly temperature offset values are available from SoilTemp, a global database of soil and near-surface air temperature measurements data. Restrictions apply to the availability of raw SoilTemp data, which were used under license for this study. The raw temperature time series data are available from Jonas Lembrechts and Stef Haesen with the permission of SoilTemp data contributors of this study.

ORCID

Stef Haesen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4491-4213>
 Jonas J. Lembrechts  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1933-0750>
 Pieter De Frenne  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8613-0943>
 Jonathan Lenoir  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0638-9582>
 Juha Aalto  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6819-4911>
 Martin Kopecký  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1018-9316>
 Miska Luoto  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6203-5143>
 Ilya Maclean  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8030-9136>
 Ivan Nijs  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3111-680X>
 Pekka Niittynen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7290-029X>

Johan van den Hoogen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6624-8461>
 Nicola Arriga  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5321-3497>
 Josef Brůna  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4839-4593>
 Nina Buchmann  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0826-2980>
 Marek Čiliak  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6720-9365>
 Alessio Collalti  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4980-8487>
 Emiel De Lombaerde  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0050-2735>
 Patrice Descombes  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3760-9907>
 Mana Gharun  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0337-7367>
 Ignacio Goded  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1912-325X>
 Sanne Govaert  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8939-1305>
 Caroline Greiser  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4023-4402>
 Achim Grelle  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3468-9419>
 Carsten Gruening  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6169-2827>
 Lucia Hederová  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1283-0952>
 Kristoffer Hylander  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1215-2648>
 Jürgen Kreyling  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8489-7289>
 Bart Kruijt  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6186-1731>
 Martin Macek  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5609-5921>
 František Máliš  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2760-6988>
 Matěj Man  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4557-8768>
 Giovanni Manca  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9376-0310>
 Radim Matula  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7460-0100>
 Camille Meeussen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5869-4936>
 Sonia Merinero  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1405-6254>
 Stefano Minerbi  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6620-2735>
 Leonardo Montagnani  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2957-9071>
 Lena Muffler  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8227-7297>
 Romá Ogaya  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4927-8479>
 Josep Penuelas  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7215-0150>
 Roman Plichta  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2442-8522>
 Miguel Portillo-Estrada  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0348-7446>
 Jonas Schmeddes  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3425-3829>
 Ankit Shekhar  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0802-2821>
 Fabien Spicher  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9999-955X>
 Mariana Ujházyová  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5546-1547>
 Pieter Vangansbeke  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6356-2858>
 Robert Weigel  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9685-6783>
 Jan Wild  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3007-4070>
 Florian Zellweger  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1265-9147>
 Koenraad Van Meerbeek  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9260-3815>

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How to cite this article: Haesen, S., Lembrechts, J. J., De Frenne, P., Lenoir, J., Aalto, J., Ashcroft, M. B., Kopecký, M., Luoto, M., Maclean, I., Nijs, I., Niittynen, P., van den Hoogen, J., Arriga, N., Brůna, J., Buchmann, N., Čiliak, M., Collalti, A., De Lombaerde, E., Descombes, P. ... Van Meerbeek, K. (2023). ForestClim—Bioclimatic variables for microclimate temperatures of European forests. *Global Change Biology*, 00, 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gcb.16678>