

# European Conservation Action Network

## Leonardo da Vinci visit to France – October 2007

### Parc Naturel Regional de la Brenne and Le Grand Voyeux, Congis-sur-Therouanne

#### 12/10

From Weymouth at 4pm to boarding the ferry in Portsmouth at 10:30pm – meeting the minibus and everyone in it, gradually.

#### 13/10

Bird list for the trip starts by streetlight at the port: those added each day will follow at the end of each daily entry. The long journey filled by staring out of the window at birds flashing past, the highlight being a brief glimpse of a male hen harrier near Tours. A stop at Sées provided me with two particularly French moments – proof that we had crossed the channel – singing black redstarts and a religieuse. The first picnic at Beaulieu-les-Loches was a sign of things to come, a feast of baguettes, ham and pâté, and already everyone was talking about the rugby. After a nine-hour journey, we finally arrived at our gîte in the centre of the village of Mézières-en-Brenne. Then left again almost immediately, another indication of the course the next two weeks would take. In the warm evening sunshine, we met Tony Williams of the LPO (Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux) at La Chérine and discussed our objectives as great white egrets and woodlarks flew overhead. Dinner in the local bar was an introduction to (effectively) raw beef, which it appears I like, and a chance to hear a few renditions of the Marseillaise, until they lost.

#### *Top 5 cultural experiences*

Rugby semi-final

Speaking French to French and English alike

Breton dancing

Visit to Champagne – vineyards in autumn and meeting a producer

Mayoral reception at Congis

#### *New birds*

Black-headed gull

Carrion crow

Buzzard

Kestrel

Magpie

Starling

House sparrow

Jackdaw

Black redstart

House martin

Woodpigeon

Mallard

Hen harrier

Little egret

Grey heron

Rook  
Collared dove  
Goldfinch  
White wagtail  
Robin  
Great crested grebe  
Mute swan  
Cormorant  
Water rail  
Greenfinch  
Siskin  
Woodlark  
Great white egret  
Marsh harrier  
Snipe  
Meadow pipit (31)

14/10



A chance to familiarise ourselves with the Brenne. Lots of birds exciting to English me at La Chérine, especially the ubiquitous egrets of many kinds, the cirl buntings and a fan-tailed warbler. Most striking? The thousands of lakes, the number of birds on each one, and therefore imagining cumulative totals. Already the beginnings of a familiar feeling for me when I travel – that the small corner of Dorset in which I work is of such little significance to the bigger picture, and that there is

the potential to make so much more difference away from Britain where we already do a great deal of conservation work. Tony took us to a lake the LPO are in the middle of purchasing, an important site for whiskered terns and a positive story. In it, our first coypu of the trip, an invasive species causing major problems in the region. We heard stories that the first cranes of the winter had been heard the night before, raising our hopes. In vain, as it turned out.

*Picture: Lost tree frog at La Maison du Parc*

*Top 5 "I wish I'd seen"*

Cranes  
The starlings waking up  
The ferruginous duck  
The Stade de France on final day  
The countryside around Muye-en-Multien from the back of a horse

*Birds*

Jay  
Skylark  
Great tit  
Long-tailed tit  
Yellowhammer  
Cirl bunting  
Song thrush

Mistle thrush  
Coot  
Moorhen  
Little grebe  
Fan-tailed warbler  
Cattle egret  
Chiffchaff  
Pochard  
Blackbird  
Chaffinch  
Kingfisher  
Teal  
Tufted duck  
Lapwing  
Greenshank  
Black-necked grebe  
Wren  
Gadwall  
Shoveler  
Canada goose  
Cetti's warbler (59)

#### 15/10 (working day 1)



The much anticipated first working day. As would be the case for much of the two weeks, I spent the day in the close company of a brushcutter as we cleared and burnt scrub at La Chérine. Despite a concerted effort not to brushcut mice or frogs, there are no guarantees. We were joined by three French volunteers, providing the first opportunity to exercise my rusty French. Wildlife highlights for me – realising that there were wild boar signs (and therefore wild boar) absolutely everywhere, and the

firecrests in the woods near where we worked. In the evening came our first experience of the French 'dinner of many courses' at the restaurant at La Gabrière. Walking it off in Mézières, at least two barn owls together ghosting over the squares of the village were a fantastic sight, and we listened to Daubenton's bats through the bat detector over the river.

*Picture: 'Cow' (sadly I failed to take the opportunity to learn about breeds) at La Chérine*

#### *Top 5 things you wouldn't see in England*

Wild boar signs  
Tree frogs  
Short-toed treecreepers  
Coypu  
Trigonophora jodea

#### *Birds*

Blue tit  
Firecrest  
Barn owl

Tawny owl (63)

### 16/10 (working day 2)

The most satisfying working day of the trip. I helped clear a pond at La Touche that wasn't even obviously a pond at the beginning of the day. I enjoyed working with some people from Le Foyer and their carers – it was especially good to be forced to try to communicate with them in French. In the course of the day, I finally saw and learnt the call of a short-toed treecreeper. Another interesting moment was to see a musk-rat in a trap. Being familiar with mink and the problems they cause in England, it was good to see a French equivalent invasive species. The moth trap was set for the first time overnight at La Chérine.

#### *Top 5 working days*

Pond at La Touche (2)

Blackthorn at La Touche (4)

Clearing around hide at Le Grand Voyeux (6)

Scrub at La Chérine (1)

Assorted jobs at Le Grand Voyeux (5)

#### *Birds*

Short-toed treecreeper

Green sandpiper

Linnet

Green woodpecker (67)

### 17/10



As it worked out, the most relaxed day of the trip. A morning trip to watch the carp being fished from a drained lake ended in disappointment (too much water), so we returned to La Chérine to look at the impressive range of contents of the moth trap. My personal highlight was a convolvulus hawkmoth, but there were many hours of fun to be had identifying some of the species that are not found in Britain. It was interesting to use the British and French books in combination, with the British book establishing the approximate

identity, and the French book offering similar (very similar) alternatives. A list follows at the end of the day's account. A free afternoon gave me the opportunity to be dropped off at La Chérine and walk through the reserve and back to Mézières. There was not much to add to the bird list, but the peace and solitude were much appreciated. Others went back to the drained lake in the hope that the water might have gone down. It hadn't. Another feast at La Gabrière ended the day in style. The moth trap was set again, but a visit on the way back from the restaurant suggested that it was too cold to be as successful.

*Picture: Me and my convolvulus*

#### *Top 5 moths*

Convolvulus hawkmoth

Blair's wainscot

Merveille du Jour

Trigonophora jodea/Crocallis tusciaria

Flame brocade

*Birds*

Grey wagtail  
Dunlin  
Pintail  
Blackcap  
Bullfinch  
Reed bunting (73)

*Moths*

Rosy footman  
Large wainscot  
Convolvulus hawkmoth  
Four-spotted footman  
Mother of pearl  
Merveille du jour  
Canary-shouldered thorn  
Flame brocade  
Delicate  
Lunar underwing  
Pinion-streaked snout  
Green-brindled crescent  
Pine carpet  
Sallow  
Many-lined  
Rusty dot pearl  
Buff footman  
Straw dot  
Black rustic  
Red underwing  
Satellite  
Blood-vein  
Red-line quaker  
Setaceous hebrew character  
Autumnal rustic  
Brick  
Grey shoulder-knot  
Scarce bordered straw  
Mottled umber  
Archips podana  
Trigonophora jodea (31)

**18/10 (working day 3)**

Emptied the fairly empty moth trap early in the morning – again, the list follows. Today we worked at Rosnay Common managed by the Conservatoire Patrimoine. Again, scrub clearing was the order of the day and we made a tiny dent in the mass of blackthorn and bramble. Satisfying work as long as you can avoid looking at the bigger picture of how much work needs doing. After work, we attended a reception at La Maison de la Nature with the director, Jacques Trotignon, a plentiful supply of wine and a small hand-painted tortoise apiece in return for our efforts over the course of the week. We also saw an article about our

work in the local section of La Nouvelle Republique, with a photo of people working with water lilies the day before.

*Top 5 kinds of chocolate*

Milka (Milk with rice crispies)  
Milka (Milk with toffee pieces)  
Milka (Milk)  
Dark chocolate from Mézières  
Chocolat chaud

*Moths*

Pink-barred swallow  
Green-brindled crescent  
Flame brocade  
Black rustic  
Large wainscot  
Lunar underwing  
Sallow  
Crocallis tusciaria  
Yellow-line quaker  
Crambus sp. (10 – trip list 35)

**19/10 (working day 4)**

A return to La Touche, and another very good day cutting and burning blackthorn for the benefit of the alcon blue. Difficult not to think of all the things we could have seen in the same places at different times of the year – the breeding whiskered terns at La Touche, purple herons, little bitterns and the like (don't mention cranes). Despite the obvious differences between the Brenne and Dorset, there are probably few times of year when those differences would be less apparent. A French lesson at the end of the day with Michelle Williams was very interesting, but really just made me want to learn more. Yet another wonderful meal rounded off the day, this time at the hotel on the square in Mézières.

*Top 5 jobs*

Brushcutting  
Burning  
Bow-sawing  
Raking  
Tree guards

*Birds*

Stonechat (74)

**20/10**

Back on the road, but not before the last opportunity for an early morning walk, which couldn't be missed. I had a look at the two nearest lakes to our gîte and said goodbye to the assorted ducks (hundreds of shoveler), egrets (great white, lining the banks) and grebes (including six black-necked) of the Brenne. The bird of prey highlight of the drive was a dark dot fading into the distance, which apparently had been a merlin when we originally went past it. After another long journey we finally arrived at Congis-sur-Therouanne at about 5pm, went straight to our very homely new gîte (with a brief red squirrel sighting on the way, the only one we saw in two weeks), then went straight out again. First, a visit to the reserve on



which we would work for the next week, Le Grand Voyeux, where we met our hosts from AVEN (Association pour la Valorisation des Espaces Nature) and had a first look at their spectacular starling roost. Then a reception at the town hall with the mayor of Congis, where we were presented with the medal of the village and I was reminded of the potential of mixing crème de cassis (and crème de anything else) with anything else. And let's not say too much about the rugby.

*Picture: Mushrooms forbidden*

*Top 5 drinks*

Crème de mûre and lemonade

- Red wine
- Champagne cocktails
- Orangina
- Water

*Birds*

- Great spotted woodpecker
- Merlin
- Herring gull
- Lesser black-backed gull (78)

**21/10**



A long day, full of culture. A freezing morning of shopping in La Ferté-sous-Jouarre and eating an inevitable tarte aux fraises on a bridge over the Marne in shorts (has to be mentioned – many strange looks) was followed by a long drive to the heart of the Champagne region. The vineyards, with yellowing leaves, looked superb, and the champagne that we tasted with



a

local producer, after a tour of his cellars, was equally good. We had a picnic in the village of Hautvillers, the home of Dom Pérignon, where we could enjoy a lovely view across the vine-covered hills, and a sparrowhawk flashing across in front of us. A late return was made rather more palatable by the roast sanglier (wild boar) de la Brenne.

*Photos: A misty Marne and champagne grapes*

*Top 5 meats*

- Venison
- Wild boar
- 'Blue' beef
- Red beef
- Mashed-up chicken

*Birds*

- Sparrowhawk
- Nuthatch (80)

### **22/10 (working day 5)**

We walked round the reserve to look at the jobs in store for us over the next few days with Jean-Pierre, and then got stuck in. I did some minor brushcutting along the paths, then joined in with some scrub clearance in front of one of the hides. For the first time there were potatoes in our fire, thanks to Marie-Élène, one of the members of the association in charge of the reserve. At 3pm we stopped and had a walk round the reserve, seeing gravel pits of different ages, and areas where work was still going on. Lots of wildfowl on all the lakes made me wonder whether they were surveyed as systematically as we do in England, or at all for that matter. I tried very hard to convince myself that calling woodpeckers were lesser rather than great spotted, without complete success. In the evening, I reignited my passion for table tennis and discovered a new passion for boggle.

#### *Top 5 games*

Table tennis

Boules with the French

Boggle

Contract whist

Top trumps

#### *Birds*

Lesser-spotted woodpecker

Goldcrest

Pheasant (83)

### **23/10 (working day 6)**

This time it was scrub clearance in front of another hide, and we made a big impression in just a few hours. At lunchtime, the wild boar from Sunday had matured into a superb sandwich-filler. In the afternoon, I had a break from the brushcutter and made my contribution to the most repetitive task of the week, removing blue plastic tree guards from what must have been many thousands of trees along a path. Dinner at the Lycée Technique was undoubtedly the culinary highlight of the fortnight, with a vast range of fish dishes and some all too delicious crêpes flambées (I managed seven, and regretted it).

#### *Top 5 things to put in a baguette at lunchtime*

Wild boar (after allowing a few days to mature)

Ham and Pâté

Ham

Pâté (de Campagne, de Lapin)

Sausages and lentils

### **24/10**

Sadly, a morning of culture was spoilt for me by the fact that I was feeling worse and worse as the day progressed. However, at the beginning of the day I was able to enjoy a walk through fields full of redwings and marsh tits near the museum of millstones near La Ferté-sous-Jouarre (the self-proclaimed capital of millstones) whilst trying very hard to avoid too much mention of millstones. We then returned to La Ferté and visited an art exhibition, toured the war memorials around the town, then returned to yet another mayoral reception (with a noticeable absence of any mayors) at the mairie. Sadly, I took little in and was really just waiting to go to bed, which I duly achieved by 3pm.

### *Birds*

Marsh tit

Redwing

Mandarin (86)

### **25/10 (working day 7)**

I struggled out of bed after 24 hours at 3pm, and got some fresh air watching the four horse riders set off. The highlight of the day, with very little competition, was a fantastic half hour watching the starlings come into roost in their hundreds of thousands. I managed a very small dinner of soup and chicken stew, not the meal I expected to follow the experience at the Lycée. We ran the moth trap for the first time in the garden of our gîte, but as expected (and as had been the case all week) it was far too cold. The highlight was a blair's wainscot caught around the trap in the evening.

### *Top 5 bird experiences*

The 'big' starling roost

Barn owls over the rooftops in Mézières

First day at La Chérine – ciril buntings and strange egrets

Hundreds of shoveler and thousands of birds on the local lake in Mézières

Gannets and the rest from the boat off Caen

### **26/10 (working day 8)**



We left for work at 9:30, but unfortunately I was unable to work very hard – taking it slowly with regular chocolate breaks was the only way. Things improved during the day, and I did enjoy working with the fire for the first time. We were visited by two journalists, from Le Parisien and the more local Marne newspaper. A final walk to one of the hides and a final chance to struggle with the finer points of gull identification and our visit to Le Grand Voyeux was over. In the evening, we partied with food brought by our

hosts from the Association. Most of it was nice, but some of it was duck cake.

*Photo: Partying in the gîte*

### *Top 5 French words learnt*

Roseau

Etourneau

Vraiment

Sanglier

Sale

### *Birds*

Yellow-legged gull (87)

### *Moths*

Blair's wainscot

Setaceous hebrew character

Green-brindled crescent

Chestnut (4 – trip list 39)

27/10

The journey home. We avoided Paris and so didn't see the Eiffel Tower, but lots of card games meant time passed quickly. A stop at Dives-sur-Mer near Caen was an opportunity to have the cake of the holiday, a tarte aux framboises, and to stock up on pâté and sausages. Having developed a minor addiction to pâté over the course of the two weeks, it was impossible to buy enough. Once on the ferry, I enjoyed the very good birds both in the port and on the sea, as the deck got colder and colder. The highlights were seemingly dozens of little gulls, hundreds of very close diving gannets (is there any more spectacular common bird spectacle?) and a single Balearic shearwater. After dark, the journey passed easily through a combination of lots of chips, card games and table tennis. We left Portsmouth at about 10pm and slowly made the journey to Alweston via various drop-off points. The final leg of my journey to Weymouth ended at 1:30am.

*Top 5 seats in the minibus*

Front

Just behind the front

Gabby's seat

Diagonally behind Gabby

Single seat right of the previous

*Birds*

Common gull

Little gull

Mediterranean gull

Balearic shearwater

Guillemot

Gannet

Oystercatcher

Great black-backed gull

Brent goose (96)

**To conclude: the most important things I gained from the experience**

- Knowledge of French conservation issues and practice
- The chance to carry out conservation work in unfamiliar habitats and for the benefit of unfamiliar species, and therefore to broaden my own experience
- The feeling that French (and therefore European) conservation is as important as, if not more important than British conservation, and the corresponding desire to spend more time in the future working on European conservation projects
- The chance to refresh my knowledge of French and the restoration of my desire to spend a significant amount of time in France and become fluent
- Experience of the significant differences in wildlife across the Channel – learning a little about birds and moths infrequently encountered in England and again the motivation to learn a lot more
- A taste for cheese and red wine (or, the opportunity to engage with French people, French culture and most importantly French cuisine)
- The chance to meet people involved in conservation both locally and in France, giving the opportunity both to do more in Dorset and perhaps to make future trips to France
- The opportunity both to learn from and to pass some of my knowledge on to other members of the group