

EUROPEAN CONSERVATION ACTION NETWORK

Programme of visit to Parc Naturel Regional de La Brenne
and Le Grand Voyeux at Congis- sur- Therouanne
October 12th to 27th 2007



Nicola Hesketh-Roberts

Friday 12th

The day of the adventure and 2 weeks away in the great French outdoors. Myself, Matt and his girlfriend (at the time but that's another story) were standing in the car park of QE when Gabby came over to ask if we were part of the group. Then Di came over with a hopeful look of familiarity and so our trip began. Di went and got John and our little group waited patiently for the rest of the party to pick us up, finding little snippet's of information out about each other - both slightly apprehensive and excited.

Gabby received a phone call from Kathy at about 6.15pm saying they had been slightly delayed so we had a little laugh and continued our getting to know each other, if all a little shy – well myself anyway! Di and John were great and we found out quite a lot about their interests in wild flowers and volunteer work at Durlston and Studland.

At 6.45pm the minibus arrived, trailer in tow satisfying our curiosity as to where all the luggage and tools were going to go. Kathy and Charley got out first, followed by Nigel and we introduced ourselves whilst putting our bags into the trailer.

Matt and I sat next to each other, knowing each other already made me less nervous but I think maybe on reflection it would have been good to have gone knowing no one – a braver experience maybe. I soon got used to the trailer beeping every time we indicated but initially I thought there was something wrong with the minibus!

We stopped to get Nathan and then again for Jane and then all being present we were finally adventure bound.

We arrived in Portsmouth around 9pm, give or take and attempted to park the van – a difficult task with the trailer attached – finding a big enough space proved quite a challenge but Nigel did well.

We had supper at the Still and West pub on the quay at Portsmouth, a pub that catered for the fish and chip lovers of Portsmouth. Fortunately they also did other food upstairs. We all had lovely meals and then ventured to the port, passing the Spink tower on route. It was my first sight of it illuminated and my thoughts began to drift to the 2 weeks ahead. A whole fortnight outside in the French countryside, away from the hussle and hectic ness of office life – needless to say I was very happy.

Once on the ferry, myself and Sophie checked into the cabin and were suitably impressed – some years had passed since I last slept on a boat. We then took a little tour of the ferry and settled for a drink or two in the bar with Nathan, Matt and Andrew finally heading to bed an hour or 2 later.

Awaking to Swan Lake through the cabin speakers was quite a pleasant alarm call -50 minutes to docking.

Saturday 13th

Myself, Matt and Sophie got a little waylaid in the morning and found our way to the minibus with seconds to spare before the traffic began moving, 'perfect timing' Nigel had called it.

Driving from the ferry at 7.15am out into Caens, the early morning sun was lovely. We drove for a few hours passing beautiful fields, spotting the odd harrier and I was introduced to the motorway bridges purposely designed to accommodate the animals, mainly deer to cross the road safely – the countryside passing above the busy roads, I was very impressed by this.

We stopped at Sées for coffee and croissants and enjoyed the market and interesting double spired church. At Loches we went to a supermarket to buy provisions for lunch and then drove to Beaulieu-les-Loches for a picnic in a quiet square beside the church of the Black Falcon. This church had certainly been through the mill.

Andrew, Fleur and I went for a little walk to see the river; it was a very quaint village.

After lunch we set off again for the rest of the journey, reaching Mezières-en-Brenne at 4.00pm. The weather was really lovely, warm enough for short sleeves and having settled into the gite called 'Le Moulin' beside the Tourism Office in the village square, we were joined by Jean and Tom Thompson who live in Brittany.



We went to meet Tony Williams at the Maison de la Nature at the Chérine reserve and sat in the evening sunshine while he told us a little about the nature reserve and we each explained why we had come and expressed some of our objectives. Tony works for the LPO (Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux, one of our Partners in this Leonardo da Vinci project).

We then went for dinner in the bar La Carpe Diem - an interesting choice, rare roast beef and crisps and preceded to watch that Rugby match. We thrashed the French and they were all lovely about it. There was an amazing atmosphere in the bar so we stayed for a few beers and then back to the gite for some sleep.

Sunday 14th

A day of exploring. We visited the nature reserve at Chérine and bird watched from the hide where we watched Cattle Egrets, Great Crested Grebe, Cormorants and Black Knecked Grebes. We also spied a red deer cantering through the surrounding fields.

Along the walk from the hide we saw the Speckled Wood and Male Common Blue butterflies, along with the Migrant Hawker dragonfly.

Kathy and Di began their wild flower quest finding Chickory, Bristly Ox tongue and wild Carrot, I learnt a lot from these two. I now have my own wild flower book and have been out and about learning as much as possible.



We then drove to La Maison du Parc for a lovely picnic. Here we spotted a green tree frog lounging in the grass along with some lizards.

Tony then joined us and we visited Lingé where he showed us the old railway line that used to run across the Brenne in the days when the road communications were poor, and which used to take the children to school from the isolated hamlets. We saw the lake they are purchasing near Lingé called Étang Purais. It is approximately 10,000 euros for a hectare of land in La Brenne and approximately 710,000 euros for the lake purchase. Le Peo and the WWF bought the new lake for less than its worth as they promised to look after it. Tony explained that as France is a much bigger country than England it is much further to the sea so the French eat a lot of carp, especially around Christmas so the lakes were being drained while we were there. We were also lucky to see the Lizard Orchards around the lake.

We then went to Étang Renard to the east of Mézières-en-Brenne before returning to our gite where we made a splendid supper. I helped make this and was in charge of cooking down all the vegetables to go with the pasta in the upstairs kitchen. We had to cook in both as they were so many of us and not a lot of cooking space. We made the best of it though and supper was fantastic if I do say so myself.

After dinner myself and Sophie went Bat watching by the river just outside the Gite – Nigel gave us the bat detector and we heard and saw Pippistrelle and Daurbenton bats. Just before we retreated to bed the Barn Owl graced us with its presence, and what a presence. It glided past us almost lit up – absolutely beautiful. This wouldn't be the last time we saw it.

Monday 15th

Work day 1.

After a breakfast of coffee and croissants we made our way to La Chérine where we cleared scrub, Bracken and Blackthorn and had 2 bonfires. Tony worked with us some of the time and the three French volunteers funded by WWF, Arnaud, Véronique and Manuel, joined us. Sophie and I thought we saw a Golden Ringed Dragonfly but it was too small. We think it was a hawk.



We stopped for lunch at about 1pm and chilled out in the wonderful sun with a picnic. Here we saw an old hornets nest and there were many hornets flying around – they were absolutely beautiful!

At the end of the day Tony took us through the woods to see the marl pits covered with Duck weed, John informed me this hosts the smallest species of flower in the world.

After work we went out to Dinner at the restaurant at Gabrière and had a lovely meal. Again after the meal Sophie and I sat by the river hoping to hear some more bats. There were quieter that evening but we managed to see a few before heading to bed.

Tuesday 16th

Work day 2.

We worked at La Touche, the site near Lingé in 4 groups. Two groups cleared out old ponds using saws and brushcutters and burnt the debris on bonfires, a third group, being myself John and Tom opened up a track between two lakes and the trees cut to encourage Whiskered terns to fly back and forth between the lakes as they don't like barriers and this area was very overgrown. The fourth group dug up waterlilies roots to be moved to a new lake. The waterlilies increase the oxygen in the water resulting in more life. Although I didn't do this job I spoke to some people that did and it was quite a tricky one to master – the lilies have Rhizome shoots under water so this needed to be followed and the lily picked up in such a way as to not break this. It looked like a very muddy job!

Adults from Le Foyer in Le Blanc worked with us with their carers. Three of the students were called Nicola (all spent in different ways as they were all male!) so we all had a photo together – it was really lovely to work alongside them. I tried my best to communicate and we had little conversations about music and asked how we all were a lot!

The area that I was working was to encourage the Whiskered turns to fly between the lakes – they protect the Black Necked Grebe from predators so is very important that they remain here.

That evening we went to Cherine for a butterfly slide show by Tony – it was the same slide display that he took to the British Bird watching show. Brenne was very well known for its birds but not so much for its amazing butterflies so they are trying to encourage awareness of these. I learnt that there are many butterflies in France that are extinct in Britain such as the Large Tortoiseshell, the Large Blue and Large Copper - these are all blooming in La Brenne, as is the Woodland Brown. This butterfly loves the habitat where wood is cut for fire use – they love the traditional Woodland Management techniques.

After the slide show, Nigel and Andrew set the moth trap up and we headed to La Carpe Diem in the square for a supper of steak and chips – hot this time!

Myself, Sophie, Matt, Charley, Andrew and Gaby walked round the village with the bat detector after dinner and stopped at the Church. We saw Noctile Bats alongside the pippistelles, the Carpe Diem's Labrador decided to come with us and Andrew bonded with him quite nicely.

Wednesday 17th

Our first 'Culture' day. We drove to watch a lake being fished near Ruffec but there was too much water in it, so we went back to Gabrière for coffee and birdwatching in the mist and cold wind. The fishermen were throwing the Sun Perch out of the Lake as they couldn't use them for anything being so small – I found this aspect quite upsetting as they were just left to suffocate on the banks of the lake. We thought maybe they could be used for something, even dog food but it wasn't to be. They also had cray fish in the lakes, these were an alien species introduced from America, they carry bacteria that affect the native species.

Back to Chérine to look at the moths caught in the trap overnight. The species list is attached, this is when I was introduced to the Canary-shouldered Thorn – a delightful little moth that looks a lot like a very small yellow bat, well myself and Sophie thought so anyway! Please also see below for the impressive mother of pearl and Emperor Moths.



We returned to the Gite for an indoor picnic lunch as the weather was pretty bleak outside. In the afternoon most people went to the fishing lake again, but there was still too much water so they went to La Maison du Parc where they looked at the displays and bought souvenirs before returning to La Chérine to see the displays in La Maison de la Nature. Myself, Ann, Jane, Sophie and the French 3, Arnauld, Veronique and Manuel went to Le Blanc to visit the fish museum. It was incredibly interesting and told the history of fish farming in the area. The English don't eat carp as we are surrounded by oceans, but after WW1 fish were important to feed everyone and readily available and inland France is not close to the sea. Therefore Carp were bought in from Eastern Europe for French lakes and are now very important – it is much more sustainable than farming cattle. Below are some pictures from the museum and the view of Le Blanc from the museum window.

We had a look around the museum grounds at the church before heading off back to Maison de Parc, here we also bought souvenirs to take home. We had another lovely meal at Gabrière, and Nigel and Andrew set the moth trap again. It was a cold night so not much flying – hence not many moths to be seen the next day.

Thursday 18th

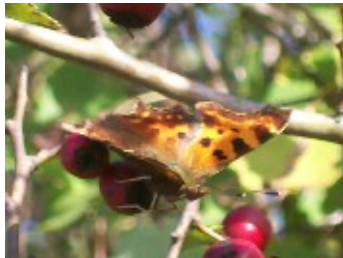
Work day 3.

It was market day so I saw this as the perfect opportunity to replace my torn wellies and grabbed a bargain. I also attempted to get some thick socks for my boots but with my limited French I came away with some funny little Chaussettes that just fit over your feet! They did me proud though.

We then went to work at Rosnay Common with Tony and Antoine from the Conservatoire Patrimoine and a botanist called Pierre, stopping to look at Tony's Connick ponies on the way. We cleared vast amounts of scrub, Blackthorn and Bramble but piled it in heaps rather than burning it.



After work we had a brief guided walk where some people went to look at the Marsh Fritillary site we worked on in February while others, including myself went with the botanist. We saw the Comma butterfly, some moth eggs and the cocoon of a butterfly. Tony came across the Parasol fungi that I learned is edible – I was also to learn later that it is very tasty!



Shortly after work we went back to Maison du Parc for a reception to meet Jaques Trotignon the Director and other staff - Cécile, Joel, Christian, Rémy and Eric the Dragonfly man to say thanks for our hard work.

Jean and Tom cooked us a lovely dinner of Pye lentils and sausages alongside roasted vegetables and lemon tarte to finish – a wonderful evening.

Friday 19th

Work day 4.

Nine people, went to La Touche with Joel to finish the work between the 2 lakes and to work on the edge of the reed beds at the Alcon Blue site where we had worked in February. Myself, Sophie, John, Tom and Jean worked at our original site between the lakes tidying up and burning what was left. Unfortunately we were alongside the dead musk-rat and the smell was overpowering – even the fire didn't drown out the smell! We finished there and went and joined Cathy and the others clearing the Blackthorn to encourage the Alcon Blue back. On our way to the other site we had to share a field with some local cows, a little intimidating to start but they were fine. Cathy and Andrew were on the brushcutters while we cleared the old Blackthorn and cut down the new growth – it's a tricky plant so great care had to be taken when working with it. We had a couple of huge bonfires to burn it on.



The others worked with Rémy breaking through scrub to give view into Chérine reserve from road. After our last day of work for the week we had a French lesson with Michelle Williams. I loved this as I remembered more than I thought I did and Nigel said I had a lovely French accent! Arnaud, Manuel and Véronique left to head back to Paris.

That evening we had dinner at Le Boeuf Couronné in Mézières-en-Brenne. Here we were given our gifts which as a little model of the European pond Tortoise which was really nice and unexpected. We drank a lot of wine that evening and after dinner went to the bar to watch the third place Rugby World Cup match between Argentina and France which resulted in the French team being thrashed, the rugby coach being demoted to Minister of Sport (!) Myself, Sophie and Nathan met the local volleyball team and proceeded to have many drinks with them, each of us trying to speak to each other in our pigeon languages. One of the girl's car had broken down so they asked me and Sophie to help push it – which we did and it started! This signaled another drink to thank us so to the bar we returned. We finally called it a night about 3am heading to the Gite for the final time.

Saturday 20th

Getting up was a little tricky on this day due to the large amount of beer consumed with the French volleyball team, but once we had breakfast and loaded up the bus we Left Mézières-en-Brenne at 10.15am to drive to Meaux east of Paris. We said our goodbyes to Jean and Tom, which was quite sad but Jean was looking forward to a bit of relaxing at home. We had a Picnic lunch in motorway services just north of Orléans. Reached Congis-sur-Therouanne at about 5.00pm. We went to the reserve, Le Grand Voyeux, where we met our hosts from the AVEN and watched the starlings coming into roost. We were told there were about 20,000 but we thought there were MANY more than this – they were magnificent, an absolutely beautiful show they put on for us. It was a great welcome to the site.

We were then treated to a grand reception at the town hall with a welcome speech from the Mayor and were given a book about the area and a medal!

We saw ariel pictures of what the site used to look like which was great to see how it had changed and developed into the nature reserve over the past 10 years. The site is old gravel pits that date back 35 years, not yet a reserve but protected land that has been exploited by private companies so it takes time to acquire. 250 hectares belong to the district council.

Jean-Pierre Labourdette our host, led us to the village of May-en Multien where we stayed in a gite on the edge of riding stables owned by Jean-Paul Garnier. This Gite was different from the one in Mezieres - it was more modern and the two bedrooms had loftrooms at the top, where me and Sophie stayed. There was a communal lounge room in the middle where we ate our supper cooked by a local family. We were all pretty tired so retired to bed quite early.

Sunday 21st - Culture Day.

We left the Gite at 8.30am to visit the market at La Ferte sous Jouarre enveloped in fog rising from the river Marne. Marie-Constance, Marie-Élène, Jean-Claude and his wife Danielle and Jean-Pierre came with us. 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. Every year they have enactments of the battle – many people were not keen on him as his conquering ways got many people soldiers killed, although people from the Champagne region named their children after Napoleons wives and mistresses – Pauline, Josephine and Eleanor for example. Mary Constance explained to us what her grandmother had told her about the Prussian soldiers. They were big men who took the women to the church to help the wounded soldiers. Her grandmother used to say 'We don't want to make a fire for the president of Prussia' whenever she left the door open.

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, learning that he was a cellar man who had a good idea to mix all the Champagne wines together, improving quality and to use a cork rather than bits of wood. The cork controls the speed of fermentation, expanding making the bottle airtight. He also made the bottles thicker so they wouldn't explode. He accelerated the fermentation process to produce finer, lighter wines changing the strength of the bubbles.

We then drove to Chalons-sur-Marne, where Marie-Constance's cousin makes champagne. Here we saw some of the processes involved when he took us down to the cellar and enjoyed tasting it. We even saw the traditional method of opening the bottle with a knife, not sure I could repeat it! Most of us bought some bottles to take back home with us, I gave mine to my boyfriend and to my surprise he still has it – keeping it for a special occasion.

We returned to the gite quite late for 'roast'sangler supper that Jane and Cathy had prepared – I must say I was a bit unsure as to whether I would like it but it was absolutely lovely. After dinner Matt, Sophie and I played cards and listened to music before heading to bed.

Monday 22nd

Work day 5.

After a breakfast of coco pops (I'd tried to cut back on the croissants by week 2!) we met Jean-Pierre, Marie-Élène and Sylvie at the town hall and went on to the reserve at 9.30am. We had a brief walk round to see the work that needed doing and we divided into 3 groups. Myself, Sophie, Charley and Gabby cleared blue plastic tree guards from trees that had outgrown them. We did this to make the site more attractive for when the site is open to the public in November. This was a pretty tough task as many of the trees had grown into the guards making it very difficult to get them off and they fell into tiny pieces. It also hurt the back to be bent over for so long so we ended up taking it in shifts and nearly everyone had a go at clearing the guards by the end of the week. Others cleared Bramble Willow and Alder from around a hide and John and Diana set about making the hide child-friendly (the slots were all far too high for children or vertically challenged adults to see through!) We had a fine bonfire and Marie-Élène brought some potatoes to cook – a lovely surprise to have a baked potato for lunch. Below are pictures of how the hide and the area around it looked when we started – it was incredibly overgrown.

We finished work at about 3pm and then had a tour of the whole reserve including a visit to the area now grazed by Solognote sheep which are supposed to eat willow as well as grass!. We saw a coypu swimming through the lake as well as a pair of cormorants chilling out and drying their wings.



Heading back to the Gite about 4.30/5ish, spotting a wild cat on our way, we all showered and awaited meals on wheels, another lovely supper. Some people played table tennis and boggle after dinner, whilst Matt, Sophie and I played cards.

Tuesday 23rd

Work day 6.

We headed off to work at 9.30am. Splitting into 3 groups again, scrub was cleared from around the other hide and from the strip of land separating them. The 3rd group continued clearing the remaining tree guards. I spent the morning clearing the land in between the hides which also included larger trees of Alder and Robinia. This was quite a hefty task and a hard days work but well worth it. I also cleared a great deal of bramble that was overgrowing in and around the hide, not very welcoming. During the past week I saw myself as bit of a bramble buster and with my gloves on and loppers in hand, I went about clearing the overgrown bramble.

Nathan and I were asked to remove some of the larger alder blocking the view from the hide over the lake behind. First we went to the hide to see exactly what trees we needed to fell so we utilised our time effectively. This involved working on a strip of land between two lakes and great team work was ensued. We took it in turns to hold the trees while the other sawed (my bow saw skills were greatly improved by the end of the trip, which I am very thankful for). We then dragged the trees back to the fire, which was exhausting. Once we had finished we went back to the hide to admire our work and were satisfied of a job well done.

During the day we helped Nigel get some big trees down with a bit of lassoing and occasional tree climbing in order to get the rope secure so we could pull them in the right direction. I thoroughly enjoyed this as have always loved climbing trees!

John and Di continued work on the hide and it was coming along beautifully – the transformation was quite something in the short space of time.

We all grouped together for lunch and Marie-Élène bought along some soup and Jean-Claude some coffee which was most welcome.

We finished work at 4.00pm and paid a visit the supermarket before returning to the gite for showers. Dinner at the Lycée Technique at Gué à Tresmes with Jean-Pierre, Marie-Élène, Jean-Claude, Danielle, Marie-Constance and Sylvie. This was wonderful, 5 courses cooked by the students and we gave them a round of applause after to thank them.

Wednesday 24th - Culture day.

We had breakfast at about 7-730am and then left the Gite at 8.30am to head to Museum of Millstones near La Ferté sous Jouarre with Marie-Constance. This was an incredibly cold day and stands out in my memory as such. The museum was owned by a man who collected artefacts from mills around Europe – he had 7 stones outside the museum all from different places and different times. He did explain them to us but after the 3rd I'm afraid I became too cold and my concentration was affected. We finally headed into the museum, greeted by a lovely fire. Inside there were more artefacts and it outlined the history of water mills.

We then went to the art gallery in the former Synagogue in the town with an exhibition of André Planson's paintings. The gallery was very well lit and was laid out just right. It showed the pictures off beautifully – Andre's paintings are quite unique. There is a lot happening in them. Also in the gallery were books he had written, with notes that detailed his life and included pictures he had sent to his parents whilst being in the army. Downstairs were black and white photographs of jazz musicians, again an excellent use of the space.

After coffee provided by Jean-Claude and chocolate crispy cakes that Jane kept making, we met Monsieur Thomas a war veteran who showed us the 'Monument des Anglais' and told us about the 1914-1918 war and the battles that took place on the Marne at La Ferté sous Jouarre. Here I learnt a history I didn't know before – 3888 soldiers were killed from the 28th August to Mid September and their names were on the memorial. It was very moving.

There was a reception for us in the town hall with drinks and speeches and it made me feel appreciated for the work I was doing there.

We headed back to the Gite for lunch at 3pm, although myself and Sophie were not feeling too well. After some lunch we lay down and slept for a while in between bouts of sickness. Some people went out to watch Starlings going to roost at the reserve, some stayed by the fire to get warm and John and Diana went with Jean-Pierre on a tour of all the DIY supermarkets east of Paris to find timber for the hide. I skipped dinner this evening and saw out my sickness.

Thursday 25th
Work day 7.

Nigel took John to work on the hide at 7.30 and returned with breakfast. Due to our illness keeping us up most of the night, myself and Sophie slept all morning and didn't make it to work. The others started work at 10.00am, all of them on tree guard removal, blue plastic and metal spikes. They then cleared bramble on slopes around entrance to the concrete bat tunnel and started clearing Sallow and Bramble from beside a pond by the look out place.

They finished work finished at 2.30 and a few of the group went horse riding with the stable we were staying with. Matt, Gaby and Nathan came back and decided to go bike riding – I was feeling a bit better by this point so attempted to go with them as I felt like I had to do something – the past two weeks had been filled with activity so a morning off left me feeling quite bored and a bit useless. Anyway, my efforts didn't last long – I realised early into the ride that I wasn't much better at all and had to leave the three of them to it whilst I walked the bike back to the Gite with little energy.

After some more sleep, I joined the group for dinner at the Gite for one last time. After dinner Nigel and Andrew put the Moth trap put out, a few games were then played and an early night was had.

Friday 26th
Work day 8.

We left for work at 9.30, except John and Diana who started at 7.30 and saw the starlings waking up. Myself and Pauline went to finish taking the remaining tree guards away and were joined by Ann and Jean-Pierre. It was quite impossible on the first look at the guards, to gauge quite how big a task this was. On this final day there we went about removing the ones that could be seen from the path, so the public had a much more natural experience. We managed to remove most but some remained, to be cleared later on in the month. I then went and joined the rest of the group after lunch, clearing more Sallow from beside the lake and burning it on a bonfire. We were visited by two journalists; one called Hervé from Le Parisien and the other Fabien from the more local Marne newspaper and we have since appeared in the Parisien

We all finished at about 3pm and had a final walk to the hide that John and Diane had updated. Please see the pictures below to see the transformation, a hide to be proud of – now young and old alike can enjoy the beautiful view and take in the wildlife the reserve has to offer. We then walked round to the other hide for some bird watching. We were lucky enough to see a glorious kingfisher – my camera did not do it justice.



We headed back to the Gite for the final clear up and to prepare for supper. . Marie-Constance, Marie-Élène, Jean-Claude and his wife Danielle and Jean-Pierre came with the local cuisine and we had a great party. We presented Jean-Pierre with a book on Dorset and the evening concluded with a brief exchange of French and English dancing which was much fun!

Saturday 27th

We left the Gite in an immaculate condition at 8.30am which was carefully inspected by Jean-Paul who seemed very pleased with us. After discussing it in the week we decided to take a route north of Paris to avoid any problems with the beginning of half-term traffic, via St. Soupplets, Senlis and Beauvais, stopping for coffee near Gournay en Bray. We had our final picnic lunch in a motorway services along the A13 between Rouen and Caen. Here we finished most of the supplies we had acquired throughout the week, and Janes coco crispies – they were so good! We had plenty of time so visited Dives sur Mer. Here I bought some local honey and Jam for my parents and Sophie, Nathan and I had a final Latte in a local café. We then continued our final journey and reached the ferry terminal at Caen at 4.00pm. The ferry was on time and we all dispersed on board, some doing some last minute duty free whilst others had the remains of the picnic supper on board.

Once docked, we left Portsmouth about 10.00pm and began the drive back to Alweston. Jane was the first to be dropped off signalling the end of our conservation trip. We then continued to drop people off along the way, having a last sing along to the Waterboys. Matt, Sophie and my journey ended at Wimborne where we got our lifts home. Nigel and Cathy finally arrived home after dropping people off at about 12.30.

This conservation exchange was such an amazing opportunity and I think myself very lucky to have got the chance to be involved. It not only developed my practical skills but opened my eyes to the issues facing other countries regarding conservation. I believe I can work well, over a considerable amount of time with people of all ages and backgrounds and plan to do a great deal more voluntary work – both in the UK and abroad to develop as a great conservationist.