

EuCan Report: La Brenne October 2008
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When I volunteered for a EuCAN conservation trip to France I expected to spend my time conserving the local wildlife, not suffering at its hand (or rather mouth). I thought I would be staying in basic, shared self-catering accommodation, not enjoying the comforts of a private room with en-suite shower. I had thought I might develop some muscle tone through a little honest toil, but I hadn't expected my arm to become twice its usual size. So it came as something of a surprise when, less than a day into my two week placement, I found myself confined to a very comfortable hospital bed as a result of a rather less than comfortable encounter with a local reptile, hoping that my swollen and discoloured arm might soon return to normal.

While being bitten by a snake might not have been very high on my list of personal development goals for the trip, it was a highly educational experience. And while I couldn't say the experience was entirely enjoyable it was extremely interesting, not to mention a valuable lesson on many levels.

On the first morning of our visit to the wetlands of La Brenne we had a brief introduction to the reserve from our host, Tony Williams of the LPO (Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux), after which we settled down to the first of many picnic lunches. A nature ramble in the woods seemed the perfect start to the afternoon, and so we set out. We had only got a hundred yards or so when we encountered our first French wildlife: a snake. It was small, about six inches long or maybe less. It was moving quite fast, its body in a tight sinuous curve with its head up off the ground, and the three of us who saw it were agreed that it looked like a young smooth snake but we weren't quite sure. So I picked it up.

Which, in retrospect, was a pretty stupid thing to do. Particularly as it was not a smooth snake but, as we later discovered, a viper. Quite why I decided to pick it up is overshadowed in my memory by the immediate consequences of that decision, but my thoughts were something like "Oh, there's a snake. I'm not sure what it is. I know: I'll pick it up to get a closer look." I did get a closer look, but it was very brief and what I saw was the tiny serpent open its mouth and sink one of its improbably long fangs into the tip of my finger.

The bite itself was brief but very painful. I dropped the snake instantly, leaving it to make its escape, and stared at the bitten digit in disbelief. And in that instant my view of snakes was completely changed. I had always rather liked them, and had handled harmless pythons in zoos and grass snakes in the garden. Having been brought up on Wildlife on One and Life on Earth I had never really understood man's deep-seated fear of the snake, but in that moment centuries of cultural demonisation of the serpent suddenly made sense.

The site of the wound went a dark purple almost immediately, and my finger began to swell soon after. I sucked it, almost instinctively, which I later learned was not a good thing to do. Fortunately I have perfect teeth, but if I'd had any fillings they would have provided a direct route for the venom to get to my brain. In fact, a similar bite nearby some years ago had led to a would-be first-aider being taken to hospital as a result of ingesting the venom after sucking his companion's wound.

Apart from the pain of the initial bite, I wasn't in any particular discomfort but I was a little light-headed and panicky with shock, and soon felt the need to sit down. This gave the rest of the group a chance to catch up, and soon I was surrounded by people offering advice, photographing me on their mobile phones, pointing, laughing, and generally (not) being very helpful. The one piece of good advice I got was to immobilise the affected area and keep it below the level of the heart. After a few minutes I felt fine. In fact, I felt better than usual. The bitten finger had swollen to about twice normal size, and was tender to the touch, but as long as I didn't move it it felt fine.

And so we carried on with our walk. Which I now know was the wrong thing to do. Next time I'm bitten by a snake I will know that I should seek immediate medical assistance, but on a sunny Sunday afternoon in a foreign country when you feel fine and your companions want to get on with their walk you think you're making a bit of a fuss over nothing, even if your finger is looking a bit odd. The rest of the afternoon passed largely without incident. I photographed some hornets and butterflies, and of course my swollen finger, and on the way back we stopped for ice-cream.

It's surprising how quickly you get used to having a swollen finger. After an hour or two it was enlarged to

the point that the skin felt it couldn't stretch any more, and it was stuck in a neutral half-bent position; I was unable either to straighten it or bend it further. Any touch on the bitten tip was very painful, and I couldn't really hold anything in that hand. But it didn't really bother me very much. I'm surprised in retrospect how little it worried me; it was actually quite fascinating watching the swelling progress.

The rest of my hand soon became swollen too, but it wasn't until that evening when I had difficulty removing my watch that I realised quite how swollen my whole arm was. Taking my shirt off was similarly difficult, and revealed a tennis-ball sized swelling surrounded by bruises in my armpit. I was a little worried at this point, but not too worried to go to sleep in the firm belief that it would all be fine in the morning.

Which it wasn't. I still felt fine, having slept well, but the swelling hadn't eased a bit in the night, and the tip of my finger was now a reddish purple colour. Nevertheless, I accompanied the rest of the group to the Maison de la Nature, where we were scheduled to start working with Tony. He took one look at my finger and said with a rather worried expression on his face that I had to see a doctor immediately, and that it had almost certainly been an asp viper. Which is when I started worrying.

The local doctor I saw had never seen a snake bite before, and was clearly quite concerned. He was quite impressed (if that's the right word) with the degree of swelling in the hand, but what seemed to worry him was the swelling in my armpit, which was apparently haematoma caused by the anticoagulant effect of the venom. My French was just about good enough to follow most of what he said, but I was very glad to have someone on hand to translate the details. He consulted the regional venom centre in Angers, and soon I found myself in an ambulance on my way to the local hospital in Chateauroux.

It wasn't until I was admitted to the hospital that I really started to worry. Lying in a treatment room surrounded by people who were clearly very ill indeed made me reflect that perhaps my situation was rather more grave than I'd thought, and when a succession of doctors and nurses came in to examine my finger and raise their eyebrows as only the French can do I started to think that perhaps I might not be going home with as many digits as I'd left with.

My new-found fears were not entirely unfounded, as without treatment things could have got a lot worse, but thankfully they were not to be realised. Once my blood had been tested and the correct antivenom supplied the swelling gradually started to subside, but at the same time the bruising got worse, apparently a reaction to the horse serum in the antivenom. In fact, it seemed that once I had received the antivenom the doctors' main concern was the possibility of an adverse reaction to the treatment, and I did suffer strange bruising to both arms for the following week or two.

Twenty-four hours later and I was ready to leave the hospital, with my arm almost back to normal size and feeling quite relieved that I was all in one piece. I wasn't able to do too much with the arm for a good few days, but having been hospitalised for a snakebite seemed like a reasonable excuse for getting out of heavy lifting. During the remainder of our stay I had many interesting and educational experiences, but none will stick in my mind quite so much as my encounter with that little snake and its immediate aftermath. I hope I've learned my lesson from it, and that I might think twice before handling an unidentified and possibly venomous creature in future.

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