

Week 1 in La Brenne

This trip started in Blandford where the minibus came to collect me for a trip I will never forget. I didn't know anyone else before hand and was very nervous but had a very open mind about what was to come. We proceeded onto other pickup points whilst making small talk trying to get to know the people we would be spending the next 2 weeks with. When I first met Nigel I found it quite funny to see him in his shorts in the middle of winter and Cathy with a smile I could never forget she was always smiling. We stopped in Wimborne where Nicky Hesketh Roberts joined us little did I know she would soon become a very good friend of mine. We arrived at Portsmouth and before catching the ferry to Cairn we stopped for dinner at a local restaurant I sat with Nicky and started to get to know her. Next was the boat trip where Nicky and myself had decided to share a room we were both very high on excitement about our trip and had a couple of drinks on board before deciding as difficult as it would be we really should try to get some sleep, we got a little. It didn't matter that much as we had a long drive to La Brenne. Trying to stay awake on the minibus which was very difficult I really enjoyed the drive as there was plenty to see from countryside and lots of birds as well as some beautiful buildings and architecture I was quite amazed at how different it looked to England as I hadn't really expected it to.

We stopped for a picnic lunch in a little town called Beaulieu it was so beautiful the weather was lovely and we were right next to a fantastic old abbey half of which was a ruin from war time. The architecture was fantastic and we went inside to have a look around when Anne treated us to a beautiful Gregorian Chant which sounded amazing .

We arrived at a beautiful little town we were in La Brenne and our gite for the next week was an old water mill with the mill stones outside and a beautiful little river running through the buildings and under our gite, adding to the peaceful and very beautiful French atmosphere. We were also lucky to arrive on such a lovely day.

That night we dined at the local pub who had cooked specially for us it was a very strange meal for the meat eaters there was incredibly rare sliced beef steak (cold) served with nothing but crisps. And for the vegetarians a very large plate of salad with what seemed to be pickled red peppers and white asparagus which I wasn't too sure about, slightly odd but quite funny and we all really appreciated the effort. This was followed by free lager as we watched England v France in the rugby world cup. What a great night we had. The locals were so friendly and welcoming they presented all the ladies with a rose and congratulated us on our win which was very hospitable, everyone really enjoyed themselves. Soaking up the atmosphere we stayed for a few more drinks and spoke to a British man who now lives in France along with his two brothers who both married French women one of which has his own lake which he uses for carp fishing this was interesting as we would soon learn all about it and how important it is to conservation.

Anyway enough of the having fun now to the work side of things we were working alongside Tony Williams he was a very informative man and I learnt a lot about butterfly's and habitats through his talks. We mostly spent our time clearing areas on the reserve we had to cut a lot of brambles, blackthorn and small trees down which we would burn. Those with chainsaws cut a few select larger trees leaving the logs in piles as they would make great habitats for insects. These larger trees were taken down to let the sun through so that it could all re-grow this kind of conservation is brilliant for many species e.g. The Woodland Brown. We cleared some very large areas due to everyone working together and putting a lot of effort in. Me and Nicky had a great time we really felt like we were working hard for a good reason.

Our second line of work was more scrub clearing around the lakes and also re planting water lily's this needed to be done as species which are not native to France (e.g. Muskrats) through eating them have played a part in the decline of these plants. Lilly's are very important for keeping oxygen in the water which helps to sustain a thriving ecosystem, they also attract species such as dragonfly's and butterfly's, and the list could be endless. They make a great habitat for much of the water life, a perfect place for larvae and frogspawn

and a safe place for smaller prey. They also act as sunshields in hot weather.

Our week was a mixture of cultural experiences and hard work whilst getting to know species, plants and land management. One of my favourite species was the tree frog which we saw a lot of during scrub clearance and we got to witness a lot of their noisy vocals.

We were given a French lesson which I wasn't very good at went on walks to hives and spotting all kinds of species, mushrooms, plants ect. There was always someone with a book or the knowledge on what you were seeing or hearing I learnt so much and it was all so interesting. We did some moth trapping which was really good fun especially with a group of 20 all trying to look at and take pictures of these tiny little insects.

We learnt a lot about carp fishing which is very important to the people as the land in France is no good for farming as the ground is mostly mud meaning (weather depending) the ground is either too hard or muddy for anything to grow. But carp farming is perfect financially and is also excellent for conservation as the constant

draining of the lakes gives the plants a chance to renew themselves. Unfortunately there is a threat to carp farming due to competition from other countries i.e. china this would have dramatic effects not only financially but environmentally.

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Week 2 Congis-sur-Therouanne

After a long bus journey we arrived at our gite very close to Le Grand Reserve which was where we were to be working. Once we had seen our place of rest we were taken to see the reserve where we were given a fantastic display by the starlings over the water it was amazing. This reserve had been a quarry and had since been taken on as a reserve. Some trees and plants had been re planted here but they had not been properly managed and a lot of work was needed to turn this area back into wetlands for the native species. Our task here was to build a lookout hut suitable for children and adults and also to remove invasive trees from the reed beds e.g. willow. It was very important to remove these as if left they would grow into the water taking over important plants ultimately destroying the natural habitats of the species which depend on these areas!

Unfortunately me and Nicky got a very bad stomach bug whilst here and spent a couple of days in bed meaning we missed another opportunity to see the starlings display and also missed finishing work we had started. Luckily I was well for the champagne tour, he, he!

As our trip had come to an end we were treated to a large supper which had been prepared by the people who worked on the reserve and we all had a good shindig. the perfect ending to an amazing two weeks.

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Evaluation

This trip was amazing and I will never forget the time I spent here and the people I met. I found it brilliant that we also got to know the areas in which we were working with trips into the local towns looking at architecture and the ways that they managed land. Also seeing the diversity of the wildlife. We took part in moth trapping learning the names. We also had a bat detector which me and Nicky used and were graced with the presence of the local barn owl screeching above our heads in La Brenne. We ate out a lot of nights and one night were cooked a meal by Jean and Tom. This was great for getting to know the group I think we worked very well together the group dynamics was so good many people we met thought we all knew each other previous to working here. I learnt so much and was overwhelmed by the knowledge of many.

I think with conservation it is very important to work closely with the community and to have a knowledge of the areas in which you are working. I believe this was fulfilled and truly believe this will work for years to come and will continue to be successful and productive both for conservation enthusiasts and the habitats of many species.

A thank you to everyone for giving me this opportunity. That is Nigel and Cathy, Tony Williams Jean Pierre and of course the Leonardo da Vinci trust who funded the whole trip.

