

REPORT OF VISIT TO PARC NATUREL REGIONAL DE LA BRENNE

Feb 29th to March 15th 2008

JOURNEY AND ARRIVAL

The group met at the Bridge Tavern in Portsmouth Harbour where we had a meal before boarding the ferry to Caen. It was a rough crossing but in the cabin I slept well. Arriving at Caen the next morning we made our way south to La Brenne stopping for coffee at Sees and a picnic lunch outside a fascinating church at Beaulieu les Loches, where we also did some sightseeing. The journey was punctuated by stops at places of interest arriving at Mezieres en Brenne around 16.00. Fortunately, the mid lent festival was being held in the market square so for an hour we mingled with the locals and enjoyed the festivities.

ACCOMODATION

Our accommodation was a gite in the centre of Mezieres. It was comfortable and spacious with shared dorms on 2 levels and a kitchen/ dining room on the ground floor. Located on the main square, it afforded us tremendous opportunity to observe and participate in the activities of a small provincial French town. Mezieres is picturesque and atmospheric but apart from market day very quiet.

LA BRENNE

La Brenne is a small largely unpopulated area located in central France and forms part of Le Berry region. During the middle ages, land was reclaimed, trees were felled and the swamps drained to form pastures and over 1300 small shallow lakes. Monks originally used these lakes for keeping fish and fishing is still an important industry. Today, La Brenne is a flat landscape containing lakes, woodland, wetland and meadows. Due to the decline in agriculture, blackthorn, willow and tree heather are slowly encroaching upon unused pasture creating areas of scrub, drying out the wetlands and changing the natural habitat and eco structure.

PEOPLE

Nigel (leader), Kathy (leader)

Ann, Hayley, Heather, Kitty

Arron, Daniel, James, Manus, Peter, Richard, Ross, Tony, Wren

The group of volunteers were very compatible and all integrated together well despite being diverse in age, interests, background, skills and experience. All appreciated the need for nature conservation but approached the subject from differing specialities and expertise which when combined made a knowledgeable and enthusiastic team.

For the first week we were joined by four French volunteers sponsored by the WWF

Florence, Van, Alain, Richard

who lived and worked alongside us. Most could speak English so provided us with French example, commentary and perspective.

We also met and worked aiding the Cherine Nature Reserve staff. In general we were supervised by Tony Williams who provided the liaison between us and the reserve.

For one day we were joined by a group of adults with learning difficulties from the Foyer in La Blanc. We worked together enthusiastically raking and burning tree heather. They were sociable and easy to work with although communication was sometimes challenging due to the language barrier. One made us feel welcome by declaring that he was a Manchester United fan. Their supervisors Eric and JoMarie, who could speak English well, provided some translation.

On our perambulations around the town we surprisingly met very few locals. Shopkeepers etc were friendly and polite.

A newspaper reporter paid us a visit at La Maison de la Nature at Cherine. He asked us fairly standard questions and made notes. A few days later an article describing our work with photo appeared in the local paper.

WEATHER

I believe that we were lucky with the weather. There was just one day when rain stopped us from working. In general we experienced overcast skies with sunny periods, some drizzle. On occasions it was cold but also sometimes it was warm.

WORK

Conservation work was carried out on a variety of sites in the Cherine Nature Reserve. Occasionally, after working on a site for a day we returned some days later to complete the task. A number of sites were recent acquisitions so were in need of a team of people, such as ourselves, to make an impact on the scrub and vegetation. The workday

ran from approx 9am to 5pm with a break for a lunchtime picnic. Frequent stops were taken for a rest and water.

In a newly acquired wood at Cherine a wide ride was cut by felling fair sized oak trees. This job was done by chainsaw. Our task was to clean up by staking brash and constructing log piles which made ideal habitat for many creatures. The object of creating a ride was to attract butterflies and specifically the Woodland Brown which had been seen nearby.

At La Touche, blackthorn, tree heather and other scrub was cut back to maintain a semi swampy grassland. Bonfires were lit to dispose of the cut material. In some patches orchids would be encouraged by this work.

At Miclos our task, working alongside the group from the Foyer, was to rake up and burn previously cut tree heather. This work not only deprived the soil of rich nutrients but also encouraged plant species other than heather to grow. In the past this process would have been carried out by grazing animals.

Possibly the most satisfying task was at Etang Purais where we cleared willow and blackthorn scrub from around ponds. Allowing light to penetrate, the ponds became a more attractive and desirable habitat for many creatures, frogs, dragonflies etc. It also looked more aesthetically pleasing to us. It was also satisfying because results were immediate and obvious. Even as we left the site there seemed to be more activity in the vicinity of the ponds.

The tools that were used were generally bowsaws and loppers. Forks were needed to tidy the bonfire. Brush cutters and chainsaws were operated by others who had been trained. Tree stumps were generally cut as low as possible to discourage regeneration and to protect the hooves of any grazing animals.

We did have a discussion on the reasons for our efforts, due to a rainy day impeding our work. This discussion was very interesting and useful with explanations not only of reasons and consequences but also of how work is organised through volunteers etc. I would suggest that something similar is formally included on subsequent projects. We also were given a slide show and talk on the work and history of the Cherine Reserve. This proved interesting as not owning or controlling the lakes, politics with the owners, those who fish the lakes, can be delicate. Also other leisure uses are occasionally found for the lakes which have a detrimental effect on their conservation. Moreover, the battle with the coypu, which have a negative effect on the rest of the local wildlife and so is a huge menace, is slowly being lost as their numbers are growing. There are many challenges to be met that are not immediately apparent to the occasional volunteer.

FOOD

Most evenings we ate 'in house'. Fortunately, (or by design?) a member of our group was a trained chef and others were very talented amateur cooks, so all meals were superb despite the limited cooking facilities – no oven.. I helped with the washing up. We dined out at many different restaurants, AU Boef Couronne and Le Carpe Diem were both conveniently sited in the main square of Mezieres. We also ate at La Flambe in La Blanc and in the town of La Roche Posny and other restaurants in some of the remoter villages of the area. All were excellent.

During the fortnight, I experienced many local foods that I had never eaten before, Carp, Pike, Sturgeon, Catfish, Venison and possibly wild boar, although this is controversial. Also we tried many different cheeses and pates. To accompany the meals various red wines, sparkling wines and aperitifs were sampled. I have never eaten so well. Croissants, fresh bread and jam was laid on for breakfast whilst lunch was generally a picnic consisting of a selection of breads, cheeses, pates, salads and fruit. Wonderful. Bananas were very popular and always in short supply.

It is noticeable that the French take the ritual of food and mealtimes very seriously. From observation they extend eating into a social occasion taking far longer to finish each course than the British. Enthusiasm for good cuisine is balanced by the importance of social interaction which when punctuated by the slow but intense sampling of several dishes extends the meal into an evening or afternoon's entertainment. Naturally, local wine is relatively cheap, further enhancing good conversation and the experience of dining. We can learn much from French attitudes.

Shop, café and restaurant opening times are a complete mystery to the visitor. On several occasions it was believed that we had cracked the code – only to be disappointed. Is there a rule or is it just arbitrary?

LEISURE ACTIVITIES

Whilst staying at Mezieres en Brenne we took many sightseeing excursions, the most notable being those to La Blanc, probably the largest town in the area, where we visited the museum, walked the town admiring the river which runs through the centre. We also had a walk around La Roche Posey, a spa town whose fortifications and interesting architecture are worth a visit. However, the spa water did not taste very pleasant. Next came Angles sur l'Anglin with its picturesque ruins, winding streets and view over the

limestone gorge. In all, our travels afforded us a good introduction to an area that is unknown in the UK and largely ignored in France except probably for ornithologists. Once obviously thriving, relatively wealthy and in possession of a fascinating history, some towns including Mezieres now seem deserted and unwanted left to exhibit a serene but faded beauty in their architecture and streets which possess a sleepy sepia quality. Without a role in the modern world they appear to be slowly slipping into decline leaving ghost towns populated by retirees and permanently closed shuttered holiday homes.

Rising early one morning we witnessed the fishing at lake Etang Masse. Overnight, the lake had been 90% drained and the remaining pond was surrounded with nets which were slowly drawn in catching the fish. The fish were only small but were sorted, put into tanks to eventually be fed into another lake, where in time, as adults, they will be harvested. I imagine that this fishing technique is traditional, originally performed by monks in the medieval age when trees were cut down forming these shallow lakes that could be used to rear fish.

On our travels we unintentionally came across preparations for the Hunt. Men on horseback dressed in traditional hunting clothes were aided by others travelling by bicycle and car. Bystanders were waiting in anticipation for the action. We saw no actual hunting but it was a vibrant and impressive spectacle.

Returning to Mezieres after work on evening we just caught the finish of a bicycle race. It was a colourful occasion with spectators lining the route cheering on the competitors. Prizes were later awarded in the town hall.

One evening we went to the cinema in La Blanc. The film was 'Into the wild' an American film shown in its original English language. It was surprising that the audience was generally elderly and middle aged. UK cinemas are (I'm told) populated by the young. Strange. Could there be any significance that the film was in English?

Part of our free day was spent at a stable at Le Grand Tremble near Ruffec where we did some horse riding. I had never ridden a horse before so whilst a little nervous was very keen to try. As a rank beginner I expected to spend the time inside training and getting used to pulling the reins etc. However, right from the start, after putting on the helmet and mounting the horse, we were led outside and into the countryside, initially walking and the trotting. Obviously the horse knew what it was doing but I got the idea and feel and coped rather well. I really enjoyed the experience and it is an activity I hope to pursue in the UK.

A few of our number wished to attend a catholic church service. It was therefore arranged to visit Fontgombaut Abbey for the Mass on Sunday. Not being especially

religious I went along (as did most) for the experience of seeing a working religious community and the promise of hearing the singing and chanting. I was not disappointed as it turned out to be fascinating. The service was conducted by Benedictine monks wearing black habits. The habits looked warm because the Abbey was cold but with the constant standing up/ sitting down routine, obviously well known and choreographed by the congregation, it kept us on the move. A unique and memorable experience.

Some of our group could speak a little French but despite this we all had a short language lesson. I appreciated this as my French does not extend beyond a few words. Although brief I learnt a few more phrases.

One evening we were having a quiet drink in Le Carpe Diem, a café in the square adjacent to our gîte. It turns out that the owner (or manager) Sandra is a singer with a very good voice. Amongst other songs she treated us to a selection from Edit Piaf a famous singer still idolised in France. It was excellent, very French and atmospheric but it is odd how we chose to communicate (musically) with the songs of a 1940s? singer.

SPECIES IDENTIFICATION

. For a full list of species identified see the official list, supplied by Nigel, at the end of the report.

La Brenne is teeming with wildlife and thus presented many opportunities for its study. Amongst our group were experts in birds and flora and enthusiasts for butterflies and moths. We frequently paid visits to hides on the reserve and consequently observed many different species of bird, many of which are not or rarely seen in Britain. As a novice at bird identification it was educational to be in the company of experts. Whilst no ornithologist but possessing a mild interest in birds, I made the effort but had difficulty in distinguishing species. Indeed, from a distance, so many birds have similar features, my attempts at identification were a dismal failure. However, with some guidance I could identify a few. Larger birds such as the heron, eagle and kite have presence, are more distinctive so are easier to spot and possibly more memorable.

It was a little too early in the season for butterflies and moths as they were only just beginning to be active. It was explained that Moths can be large and colourful, much like butterflies. The moth trap caught several species which are hairier, with larger heads and eyes than the more slender butterfly. Their wing colouring being less gaudy and understated have nevertheless very intricate designs.

We also identified many plants and flora. Whilst stopping for a picnic at Ciron, across the river from the chateau, a tree was discovered that could not be identified. Those with knowledge about trees seemed mystified. After a few days pondering a vague type of ash was suggested. This was a disappointment as an unidentified tree has more mystery and cache. I would have preferred it to have been a rare exotic whose seed had somehow floated down the river.

Whilst I have neither the knowledge nor the enthusiasm to take a keen interest in the details of species identification, my interest in birds, flora butterflies and especially moths has been enhanced. Prior to this trip I had dismissed moths as dull creatures with few interesting features. In future I will take a greater interest in moths.

We also caught sight of animals rarely seen in Britain. Wild Boar were glimpsed briefly from the window of the Reserves visitor centre. A beech martin was found dead on the road. It was similar in size, fur and shape as a cat but with a very different head and face. Whilst working in the wood I was nearly knocked over by a Roe Deer? fleeing from colleagues who had surprised it.

COMMENT

In general, the project was well organised, well financed and well led by knowledgeable and enthusiastic leaders. The Cherine staff, I believe, were satisfied with our efforts and contribution to their nature reserve. In turn, we enjoyed the work and surroundings, coming to understand more about the natural world and techniques of wildlife conservation. Through observation we learnt about France and the French way of life. By the experience of actually being there we could gauge the less quantifiable sensations such as the cultural differences and similarities with Britain. Whilst only witnessing a snapshot of French life it has become easier to have empathy with the French perspective and consequently it has enhanced insight and understanding.

15.05 2008. peter abbott