

Report on a EUCAN placement in The Brenne National Regional Park 6th - 21st February 2009

This placement was organised by The European Conservation Action Network which was established by The Kingcombe Trust, a charity dedicated to conservation and environmental education in association with the Dorset Branch of Butterfly Conservation. The project is funded through the Leonardo da Vinci section of the European Union Lifelong Learning Programme and has partners in France, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland.

Brenne National Regional Park

The Brenne National Park, which covers 166,000 hectares, is one of forty four national parks in France. Brenne is renowned for its internationally important wetland habitat, 140,000 hectares of which are listed under the RAMSAR Convention. The Chérine Reserve, situated within the Brenne National Park, covers 145 hectares and this is where we were working and studying the ecology of the Brenne. Twenty per cent of the Brenne is wooded. Some of our tasks were in carr woodland which has areas of damp and shade with an abundance of ferns, mosses and liverworts, while extensive lichen and fungi grow on branches and dead wood.

The Economy

There are about 4000 man made fish ponds (etangs). The ponds which are privately owned are drained annually, the fish netted and sold for consumption or stored in tanks to be transported live to stock ponds for fishing, mostly in the northern France. The soil is thick impermeable clay which becomes waterlogged in winter and rock hard in summer and consequently the opportunities for farming are limited with much of the area is pastureland for cattle (Charolais) and sheep. The main crops grown are hay for animal feed and maize. Although the main activity in La Brenne is fish farming it has in recent years seen a decline in fish stocks. Reasons suggested for this decline include an increase in the cormorant population which feed on fish, and eutrophication, a decline in water quality associated with agricultural run off. There are Wild boar *Sus scrofa* in the national park and these are hunted for their meat.



Harvesting the fish from the drained etang

Tourism

The area welcomes tourists and provides plenty of information about enjoying the natural beauty and rich diversity of plant and animal species. There are tourist information bureaux in many of the towns. Places to visit include the newly opened Maison du Park, Maison de Nature and the Écomusée. The latter provides a comprehensive history of the area, its geology and occupations. Conducted natural history trips are available and the area offers the opportunity to camp, hire bikes or kayaks and to go horse riding. Lentils, honey and goat cheese are all local produce and there is a good choice of moderately priced restaurants.

My visit to the Brenne arranged through the European Union Lifelong Learning Programme

This was my first visit to La Brenne and it provided an ideal opportunity to study biodiversity and conservation in a wetland area of France. We stayed in a gîte d'étape, which was a converted watermill in the centre of Meziere en Brenne. It had accommodation for about 30; the beds were comfortable and each bedroom had between two and six beds. It had good facilities and plenty of hot water which was very welcome after a hard day's work.

Organisation

The group leader was Nigel Spring, ably assisted by Kathy Henderson. The whole trip was well planned and well managed and their cheerful natures and enthusiasm kept everyone happy. There were 13 participants, 11 from the UK and 2 from Hungary, and from the start this was a harmonious group who worked well together throughout the project. We were made very welcome by Jacques Trotignan (le chef) and Tony Williams who are two of the conservation team based at La Maison de Nature. They and their team of wardens and researchers were very helpful in explaining and discussing the successes and problems of conservation.



On this site we cleared the blackthorn and willow which had invaded the grassland and reedbeds. Note the many anthills

Conservation Tasks

We all worked hard with great enjoyment on a variety of conservation tasks. There were three people who had chain saw skills, about six with brush cutter skills and the rest of us willing to use loppers, handsaws and slashers to tackle tasks such as clearing thickets of blackthorn, removing trees in reed beds and meadows, clearing overgrown woodland paths of saplings and brambles and clearing shallow pools of invasive trees and bushes. The daytime temperature averaged between 1°-7° centigrade with a couple of days reaching 14° centigrade. Apart from dealing with the sharp thorns from blackthorn and brambles, the ground surface was very uneven with numerous anthills and furrows and small ponds as in many areas the meadows were waterlogged. We worked on about six sites over 8 days.



Starting a fire and beginning to clear the scrub



The same area on the second day of working

Education

Throughout the two weeks we were learning about France, its history, language and natural history. We had two slide shows and made daily observations of the flora and fauna, especially of birds. We also had access to a broad selection of reference material.

February is ideal for scrub clearance as this is before birds start nesting, and other species emerge from dormancy. However this did mean that the opportunity to see the rich diversity of plants, insects and birds was less compared with spring and summer time.

A major threat to this habitat are immigrant species such as the Coypu *Myocastor coypus*, Muskrat *Ondatra zibethicus*, Topmouth gudgeon *Pseudorasbora parva* and Red claw crayfish *Cherax quadricarinatus*. There are a lot of Wild Boar on the reserve and they eat birds' eggs, young fauns and snakes.



Bird watching using binoculars and telescopes

Around the ponds were extensive reedbeds and these provide a suitable habitat for birds such as the Bittern *Botaurus stellaris* and Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*. Reedbeds provide roosting and feeding sites for migratory species and support a variety of amphibians; predators such as grass snakes and herons are thus attracted to these areas. We saw many birds including Grey Herons *Ardea cinerea*, Purple Herons *Ardea purpurea*, Great White Egrets *Ardea Alba* and Black-necked Grebes *Podiceps nigricollis*. We also had the excitement of seeing Cranes *Grus grus* who fly to this area to feed on the maize fields and in the evening we saw nearly 2000 cranes coming into roost.

The main cause of species decline in Brenne is habitat destruction and introduced species. In the last two decades there has been a dramatic decline in number of ponds with water lilies *Nymphaeaceae alba*. This plant is a favourite food of the Coypu *Myocastor coypus* and as a result there has been a decline in the population of Whiskered Terns *Guifette mousta* as these birds build their nests on water lilies.

We learnt about the importance of the edge effect of woodlands, ditches and reedbeds as these add to the diversity of the habitat. Thinning out woodland helps trees to grow tall and strong, and creating glades allows more light in for flowers and butterflies such as the Woodland Brown *Lopinga achine*. Glades linked by tracks are more useful to wildlife than those that are isolated. By retaining brambles especially in sunny spots these provide shelter for many animals, and their flowers are a nectar source for insects. In meadows we cleared grass and scrub to improve the habitat for the butterflies such as the Alcon Blue *Maculinea alcon*, whose caterpillars feed exclusively on the Marsh Gentian *Gentiana pneumonanthe*, and whose larva is taken into the nest of a red ant (*Myrmica* species) where it is fed by the ants, and where it remains until it emerges as a butterfly the following summer.

The weather was warm enough on two days to set moth traps overnight and we were also able to observe the moth tents of the Pine Processionary Moth *Thaumetopoea pityocampa*. The beginnings of the slightly warmer weather enabled our group to find the thread-like spawn of the Agile Frog *Rana dalmatina* attached to reeds just below the water surface.



This was a cleared area of the woodland, with brush left as piles, some logs left as deadwood piles and some logs removed for fire wood

The approach to conservation in the Brenne

- To designate land as a national park and reserves
- To acquire new land to expand and link areas to reduce habitat fragmentation
- To implement the European Directives on Wild Birds and Habitats
- To manage woodland areas to promote diversity of native trees and to create glades and open areas to provide suitable habitat for butterflies and other species
- To clear scrub on neglected areas of marsh and heathland
- To control scrub by regular clearance by machine, by hand, or by low level grazing by Konik ponies thereby promoting biodiversity
- To regenerate reedbed by removing trees and scrub
- To prevent encroachment of small ponds and ditches to provide a suitable habitat for dragonflies and other water dwelling species
- To control introduced species by trapping or by elimination of invasive fish species when fish ponds are drained
- To reduce the number of wild boar by trying to scare them off the reserve using archers
- To have agreements with local landowners to apply conservation methods on their land
- To employ researchers and experts to carry out research and conduct standard surveys on invertebrates, bird and plant species
- To develop and promote an education programme to increase the knowledge and interest in the ecology of the Brenne.

Summary

For me this was a very rewarding placement. I learnt a lot about the national and cultural heritage of the area, about its broad leafed woodlands, the wetlands habitat and the measures taken to protect the indigenous and sometimes rare species to be found there. I was able to learn and practice my French and talk to the conservation team working on the Chérine Reserve. We had an action packed visit and an immensely enjoyable one.

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Further information about European Conservation Action Network can be obtained from www.kingcombecentre.org.uk or from Nigel Spring (tel: 0044.1963.23559; email: nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk).