

European conservation action network trip to La Brenne – March 2008

After successful application for a place on one of the European Conservation Action Network trips I was given details of a preparatory weekend. The idea of this weekend was to provide a background to the project, meet participants past and present, and the leaders Nigel Spring and Cathy Henderson. The weekend was based at the Kingcombe Centre in west Dorset and would involve two days of practical conservation work followed by food and informal lectures/talks in the evenings. The weekend was a great success and definitely gave a solid base so far as what to expect during the fortnight trip as well as meeting and getting to know some of the people involved. It was useful to talk with participants from previous trips to really get a feel for how our visit might unfold.

The next time that the whole group would meet would be during the first part of the journey to La Brenne; the UK leg. This all went smoothly with the exception of one person not realising that a passport was required for the ferry crossing, he made alternative travel arrangements and we continued on our way. As this trip was carbon conscious, no flying involved, we would be driving across France in a minibus. The journey was quite pleasant with various wildlife sightings from the road as we went, it gave us all a chance to view the various landscapes that we traveled through and helped to build excitement about the adventure ahead.

One thing that soon became evident was the diversity of the people in the group, diversity of age, background and interests but all with a common thread – an interest in the natural world. I found this to be one of the most stimulating aspects of the trip, to see people's reactions to different situations and canvas the wealth of knowledge held within the group created a very good environment for learning.

After a delicious picnic (which set the tone of lunches to follow) in glorious spring sunshine the final leg of the journey was completed. During the final few miles the Brenne began to unveil its self to us. Large areas of rough pasture, scrub and oak woodland shrouded tantalising glimpses of ponds and lakes. This seemed a fine place to work.

The landscape of the Brenne is at first not easily understood mainly due to the almost complete lack of far reaching views. It is when you first see an aerial photograph that it all falls into place. The landscape at its best can be described in the following way. Lakes and ponds of various size's dominate the area and are in many places connected by tracts of often wet molinia dominated pasture, areas of blackthorn scrub and many good sized woodlands, predominantly oak but also including sweet chestnut, ash, willow, sallow, elder and hornbeam. Settlement is generally confined to large villages all of which have an unspoilt rural feel to them, connected by straight well maintained roads. One landscape feature of note are the buttons, small hills never more than about 30 feet in height which can be seen standing proud in this otherwise flat landscape.

The wildlife of the Brenne, although perhaps not seen at its best in March, is diverse and abundant. An agreeable climate, plentiful good quality habitat and the influence of such a

large amount of shallow fresh water all combine to accommodate many thousands of species of flora and fauna. By the end of our trip, the last day especially, spring had sprung and gave us a taste of the no doubt impressive summer months to come. The early butterflies and those that hibernate were seen including: Brimstone, Orange tip, Comma, Green veined white, speckled wood, large tortoise shell, Peacock and the illusive Camberwell beauty. Birdlife is one of the many natural spectacles on offer here and it did not disappoint. During our two week stay the group was lucky enough to enjoy more than a fleeting glimpse of nearly all the species present in the Brenne in March. Some species of note follow; Great white egret, cattle egret, Cranes, Black necked grebe, Red crested potchard, Black kite, Short toed eagle and Marsh harrier to name but a few. For the most part the wildlife of the Brenne is safe from harm thanks to the hard work and diligence of several organisations and a good size team of staff, it was this conservation activity that we had come to help with and learn about.

Our host in the Brenne was Tony Williams who works for the LPO and is based at the Masion de nature; a combination of offices and visitor center in a purpose built structure that over hangs one of the lakes. He was a great host with masses of local knowledge and a real passion for the Brenne. With his guidance we put our practical skills in to practice across various reserves in the area. The work was varied and interesting with plenty of opportunities to learn more about point specific issues around the Brenne. The main project that we undertook was the cutting of a new ride through woodland at Cherine nature reserve with the aim of increasing the amount of suitable habitat for the woodland brown butterfly. This involved felling and stacking 40 to 60 year old oak trees and clearing the under story allowing light from the newly opened canopy to reach the ground. Hopefully with yearly management to prevent succession a field layer of woodland grasses and herbs will develop interspersed with coppice stools. The habitat would then be similar to other areas used by the woodland brown and may possibly support a breeding population. Regardless of wether the woodland brown takes up residency or not the ride, several hundred meters long, 15 to 30 meters wide, meandering and with scalloped edges will be a valuable addition to the woodland. When I visited the completed ride on the last day of our trip there were many species of butterfly using it this would almost certainly not have been the case last spring. Other work included clearing blackthorn scrub to prevent the shading out of the marsh gentians which are the food plant of the Alcon blue butterfly, dismantling a fallen sallow tree, clearing around small ponds to stop eutrophication and various other jobs which needed a hand's on approach. On the whole the group worked efficiently to complete each task and left site at the end of each day tired but satisfied.

The end of each day would see us return to the gite in Meziere en Brenne. The gite was basic but provided all that we needed as far as sleeping, cleaning and eating were concerned. Evening meals were either created by members of the group or the group would all eat together at various restaurants throughout the Brenne. One thing remained the same wether we ate in or ate out, very good food and always in great company.

The premise of the trip was one of 'life long learning' and I feel that I have learnt a lot. My expectations were met and exceeded during the two weeks as we learnt about

European conservation issues and French culture. I am also certain that the learning process was reciprocated from the group to our French hosts and all those who worked with us. The exchange program also has a range of benefits outside of the actual trip to France in as much as it creates a network of like minded people, many of which will be useful future contacts. It also gets people involved in conservation volunteering in their local landscape.

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