

## **The October 2007 groups' visit to Parc Naturel Regional de La Brenne and Le Grand Voyeux at Congis – sur- Therouanne.**

I had finished university and was interested in taking part in some conservation work abroad, to gain new skills and to see what conservation projects were happening in different countries. However as these projects can be as long as a few months, the length of time did put me off. Although when I heard about the Leonardo Di Vinci project it seemed perfect, as it was for a couple of weeks and you went with a group of volunteers from around Dorset, so I decided to apply.

However, when it got closer to the time to go I started having doubts wondered whether I would enjoy it, as I had never done anything like this before. In addition, I had decided not to go along with a friend but to go by myself on the trip as I thought it would be a big achievement for me as I am not an independent person. Luckily, I did not drop out as it was the most interesting and exciting two weeks and I wish it could have been longer!

### **Friday 12<sup>th</sup> October 2007**

The time had come to meet the group of volunteers, which I was going to spend 24/7 with, work, eat and sleep with! I was very nervous when I was dropped off at the pick up point at Queen Elizabeth's School, Wimborne. Due to the equipment list Nigel had given us, my suitcase was bulging at the seams and I found out much bigger than everyone else's. They were obviously better at packing than I was! My nerves disappeared the minute I met everyone, as everyone was very friendly and all here for the same reasons. There were 15 of us soon to be joined by 5 more once we reached France.

We drove to Portsmouth to catch the 10 o'clock ferry and had dinner at the Still and West pub. As we were going to only have French food for the next two weeks I decided to have the Aberdeen Angus burger and chips, which was delicious. If I had know how much we were going to eat over the next two weeks and how much of that would be meat I would have gone for a lighter option! When we were getting back into the minibus to catch the ferry we heard our first bird call it was a Lapwing!

We thankfully had cabins on the ferry so therefore nearly got a goodnight's sleep; apart from the 6 o'clock wake up call!

### **Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> October 2007**

We set off for La Brenne at 7.15am (6.15 am British time!) and we made a few stops on the way. Our first stop was at Sées where we saw our first French market and had croissants and chocolat chaud (random words and phrases from French lessons at school did come back to me over the two weeks and I tried to use them as much as possible!) which were to be the first of many! Along the way, we saw many forms of wildlife such as kestrels, marsh harrier, starlings and many buzzards. Our next stop was at Beaulieu-les-Loches

where we stopped to have lunch after buying a lovely picnic at the local super market. We had cheeses, ham pate, baguettes and cakes it was delicious! We arrive at La Brenne at 4.00pm and dropped our luggage off at our gite, which was in a beautiful little square. Jean and Tom Thompson who live in Brittany joined us and then we made our way to the Maison de la Nature at the Chérine reserve to meet Tony Williams who works for the Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux. He explained what we would be doing over the next week; he also explained that La Brenne had the pond tortoise, which everyone was very interested to see. However, we had come at the wrong time of year as it was now hibernating under the mud! He told us about the conservation problems with La Brenne such as the soil is impermeable which means it is not good for farming and lakes form. Therefore, these lakes are filled with carp and emptied every year; the carp is then sold to Poland and Germany who enjoy eating it especially at Christmas.

We then went back to the gite as we were having dinner at the local bar, La Carpe Diem. Where we were having a special dinner put on for us due to the Rugby Match, which was showing that night. We were served Boeuf et chips, which were beef, and crisps do not know if that was a mistake in translation or a joke! There was a great atmosphere in the bar even though France was playing England. We were not the only English there as several local English came and joined us. England won!

### **Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> October 2007**

We were slowly introduced to La Brenne with a day of exploring the local lakes and reserves. We saw lots of wildlife, mainly birds; therefore, I was grateful I had bought my new binoculars with me. The groups' knowledge in birds and wildlife varied enormously, so it was interesting for a person like me with little knowledge in identifying birds to be able to learn from others, such as Andrew who works for the RSPB, he had spotted and identified a bird before I had even focused my binoculars! To name a few we saw house sparrows, ciril bunting and great crested grebes. Some people were lucky enough to see the Kingfisher, which Nigel pointed out, but by the time I had looked up it had already gone. We also saw cattle egrets surprisingly next to the Casta cattle, looking for grubs in the soil that the cattle churn with their hooves. At one of the lakes Tony showed us, Lake Renard, we were lucky enough to see a tree full of great white egrets roosting, they looked too large for the branches to support them!

### **Monday 15<sup>th</sup> October 2007**

This was the first day of work so we were about to find out what we had let ourselves in for! We set off early on a full stomach, after another delicious breakfast where we had the choice of fruit, cereals, preserves, bread and croissants; we were ready to get working on the Reserve Naturelle de Chérine. We had been lucky with the weather so far and it was another beautiful sunny day, perfect weather for working outdoors! We spent the day working on the reserve clearing an area of woodland to make scrubland, which can support more species of wildlife. We chopped down oak saplings

using bow saws and removed the brambles with loppers. We made a massive bonfire out of the foliage and burnt it. It gave me the chance to improve my ability to use a bow saw and was the result was very satisfactory as there was a definite difference so you could see how hard we had worked! The three French volunteers funded by WWF, Arnaud, Véronique and Manuel, joined us and were going to spend the week living and working with us. Whilst working we came across a tree frog and a large beetle larva, which was very interesting!

At about 4 o'clock we were allowed to stop work and Tony took us on a guided tour through the woods on a boardwalk to see the marl pits. It was truly fascinating and quite eerie! We had to stoop in some places because the trees had grown so close to the boards and were gnarled due to some type of fungus.

### **Tuesday 16<sup>th</sup> October 2007**

Another sunny day! I woke up very stiff after yesterday's work but excited to see what Tony had in store for us! We were working in at La Touche and were given several different tasks therefore we were split into groups to complete them. One group opened up a track between two lakes and the trees cut to encourage Whiskered terns to fly back and forth between the lakes. Another group dug up waterlily roots to be moved to a new lake, which I was told was very difficult and muddy! Two other groups cleared out old ponds using saws and brushcutters and burnt the debris on bonfires. I was in one of these groups and if we thought, it was hard work yesterday that was nothing compared to our tasks today! It was impossible to see into our area and we had to hack our way in with saws and loppers. We were joined by adults from Le Foyer in Le Blanc who worked with us with their carers. Even though our task seemed impossible, to begin with the difference was soon obvious and again so rewarding at the end of the day to see the change we had made!

On the way back to the gite, we stopped off at La Chérine to set the moth trap up for the night. We would return in the morning to see the results. After dinner at Carpe Diem, a few of us went for a walk around the village. We took the bat detector with us to see if we could spot the infamous barn owl that was supposedly flying around at night. We saw many bats, which were probably pipistrelle, but we were not lucky enough to catch a glimpse of the owl.

### **Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> October 2007**

There was not work today as it was our first culture day and it was raining. Never the less we put on our waterproofs to go and watch the fishermen empty one of the carp lakes. However, it was still too full so the carp were swimming under the nets and escaping so we were told to come back later. Therefore, after checking the moth trap where there was an array of species we had another delicious lunch at the gite in the dry then returned to the lake but it was still too full and had been postponed until tomorrow. However, we did get to see a pike and carp, which they had caught.

### **Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> October 2007**

Back to work today and thankfully it was another brilliantly sunny day. We had the chance to wander around the local market in the village. We saw that they were selling skinned rabbits and chickens with their heads still on, which probably would not be that popular in England! I bought some locally made honey, which now I have had a chance to taste it I can now say is delicious!

We then set off for work at Rosnay Common where we spent the day clearing brambles and blackthorn, which give you even worse cuts and scratches! I saw a sand lizard and a tree frog, which I had to remove from the sapling I was cutting down as it was refusing to move!

After work a reception was laid on for us at Maison du Parc to meet Jaques Trotignon the Director and other staff, which was very welcoming of them. However the champagne on an empty stomach went straight to my head so I was pleased to return to the gite for Tom and Jeans scrumptious dinner of sausage casserole and Greek salad!

### **Friday 19<sup>th</sup> October 2007**

We were working in two teams today I was in the team, which was making a ride in one of the reserves. That is clearing invasive scrub so that the reserve can be seen from the road. We cleared the allocated area and broke through to the other side, yet another successful day! At 5.30 we had a French lesson from Tony's wife, Michelle where I struggled to remember French from my French lessons at school!

### **Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> October 2007**

We left after breakfast and arrived at Congis-sur-Therouanne at about five, where we settled into our new home for the week, which was set on riding stables. We went to the reserve, Le Grand Voyeux, where we met our hosts from the AVEN and watched the starlings coming into roost, which was spectacular. I had never seen anything like it also; it was amusing when Ann was very lucky to be hit on the head with starling poo! We were then whisked away for a reception with the mayor of the town and we were presented with a book of the town and a medal!

### **Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> October 2007**

We drove to the Champagne region of Épernay via the war memorial at Champaubert commemorating Napoleon 1's victory over the Germans and their allies in 1814. The temperature difference between here and La Brenne was amazing, it was freezing and I was beginning to wish I had bought some warmer jumpers! Yet Nigel and Andrew were still having their short competition, neither was going to give in and wear trousers! We had a picnic lunch in Hautvillers, the village where Dom Pérignon lived and discovered the 'champagne method' of producing fizzy wine. We explored the parish church

and saw Dom Pérignon's grave before driving to Chalons-sur-Marne, where Marie-Constance's cousin makes champagne. Here we saw some of the processes involved and enjoyed tasting it, this is what I had been looking forward to. In addition, they were very generous as they gave us several glasses to taste. Therefore I felt I must oblige and buy a couple bottles of their delicious champagne!

### **Monday 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2007**

We began work at the reserve at 9.30am and were first shown what the different jobs were. We had to remove plastic tree guards in preparation for the reserve opening to the public, remove scrub such as Bramble, Willow and Alder from the hide area, and adapt the hide for children as the view points were too high. I removed the tree guards for the whole day as I wanted a break from the bonfire as it had singed a clump of my hair (a memento from France which I am still growing out now!), it was back breaking work as you spent most the day bent over and the plastic disintegrated when you pulled it. It did look a lot better once we had removed a substantial amount however, we did not have the time to remove all of them.

### **Tuesday 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2007**

We started work at 9.30am and I continued to remove the many tree guards! By 11.30 my back had had enough so I joined the others in removing scrub from the other hide in order to improve the view from it. I helped to bundle and clear the cut reeds and branches then they were put on the bonfire. After lunch Charlie and I cut down the alder trees on the island between the two hides. We stacked the cut branches on either side of the island. I enjoyed cutting down the alder, as it is a very soft wood and between us with one sawing and one holding the tree we easily made short work of the trees.

We had dinner at the local cookery school Lycée Technique, where I was pleasantly surprised! I was expecting to be eating in the school canteen I was not expecting it to be as posh and professional as it was! The food was delicious!

### **Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup> October 2007**

We were up bright and early to go to Museum of Millstones near La Ferté sous Jouarre with Marie-Constance, where it was even colder! Then on to a art gallery in the former Synagogue in the town with an exhibition of André Planson's paintings, and black and white photographs of jazz musicians. We then had a tour around the local war memorial with a war veteran who explained what had taken place right where we were standing on the Marne at La Ferté sous Jouarre. We were invited to the town hall to meet the major however she could not make it.

### **Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> October 2007**

Back to work and you've guessed it more tree guards and we finally had removed enough so that the visitors would not see them. After we had finished tree guards we joined the other to remove the willow encroaching on the lake, this was a loppers job with the larger willow being removed by the use of bow saw. We had an early lunch as some of the group were going horse riding, as you had to be fairly experienced to go Nathan, Matt and I decided to go for a bike ride instead to explore the area around the gite. However we didn't find much apart from fields and locked gates, also it was brilliant fun going there as it was all down hill not so much coming back!

### **Friday 26<sup>th</sup> October 2007**

We continued to remove willow from the reed beds, which was smelly muddy work but great fun. The willow was then put into a huge pile and burnt (our last bonfire!) Finished at about 3pm and had a final walk to the other hide and quick birdwatch, where a kingfisher sat in front of us for ages, so I finally got to see one up close! We left to get ready for our party, which our hosts were arranging for us in our gite. The food was great and I tried something's I had never eaten before such as duck cake! It was a wonderful opportunity to socialise with the local French with lots of dancing and wine!

### **Saturday 27<sup>th</sup> October 2007**

We left early to catch the ferry home, it had be an amazing two weeks and I had experienced and tried new things. It had been hard work but I had thoroughly enjoyed myself along the way!

