

Leonardo Da Vinci Project La Brenne and La
Grand Voyeux Oct 2007



By Nathan Bolger

On Friday the 12th of October I was picked up by Nigel Spring and the rest of the team in a mini-bus to travel to Portsmouth from Dorset to catch the ferry to Caen in France. On the way we ate a meal a got to meet our companions for the next two weeks. We slept on the ferry after a couple of drinks at the bar and arrived early in the morning to drive to our gite in Mezziers en Brenne. On the way we spotted a large number of birds including Buzzards and Kestrels which seemed to be frequently perched on fence posts by the side of the roads and were a far more common site than in England.

On Sunday 14th we met our host for the first weeks work Tony Williamson he is the warden for the area in La Brenne and had a look around the Cherine reserve. This looked out on a large lake, one of 4000 in the area which is used to breed fish for farming. We saw a selection of birds using the lake from the hide including the Great Crested Grebe, Little Grebe and a Kingfisher; and a Small Tortoiseshell butterfly flew by and a wild stag escaping hunters could be seen running across the reserve. Whilst walking to this lake there were Custer cattle grazing a nearby field and we had spotted a variety of different wildlife which included the butterflies 'Speckled Wood' and the 'Common Blue' of which we saw both sexes. Heron flew by and the Cirl Bunting was flitting from bush to bush along our path. No sign of any migrating Cranesbill on their way to Spain however. The weather was fine and we had a great day looking around La Brenne, Tony was telling us how the Wood Brown butterfly had made reapperance in the area in 1999 because the woods were being used to provide firewood, this tree cutting had created the ideal habitiat for them. Such woods are cut on a five year rotation. In all there our 97 species of butterfly in this area of France.

Our tour included a cultural talk about how La Brenne had been a very poor area of France until recent times and we stopped near a house which had been used as school placed directly opposite the local train station which was now a home for a local family. Children had caught the train which travelled slowly through the area in order to attend the school.

La Brenne has become more wealthy recently (since the 1970s) because the rich have been buying up areas of land for leisure purposes which now reaches 13000 euros a hectare. These people wish to have their own estate in this area of France.

We also learnt that a local land owner who was keen on wildlife had sold a Lake to the LPO for 710 000 euros in order that it be protected for the population of Whiskered Terns.

The lakes are mainly fished for Carp which the Germans like to eat around Christmas time, they are exported alive in large tanks on the back of lorries.



All the lakes are man made being lined by clay which rests on a sandstone bed, this makes them very impervious and they hold a lot of water. They are interlinked as one lake can be drained into as many as 30 others. The lakes are drained and fished every year with the best stock being eaten and the smaller being used to restock other lakes. Each lake contains a sluice gate which is opened when the fishermen want to drain it into another lake or the river and net their catch in the shallow residual water containing that years fish.



Water lillies grow on these lakes and provide places for Whiskered Tern to nest with Blackheaded Gulls and part of our work during the following week was to help transplant these from one lake to another.

We visited lake Reanard as our second of the day, Great White Egrets are a common site along with Lapwing, Heron, Gadwall, a passing Sparrowhawk, and a Kingfisher.

On Monday 15th we begin work for the week on the Cherine reserve. I have been assigned to cut scrub with a brushcutter as part of my training, this is an arduous job on a lovely sunny day. I spend the morning cutting with Andrew and when this is completed I begin raking it up. In the afternoon I get help with the raking from Paline and Jane and by the end of the afternoon we have a large pile cleared as shown below:



The purpose of our efforts is to improve the habitat for butterflies by encouraging growth of wildflowers rather than allowing the scrub to take over. We are hoping that orchid will grow and also to see the Short Tailed Blue Butterfly. The others are clearing and burning an area adjacent to us in which they are assisted in the afternoon by three French friends from Paris:



In the afternoon after we have all finished work Tony takes us for a guided walk around the nearby man made 'marl pits'. The water in these is highly alkaline due to the marl with a pH of about 9. This creates a habitat which is unique within the pits for this area as the lakes all around are acidic. Diane and John showed us the presence of the Water Violet growing there and have trouble identifying a fern.

On Tuesday 26th we are driven to La Touche where there are three jobs to do, one is to help transplant Waterlillies these are to be dug up and put into a truck and replanted in another lake which has depleted stocks. The next job is to trim down trees which are blocking the flight path of Whiskered Terns between two adjacent lakes the Grand Etang and Petit Etang. The third job is to clear two large pools which have become over grown and burn the debris, this is the job to which I am assigned. The pools are important as they provide a environment for Great Crested Newts, which are a priority species under the European Habitats Directive. I spent the morning in the larger of the two pools and on clearing some of the pool we find that it has a wall round it made of slate and a sluice gate. We are also assisted in our job by some disabled French people.



In the afternoon I continue working on the smaller but no less important pool with some success, by the end of the afternoon we have cleared it and cut back surrounding trees and bushes to allow more light on the pool. This involves some work with bow saws and loppers and I do a bit of brushcutting as well.

In the evening we go for a talk by Tony on the butterflies which inhabit La Brenne of which there are 79 different types and 250 in France.

We also put out a moth trap on the reserve at Cherine.

Wednesday 27th of October Nigel and I get up early and go to look at the moth trap it's quite exciting to be on the reserve so early in the morning and we discover a large variety of moths including a large Convulvulus Hawkmoth. We catch a few that are around the trap and turn the light off. The rest of the day sees us off work in order to observe the local fishermen fishing a lake near Rufec. When we arrive in the morning the lake has been drained and they are trying to fish the remaining water but it proves to be too deep as the fish are swimming under the bottom of the net and they tell us to return in the afternoon.

In the afternoon we find that they have fished the lake in our absence but we do get to see the results of some of their netting.

The fishing is a family occasion and often friends and relatives of the fishermen will turn up to help and go away with a few fish of their own.

The fish in the bucket are Zander, Pike and Carp. These are three of the main types of freshwater fish we could expect them to catch during the process.

After watching the fishermen at work we go to the reseve to look at what we caught in the moth trap, also including a Red Underwing and a Merveille du Jour (below). There seems to be a great variety of moth which we try to identify by close inspection. In the evening we release the moths into a nearby hedge.

In the evening the whole group goes out for a meal at a local restaurant 'La Gabriere' and we eat Zander as the main course.

Thursday 28th, we get up early and visit the local market in Mezziers en Brenne, I purchase a bottle of cider and practise my french!

Once we have all returned to the Gite we make our way to Rosnay Common where we will be working for the day. The common has become over run with bramble bushes over the last two years and the warden wants us to clear as much as we can. The common provides a habitat for 7 varieties of orchid including 'Tongue'. By clearing the common we hope to improve their chances of growing. We also find a Parosol mushroom to eat.

I begin the day by using the brushcutter on a large bush of bramble, then Nigel has a go. After this I help to clear by hand.

On Friday the 29th we are split into different work parties and I am sent to make a ride in Cherine. This is by the edge of a road and by clearing the thicket we are hoping to be able to see onto the reserve through this. The day involves brushcutting and clearing by hand and by the end of the day we have created a large opening through which to view the reserve behind the wall of thicket. In the evening we are given a French lesson by Tonys wife.

On Saturday 20th we make our way to our next destination Congis-sur-Therouanne near Meaux and stay in a nearby village May-en-Multien. Here we will be working on the nature reserve called La Grand Voyeux and after we have unpacked at the Gite we go and visit there. It is a beautiful spot which is an area of reinstated gravel pits close to the river Marne and there are Starlings swarming in their thousands when we arrive preparing to roost for the evening. After this we make our way into town and are received by the local mayor. He is most welcoming and presents us with an award for coming.

On Sunday 21st We visit a nearby town called La Ferte-Sous-Jouarre where there is a local market and we go for a coffee.

After this we meet with our guide for the day Marie Constance and we make for the town of Epernay in the heart of the Champagne country. On the way we stop to see some of the memorials to the Napoleonic wars including the Collone De Champaubert. Once we arrive we park and walk to a local viewing area and survey our surroundings. On the way Marie shows us the houses in the area and explains how each house shows what kind of work it does to help produce champagne by having a sign or something similar. In the picture below the bottle on the door shows that this house does bottling. After lunch Marie give us a short talk on how champagne is produced.

We also visit the abbey where Dom Perignon is buried. He famously invented the method of retaining the sparkle in wine by corking and wiring thicker bottles. He further experimented with the mixing of grapes from different vines from which each champagne house has its own unique style.

We then decide to visit a relative of Marie Constance who produces his own champagne to retail. He shows us around his cellar and explains how he makes and bottles he particular brand and gives us a sample of his wears which we all agree is most delightful. Most of us purchase a bottle or two from him for when we get home!

On Monday 22nd I fell sick with a stomach bug which had been going around and spent the day in the warm on the sofa.

On Tuesday 23rd I feel better and go to work. This is spent in the morning removing tree guards. These had been put around young trees to protect them from rabbits several years ago and I can happily report that a large number of them were more successful than not. In the picture below you can see Gabby hard at work.

We also saw a Greater spotted woodpecker and a brown frog, possibly 'Tree', whilst at work.

In the afternoon after our usual picnic lunch I engaged in a more physically demanding job with Nicky. We were assigned to cut down trees which were obscuring the view between the two lakes from the hide on the reserve. After cutting them down we had to drag them to the fire which John Claude was attending See below.

After work we agreed we were all tired and we got ready to spend the evening at a local cookery school. This proved to be excellent and we ate fish during a sumptuous five course meal. We gave the students a round of applause after the meal and everyone went away happy.

On Wednesday 24th we had a day of culture and began by visiting a local Millstone museum. This had been created in a 17th century house used by the locals who lived and worked in the quarries.

The stone used in this area of France was of renowned quality and was exported around the world to England and America amongst other countries. This industry made the town of La Ferte-Sous-Jouarre very wealthy. When the industry died the wealth left the town and these days they hope to rely on Tourism, which has encouraged them to take an interest in La Grand Voyeux and the surrounding countryside, the main point of interest being the River Marne which runs through the town.

After seeing this museum we take a tour around the town to look at some memorials from the first world war with an old French veteran as our guide, including the 'Monument des Anglais'.

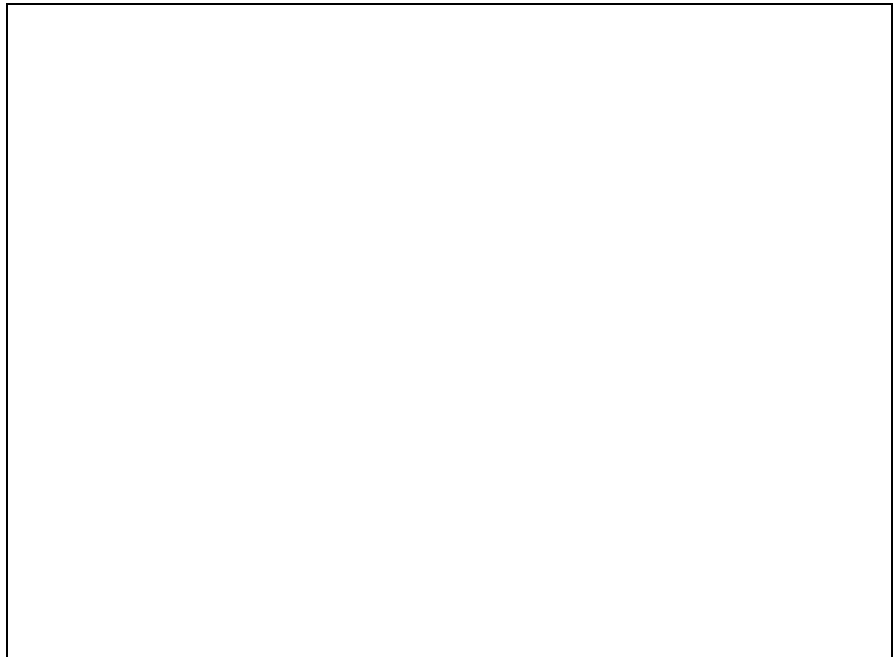
We then walk to a local art gallery called 'Musee Andre Planson' this was a converted synagouge which remembers those in the town who were transported to the Nazi concentration camps by the Germans in the Second World War.

After this we were received at the town hall by a friend of the mayor (the town hall is pictured behind the market in an earlier photo) who gives a short talk on the town.

We then have the afternoon to relax at the Gite.

On Thursday 25th We return to La Grand Voyeux and we all agree to clear tree guards, again as this is quite a large job for just a few people, with John Pierre. In the afternoon I am given the job of clearing the entrance to the bat cave with help from Matt. We fell some alders and I brushcut some large brambles which have obscured the entrance to the cave. We are hoping that this will encourage them to use the cave.

At about 3.00pm we stop work and Gabby, Matt and I go back to the gite in order to go for a bike ride around the area whilst some of the others go horse riding.



On Friday 26th we are all working again and we are back at the reserve I am assigned to finish clearing the entrance to the bat cave and once this is finished I help the others who are clearing Willow from the reed bed which go around one of the lakes. The Willow is a pioneer species in this environment and preempts the formation of solid land. This is seen as undesirable and in order to conserve the reed bed environment and the lake they are cut and burned along with some Alder which is also growing alongside them.

After work we discuss some of the objectives of our visit:

1. Exchange ideas with the French Conservationists
2. Improve Awareness
3. Create Links
4. Work together as a team with varied backgrounds and age
5. Experience a different culture
6. To help us appreciate what we've got
7. Learn about French Habitats
8. Develop Practical Skills
9. Learn the French Language
10. Improve our motivation

To List but a few

This is our last day of work and we return on the ferry the following day.

On returning I have been working to create a link between the Dorset Wildlife Trust and the French volunteers from La Brenne, Arnaud, Veronique and Manuel pictured earlier with Nigel.