

European Conservation Action Network

Visit to Parc Naturel Regional de la Brenne and Le Grand Voyeux at Congis - sur - Therouanne October 2007

On a dark, Friday evening in October, a mini - bus pulling a trailer drove in to the Little Chef car park . There began a very different kind of journey.

A group of 13 volunteers, together with their Leaders, Nigel and Kathy, were going to visit 2 areas in France to participate in Conservation work on the Nature Reserves, and to broaden their knowledge in respect of the Wildlife, the Countryside, the Language, the Culture, and Practical skills. We learnt much more than this, and returned home with new friends, both English and French, and many happy memories.

I was fortunate to be a part of this group, and I hope to give in this report a taste of what we learnt, and accomplished.

After a comfortable journey, during which we started to get to know each other, we arrived at Mezieres - en - Brenne, the main town of the area called La Brenne, where we would be working for a week. We all helped with conservation work in our home areas, and some of the younger members of the group are keen to change their careers to environmental type work.

La Brenne is a small, and relatively unknown area in central France, nestled in the Loire Valley, approximately 300 miles south of Caen, and almost 50 miles south west of Orleans. The Brenne National Park covers some 160,000 hectares, with 30,000 inhabitants.

The Park was created in 1990 at the request of the local electorate, and the physical limits are parishes, and not geograpy. It comprises a group of varied, natural areas, such as wet pasture, marsh, reed beds, and open water. However, the characteristic of the region are the lakes, more than 2,000, artificially created in the poorly drained soil over the last 8 centuries. We heard how up until 1952, the road communications were so poor that the school children were collected by train from isolated hamlets, and delivered to the School which was just by the railway line.

Our hosts in Le Brenne were Jacques Trotignon, the Director of the nature reserve at Cherine, and Tony Williams, a British Naturalist who has lived in La Brenne for 20 years, and who works for the LPO, La Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux, as well as the Cherine Nature Reserve. We met Tony on our first afternoon, and sat in the evening sunshine at the reserve, while he told us a little about the nature reserve.

Our first full day started at the reserve with a nature walk in beautiful warm, sunshine, followed by bird watching from the hide. It gave us a taste of the richness of the wildlife in the area, which is well known for the birds in the Spring, and also its butterflies. There are 250 species of butterflies in France as compared with 55 in the U.K., and 97 of those species are to be found in La Brenne.

That morning we saw numerous birds; the **cetti** warbler, ciril bunting, grey heron, redwing, skylark, mistle thrush, egrets, and cattle egrets, stonechat, buzzard, coots, moorhen, mallard duck, and the Grebes, great crested, and little. Butterflies were not so plentiful owing to the time of year, but we did see **the rare Alcon Blue**, a Common Blue, and Speckled Wood. This was just our first morning! **We only saw Common Blues - Alcon Blues only fly in summer.**

In the afternoon we visited 2 lakes, Etang Purais, and Etang Renard, and Tony told us more about the lakes - the first ones were built in the Middle Ages, many emptied during the Revolution, and it was not until the 20th century, between the wars, that the lakes took on their present appearance and modern fish farming developed. The lakes are inter - connected in series, and in the Autumn, in time for the Christmas markets, often German, the fish are caught. The main fish is carp. The **lowest** lake is almost emptied, and when the fish are near the sluice gate they are caught in large nets. Then the next lower lake is emptied, and so on. Rain in the winter fills them up again. Fish is a major export of the area, and important to its economy.

However, the lakes are important for the birds, one of which is the Whiskered Tern. Approximately 2,500 fly from Africa to France in April, and the lakes at La Brenne are home to the biggest colony in Europe. They nest on the water lilies until September. They also protect the eggs of the black necked grebes **whilst the parents are away from the nests.**

Having learnt some of the background to the area, the next 2 days were spent working. We were joined by 3 French Volunteers, funded by WWF, Arnaud, Veronique, and Manuel. We cleared scrub at La Cherine, and had 2 bonfires. Then we worked at La Touche, and split into 4 groups. 2 Groups cleared out old ponds using saws and brushcutters, and burnt the debris on bonfires. At one of the ponds, we hoped to encourage the **Great Crested newt** to breed by removing leaves, and encouraging the light. A third group opened up a track between 2 lakes and the trees cut to encourage Whiskered terns to fly back and forth between the lakes. The fourth group dug up water lily roots to be moved to a new lake. We were also working with some folk from Le Foyer in Le Blanc, who came with their carers. All the lakes are privately owned, and the water lilies are disappearing due to coypu, and fish farming. **(The lake at La Touche is owned by the LPO.)**

A moth trap was set up that evening at Cherine.

Next day (Wednesday) was a culture day, and we drove to watch a lake being fished near Ruffec. Unfortunately, the lake had not drained enough, and there was too much water in it, so the fishing was delayed. We went back to Cherine to look at the moths caught in the trap. There were many, but I particularly liked the **Merveille** du Jour - the Beauty of the day, a colourful aquamarine and black one.

During the afternoon, Ann Veronique, Manuel, and I were kindly driven by Arnaud to the Museum in Le Blanc. This again showed us the History of this unique area, and we saw pictures of men fishing for the carp in the 1950's, and some of the equipment they used.

Thursday was market day at Mezieres, and a quick shop bought us lunch. We then worked at Rosnay Common with Tony and Antoine from the Conservatoire Patrimoine and a botanist called Pierre. We cleared vast amounts of scrub, blackthorn and bramble, but this time piled it in heaps rather than burning it. We learnt that the land is hard and baked in the Summer, and flooded in winter. It is rocky and unfertilized, and very good for orchids. There are 38 species on Le Brenne, and we saw a few that afternoon.

Friday, our last day at Le Brenne saw us divide in to 2 groups. One went to finish the work between the 2 lakes and to work on the edge of the reed beds at the Alcon Blue sites where a previous group had worked in

February. 10 of us worked with Remy breaking through the scrub to give a view of Cherine from the road. Both sites had bonfires.

The Alcon Blue butterfly is a butterfly which is rarely seen in Britain, and requires nurturing and protection in France. It lays its eggs on the lowland marsh gentian flower, on which they live for about 10 days. In the larval stage they are adopted by ants, and fed in the ants nest by the ant workers until next spring. Pupation takes place in June, and the butterflies hatch from the pupae in the beginning of July. Maintaining the correct habitat for the flowers and ants is therefore an important factor in protecting the alcon blue.

A French lesson later in the afternoon by Mrs. Williams improved our French., and a delicious celebratory dinner improved our knowledge of the French cuisine !

During the week we stayed at a Gite called ' Le Moulin ' where we cemented our friendships and laughed at the long forgotten art of clambering in and out of top bunks. We had 2 delicious dinners at the Gite , one cooked by Tom and Jean Thompson who live in Brittany, and joined us for the week. Some of the group also saw the rugby game in the world cup between France and England which we won, and the final between us and South Africa, which we lost. Our leaders, Nigel and Kathy made sure that everything ran smoothly, and they, and members of the group added to our knowledge of the wildlife we had seen.

On Saturday, we said sad good-byes to Mezieres, and drove to to our Gite at May - en- Multien, near Meaux, east of Paris. We went to the reserve, Le Grand Voyeux where we met our hosts from the AVEN, and watched the starlings coming to roost. We were then treated to a reception at the town hall with a warm welcome from the Mayor. Nigel was given a book about the area, and a medal.

Le Grand Voyeux is a very different area, with a different history to La Brenne. This small area of 245 hectares was a former gravel quarry mined for the building industry during 35 years. However, a group of far - sighted nature lovers wanted to make the pits in to a nature reserve, and despite some local opposition, have achieved this. Our first view of the still, tranquil area, full of birds on the water - set before the back drop of a hill of glowing, golden brown trees was stunning. This was where we were to work for the next week.

The next day Sunday, was however, a day of culture. The Champagne area was not too far away, and following a visit to a nearby market and coffee, we set out through the countryside to Epernay, passing on the way a war memorial commemorating Napoleon 1's victory over the Germans and their allies in 1814. The village of Hautvillers, twinned with Beulieu, a village near to where I live, was the scene for a picnic lunch. The view from our spot was spectacular, the Autumn colours vibrant in the sun. We explored the parish church and saw Dom Perignon's grave before driving to Condé - sur - Marne (sorry our mistake) where Marie - Constance's cousin produces his own champagne. He demonstrated the various processes involved, and we enjoyed tasting the end result!!

Work over the week followed a similar pattern . We cleared scrub and larger trees, Alder and Robinia around 2 hides to enlarge the viewing area for the public who are soon to visit it.

There is some connecting land between the hides, and this was also cleared. A trail will be opened soon to the public, and the unsightly blue tree guards and metal poles along the route needed to be removed. This we did, and were relieved when we finished as it was hard on our backs. John and Diana reconstructed one of the hides to make the viewing areas more child friendly. We also cleared bramble on slopes around the entrance to a bat tunnel, and cleared willow and alder which were encroaching on the reeds on one of the lakes. It looked a different place when we had finished, and our hosts were pleased with what we had done. Two journalists came to speak to us, and take photos of the work we had done.

We saw the wonderful graceful and fluid movement of the starlings roosting in the evening, and some of the group were up early to see them leave the reeds in the morning. From the hides we saw many birds including heron, ducks, swans, lapwings, moorhen, grebes, gulls, and not least, a very obliging kingfisher who sat on a reed in front of us for quite a while.

In the middle of the week, the Wednesday we had another culture day, joined by Marie - Constance, and Jean - Claude. First, we visited a Museum of Millstones, then an art gallery in the former Synagogue in the town of La Ferté sous Jouarre. The art exhibition was dedicated to the French painter, Andre Planson, and we were pleased to meet his daughter at the exhibition. After coffee, provided by Jean - Claude we met

Monsieur Thomas, a war veteran who showed us the "Monument des Anglais" and told us of the battles fought in the 1914 - 1918 war on the river Marne. A reception followed at the Town Hall with drinks and speeches.

During the second week, we stayed at a very comfortable gite owned by Jean-Paul Garnier, we enjoyed delicious food brought to us by a local family, and we enjoyed each other's company. We even had one evening at a cookery school, where we were willing and appreciative pupils to the creations of chefs! On our last evening, we had a great evening with our dinner being prepared by our hosts, and a brief exchange of French and English dancing. Our hosts left with assurances of future meetings, and kisses all round.

In all, we had seen 5 species of amphibians, 3 of reptiles, 15 of mammals, 4 of dragonflies and damselflies, 3 of grasshoppers and bushcrickets, 40 of moths, 9 of butterflies, and 84 of birds. Also, Kathy and Diana examined many of the wild flowers which were present **list will follow soon**. An amazing array of wildlife.

So we left for home, 14 days after we had first met, but it seemed that we had known each other for very much longer. I certainly felt more knowledgeable, relieved that I had been able to keep up with the work required, and very grateful that I had been part of the group.

I would like to thank the Leonardo da Vinci Project for funding the trip, Nigel Spring and Kathy Henderson for being such great leaders, our hosts in France who made us so welcome, and giving us so much of their time, all the volunteers for making it into such an enjoyable and fun time, and for Vicky Myers at the Forestry Commission for informing me about it in the first place. It was a great experience, and I hope there will be many such trips for other volunteers in the future.