

La Brenne, France – Not just a step across the sea!



EuCAN Volunteer Trip February 6th – 21st 2009



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Running down the station platform at Slough concerned about missing the train and that there would be lots of delays in the journey to Portsmouth due to unusual amounts of snow in the UK, it hadn't crossed my mind how much I'd learn in the 2 weeks volunteering I was about to embark on.



A trip fully organised and run for you normally has a catch but with EuCAN I believe I can safely say that I did not find one. The trip consisted of 11 of us 'volunteers' with Kathy and Nigel (the organisers) and two Hungarians from a partner reserve in Hungary. The group was amazingly diverse from recent graduates such as myself trying to get experience to help with their career, to retired individuals with lots of stories to tell of being a leader all over the world including the Arctic. People of all backgrounds such as social workers, nurses and gardeners amongst many others, all seemed to gel together automatically. From my fellow volunteers alone I learnt all sorts of things from world history to cooking tips and new card games. The group were a wealth of knowledge in all areas of life, introducing me to new ways of looking at and interpreting things.



EuCAN, the European Conservation Action Network is a charity based at The Kingcombe Centre, west Dorset (Reg. Charity no.1054758). It was established in 2007 by The Kingcombe Trust in association with the Dorset Branch of Butterfly Conservation. It 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. For further information about EuCAN and The Kingcombe Trust please see the Kingcombe website, www.kingcombecentre.org.uk or contact Nigel Spring (tel: 0044.1963.23559; email: nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk).

EuCAN is designed to assist conservation at a European scale through training in conservation and the environment, including maintaining sites of special interest to Biodiversity. La Brenne, France is one of the many areas within the EuCAN network it is a Parc Naturel Régional (National Park) which is unique in its habitat due to manmade lakes set up so monks could eat fish on fast days as they were too far away from the sea, something we wouldn't have had in England! The lakes create such a special environment for many species of birds, insects, reptiles and mammals that its management needs to be carefully considered.



The UK is seen to be well advanced in the area of conservation and particularly in the use of volunteers to help maintain sites through scrub clearance and pathway maintenance. We seem to have hit a pattern in recent years of the public having a growing interest in nature and its conservation and being willing to get involved more. From the EuCAN trip I have learnt that this is not the same in the rest of Europe, France is often thought to be approximately 30 years behind the UK in terms of interest in conservation and therefore it is difficult trying to get volunteers and to get people interested in enjoying the natural world around them. Many of the rural areas are also deserted throughout most of the year and are only really alive during the summer tourist season which can damage them somewhat in terms of culture and being looked after and fully appreciated. With EuCAN it has been interesting to see what the UK may have been like 30 years ago before the growing interest in the natural world. It is also nice to have the chance to help conservation in its early stages and to use some of our knowledge to help develop the ideas of the local people who are trying to get people interested in helping them.

In terms of the actual trip, we stayed in a gîte in Mezieres-en-Brenne in the middle of the Parc Naturel Régional de La Brenne and worked in the Cherine Nature Reserve doing scrub clearance using brush cutters, chainsaws, loppers and bowsaws. The scrub clearance was in a variety of areas mainly to maintain or create areas specifically for butterflies and/ or dragonflies. Due to the clearance of this land for butterflies it also allows other species to thrive. Many of these areas were around the large farming lakes helping to reduce blackthorn growth encroaching on reed beds and grassland. Other sites which we worked on included opening up a series of Marl pits, used for acquiring alkaline clay to help fertilise acidic soils in the area for agriculture. These had been left to be overgrown with brambles and opening these up allows more areas for dragonflies. We also helped to clear pathways through some areas in order to allow better access to the public so they can enjoy this amazingly rich area.



As well as feeling as if we were actually contributing to the overall conservation of the area, a disabled group joined us a few times, and it was good to see that the people managing the area were attempting to get local groups involved and also helping those less fortunate. It was interesting to see how they managed the areas and the work that needed to happen. There were a few things which we found slightly bizarre such as wood piles being left for over a year and then being moved rather than being moved straight away or left as habitat piles. It meant that many logs which had developed amazing fungus and probably had a lot of invertebrates in were transported out of the wood in order to go to another log pile which would most likely be burnt at some point in the future. An unfortunate event that we heard about was a pile not being moved and it being set alight and 2 beech martens (*Martes foina*) were seen running out of it. I remember being a child and seeing adverts about not lighting your bonfires until you had checked for hedgehogs and so it is a commonly know practise now. However, apparently this isn't a know practise in France and it just helped to show the cultural differences between us even though we are so close in proximity.

As well as the work we got to see quite a lot of places around La Brenne and do a bit of a cultural tour. It was amazing to see the towns and villages, with all the streets lined with lime trees manipulated and pruned into various shapes.



Many buildings had trees and plants draped all over them and growing around them as decoration.



The buildings themselves were fascinating; many of the old doors were made up of many layers of planks of wood and some with carefully etched decorations.



Some of the metal work is amazing, with decorations which really are not necessary but add a nice overall look, the most fascinating were the windvanes that were so intricate but hardly able to be seen from the ground.



In terms of the churches they seem to be quite basic particularly on the overall outside, but with highly decorated fronts, particularly doorways and stained glass windows definitely seem to be an important component, and also occasionally wall paintings such as those in the church at Paulnay.



We also visited an Ecomuseum which helped to shed some light on the use of the chateau and the land around it in Le Blanc. It was useful to see a bit of the history of the area, as I think this helps to get an understanding of the culture and people which is needed if you want to raise their awareness of the natural world around them.



Alongside the conservation work and cultural experiences we saw many amazing places, including many different birds species, we saw a flock of approximately 2000 cranes (*Grus grus*), settling down for the night, lots of lapwings (*Vanellus vanellus*), mallards (*Anas platyrhynchos*), teals (*Anas crecca*), and so many grey herons (*Ardea cinerea*) and buzzards (*Buteo buteo*) compared to the UK it was unbelievable. Alongside these were little egrets (*Egretta garzetta*), great white egrets (*Egretta alba*) and smaller passerines such as blue tits (*Parus caeruleus*) and great tits (*Parus major*) were never too far away. Some of us also saw Red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) and Roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*) and the exotic species Coypu (*Myocastor coypus*).



We found many signs of life whilst working including nests, praying mantis egg cases, gall wasp galls and many patches dug up by wild boar.



As well as on the job experience we also received a few lessons, we had a few French language lessons where we learnt how to order in a restaurant and ask which bird we had just seen. We also received a slideshow of the history of La Brenne and the butterflies which can be found and why La Brenne is so important for them, in terms of their host plant and interaction with ants (eg. Alcon Blue, *Maculinea alcon*). We also found out about the bird life and the affect of exotic species such as the Coypu on the Whiskered turn (*Chlidonias hybridus*) as they eat all the vegetation and disrupt the balance of the delicate lake ecosystems.

As well as the conservation aspects we also learnt a lot more in terms of identifying species, these were particularly birds, moths and plants. We did quite a bit of bird watching and in the last few days moth traps were set up in the Cherine nature reserve where we got to practise our identification skills if we wanted and it was quite a sense of achievement to successfully identify 5 species which weren't identifiable immediately.



Overall I learnt a massive amount in such a short time both in terms of conservation and cultural differences as well as personal communication. I feel that I have made many new friends during the trip and that everything I've learnt both from France and the people in the group will stay with me throughout my life and help to improve it. I also discovered new ways of thinking and learning to think from other people's perspective, which I feel will be extremely valuable in the future. I have also learnt a lot more French language than I thought I would, and I think one of my fondest memories and biggest achievements of the trip was walking into the flower shop opposite the gîte to buy a single red rose for my partner on valentine's day, which I asked for in French and had a proper conversation about the colour and understood how much and to wait a moment for them to prepare it for me.

I wish to return one day to see how our work has helped and to see the progression of the conservation efforts that we helped to implement and to visit the friends we have made.

