

Field Report by Peter George -

Event: EUCAN two week conservation project in the La Brenne, France, sponsored within European Lifelong Learning initiative

Description:

The project comprised of a group of 15 people (13 from Britain and 2 from Hungary) with varying backgrounds, coming together and spending 2 weeks staying in the town of La Meziere en Brenne and undertaking a combination of tasks including preparation of locations for the conservation of wildlife within existing nature reserves with associated general and specific nature and wildlife learning opportunity, field visits to gain knowledge of the locality and experiencing local cultural aspects including language, history, food, employment, population and lifestyle. The main fortnight was preceded by a weekend preparation weekend at the Kingcome centre in Dorset.

Content covered:

1) Experiencing and learning French language

This was achieved by encouragement on the preparation weekend to self learning and through 2 lessons of applied French language, reinforced by encouragement and opportunity to mix with local French people in particular using local trading facilities (shops, market etc) and by exposure to French language in varying contexts such as visits to museums and places of interest, interpreting literature and information.

2) Experiencing and learning about local fish based economy, its nature, history commercial application and environmental aspects.

This was achieved through a group visit to a museum in the area that gave historical and technical information. Some individuals including myself with particular interest were able to access another museum/resource centre specific to the industry. This was reinforced by an opportunity to observe fish harvesting in the local manner and access to workers engaged in the industry.

3) Introduction to wildlife provision of the area using the expertise within the group. A large number of the group included ornithology and entomology enthusiasts and graduates of a wide experience of scientific study, all eager and willing to discuss and share their expertise and facilities of the nature reserve including literature, educational exhibitions and staff expertise (in particular two presentations about the nature reserve and butterflies).

4) Conservation issues within La Brenne. This was a continuing theme including looking at the viability of the aims, objectives and projects being undertaken and the relationship between the nature reserve and the local population (e.g. establishing and maintaining habitats whilst continuing

commercial activity is undertaken) This was achieved through the general educating about the area, listening to local people and having some opportunity to question and discuss issues with stakeholders.

- 5) Practical conservation work. This took the form of practical work on the two day preparation weekend being introduced to habitat clearance techniques with training for a limited number in the use of machinery and some 9 days of the fortnight spent by the entire group undertaking manual work to clear new, and maintain existing wildlife habitats on reserves within the park with particular emphasis on the habitat of the Alcon blue butterfly.
- 6) General conservation education. This was mainly achieved by education from group leaders and nature reserve staff in relation to the practical work we were undertaking, learning the nature of the habitat being prepared, its significance for the targeted wildlife and its relationship to other species, their interests and influence.
- 7) Cultural learning and experience. This was achieved by exposure to the French language, visits to local towns, stopping to experience particular places of interest and a variety of interactions with local people including two sessions of habitat conservation working alongside a group of local people with learning disability.
- 8) Learning and experience in land management (including a limited education on land usage and use of equipment by working alongside others e.g. chainsaw users and through practical use of equipment e.g. bow saws, loppers and mechanical brushcutters.
- 9) Personal interest: For me this become an awareness of the historical water based economy, its industrial facilities, in particular a preponderance of watermill provision and history within the area.

The Organisation and Administration behind the Project–

Project History

The concept of the current project derived from the work of Nigel Spring. Nigel is a wildlife enthusiast. He has a degree in zoology and post graduate certificate in education. He taught science and environmental studies for 14 years before he and his wife founded the Kingcombe Centre in 1988.. The Kingcombe Centre is an environmental study centre in the heart of West Dorset on the banks of the river Hooke, now owned and run by a charitable trust. (ref website: <http://www.kingcombe-centre.demon.co.uk/main.htm>) . The centre has access to the Dorset Wildlife Trust Kingcome Meadows reserve which is on its doorstep. <http://www.kingcombecentre.org.uk/>

Nigel has had involvement in many ventures. He was originally involved in a private endeavour to set up trips for naturalists [ref: <http://www.naturalhistorytravel.co.uk/html/007leaders.html>] This was not that successful but being a butterfly enthusiast in 2006 Nigel built on his previous experiences and was instrumental in the EUCAN (European Conservation Action Network) initiative between The Kingcombe Trust in association with the Dorset Branch of Butterfly Conservation and several partners in Europe to provide two week conservation placements in Poland, Hungary, France and the Czech Republic. 100% Funding was acquired from the Leonardo da Vinci section of the European Union's Lifelong Learning Programme. Nigel, supported by Kathy Henderson has now led a number of conservation work, study and research groups within the project.

The Dorset Branch of Butterfly Conservation is part of the group of Butterfly Conservation (UK) [ref: <http://www.bc-eig.org.uk/index.htm>] that was formed in November 2006 to co-ordinate activities of Butterfly Conservation members in Europe. Butterfly Conservation, is part of a now international network formed within the wider European interest group.

The Leonardo Project

Leonardo is part of the European Commission's Life Long Learning Programme. It is a funding programme that supports education and training across Europe including the development of skills and training. Funding placements for workers staff and trainees runs alongside support for European projects discussing common issues or develop training materials, courses and frameworks.[ref: <http://www.leonardo.org.uk>]

Preparation Weekend



The project run a series of preparation weekends based at the residential study centre owned and managed by the Kingcombe Trust.



The Centre is made up of converted farm buildings giving study, accommodation and administrative facilities set in the picturesque village Toller Porcorum in

Devon, surrounded by over 500 acres of Dorset Wildlife Trust nature reserve and organic farm.



I attended the course of the weekend 9-11th February 2009. Arriving on Friday evening, I was to meet more than 20 individuals who

were destined to make up the various groups of the project. The Friday evening was devoted to introductions amongst participants, an overview and expectations given of the project, supplemented by a presentation by Richard Belding, a participant of one of the previous year's groups that undertook a butterfly survey in Hungary.

The next two days were filled with a mixed and intensive programme with some taking a walk around the reserve with Neil Croton of the Dorset Wildlife



Trust, explaining their conservation efforts whilst I was one of a number on a brushcutter training course. Later that day, practical work was undertaken at the nearby Powerstock Common Reserve, clearing banks of an old disused railway cutting to provide butterfly habitat. A hard day's graft was rewarded with a social evening including a 'barn dance'.



Sunday continued the practical work joining members of the Dorset Branch of Butterfly Conservation at Alner's Gorse, a reserve of herb rich neutral grassland, scrub and woodland near Hazelbury Bryan, Dorset. The work in hand is to cut a clearing through woodland to join two areas of butterfly/moth habitat. This was a prime opportunity for me in applying the training from the day before in brushcutter usage.

The weekend was interspaced with a wealth of education on conservation issues and the work ahead. A good social experience was had by all and a lot of new friends and contacts made. The facilities of the Kingcombe Centre were excellent especially the catering with food in abundance including an introduction to some of the local cuisine experienced by previous groups in their trips to foreign lands.

The Trip to La Brenne.



The start of my fortnight was filled with doubts over its feasibility. Living in the milder climate of East Sussex and faced with a 4 hour journey to the wilds of Dorset the snow lying in my back garden caused some anxiety over whether I would make the party. Other than some drifting snow across the A303 on Salisbury Plain, my fears were unfounded and I made it to

the pick up area. Unfortunately, being clever and exploring back lanes in my effort to reach the meeting location I had not allowed for Dorset streams in flood and had a slight anxiety attack when I found myself trapped on a hump back bridge with at least two feet of flowing water both in front and behind me. I had foolishly thought I could get my old Renault Megane through what I thought to be a puddle. Having committed myself I had to keep going forward and it was not until I mounted the bridge I realised the other side was also flooded. I gingerly edged into the flood to the point of water spraying in through the door seal and washing up over my windscreen. On realising it was deeper on this side I rethought my strategy. Against my expectations of ending trapped in the middle of the countryside, with no civilisation in sight, I do not know how, but I managed to back my car up on to the bridge, make a three-point turn on the bridge and get through the water again. In my thankfulness to escape I failed to record the scene for posterity on my camera but made the meeting point just in time.

On meeting up with 12 other members of the group, we set off in our minibus with trailer filled with personal possessions and equipment. The journey to Meziere en Brenne incorporated a 5 hour night crossing on a ferry from Portsmouth to Caen followed by a 6 hour road journey to our destination. With some stops and plenty of food, our driver, Nigel, survived the ordeal despite our concerns for his ability to stay awake. This was to be no test of what we were to come to know of Nigel's stamina, endurance and enthusiasm. The journey on boat and land, in close proximity to each other laid the ground for friendships that would stand the test of a group of people living and working together.

We arrived later the next day at where we were staying for the whole of the fortnight. We had a series of shared bedrooms and common facilities in a hostel style accommodation, owned and run as a municipal resource by the local tourist board of La Meziere en Brenne. The hostel, or gite, was a converted watermill that at one time must have been a major industrial resource of the town now used as the hostel and tourist information office. Meziere itself is a small market town typical of the La Brenne area, very French in all respects, its buildings, people and culture.



The hostel facilities proved to be basic but adequate. Three of us older members of the group shared a 6-bedded dormitory. This was a reasonable bet by our organiser as it placed three people of similar outlook and habits together which meant we were able to accept and tolerate each others little eccentricities and behaviours especially the snoring. Nick would rise unceremoniously

very early each morning, Jon did his share of the snoring and both were too polite to tell me I probably challenged both together in the snoring stakes. We become the brunt of complaint from light sleepers in other rooms but had the satisfaction we did not command a monopoly as often sounds of deep sleep vibrated from the rooms of the younger fraternity. Two members joined us on the Saturday, having driven from their home town in Hungary. Istvan, a chef by training and a tour guide by employment had been introduced to the project through his mother providing domestic service to the earlier groups that visited Hungary. Istvan had come with his brother in law, Lazlo, an electrician.

Domestic arrangements for the next two weeks were going to take a while to gel. Toilet and washing facilities were basic. With access to four toilet and four shower cubicles, there was more than adequate though what the showers lacked in sophistication (flexible showerheads with no brackets) they made up for in power and an endless supply of piping hot water. Squeegee mops were thankfully supplied to make the job of cleaning one's flood easy.

Kitchen facilities were a little lacking, being rammed into the corner of the common area. There was a separate kitchen upstairs but this was left for other guests staying at the gite.



Breakfast most mornings comprised of fresh French bread, croissants and preserves. Kathy our group leader was fastidious in ensuring food was always in abundance and eventually had to be hounded to ease up on mothering us and allow others (sometimes reluctantly) take turns in domestic chores. On the whole though, everyone shared

responsibilities. I was allowed loose in preparing a cooked breakfast and mussels towards one evening meal. Several evening meals were taken at local restaurants but in between we self catered with a wide variety of diet including the Hungarian lads providing their cultural specialities from their homeland. With working groups, we mostly had picnic meal breaks that proved to be gastronomical feasts with the selection of breads, cheeses, meats and fresh salads sourced from the local shops and markets by Kathy and Nigel intent that despite the level of physical energy expended, we would all be going home rather heavier than we came, all except Natalie who never once showed any indication of adding to her slight frame despite her capacity to eat.

Nigel and Kathy had a growing library resource and this was always available with local guides, maps and wildlife reading matter especially field guides. Nigel's teaching background become increasing apparent in his organisation but lost its efficacy on occasion failing in his efforts to tempt some of the younger (and sometimes older) more unruly element to turn in at a reasonable time.

By the end of most working days, the group was generally ready to chill out and retire. Most evening meals took us through to bedtime frequently helped with a sampling of local wines and beers. One downside of the hostel was the absence of a comfortable recreation area with only a canteen style common area with dining tables and hard chairs. This however did not hinder the passing of free time in card playing and talking.

We had brought all our work gear with us. Individuals were responsible for bringing work clothing and foot gear and many had their own protective gloves. Adequate gloves and all other protective gear (hard hats, goggles, ear defenders etc) were provided by the project as were the tools including bow saws, loppers, pitch forks, bill hooks, mechanical brushcutters etc. All this equipment had been brought with us from England and was shared amongst the group except Nigel and Steve being our resident chainsaw experts having their own chainsaws and protective gear. Each morning and evening saw the loading and emptying of the trailer of the equipment which was stored in our common area of the gite for security.

The rest of the content of the fortnight deserves itemising in its own right:



By far the largest task undertaken within the fortnight was in removing scrub and blackthorn that was invading grassland important for the Alcon Blue butterfly at Etang La Touche. Before my introduction to the project, my interest in butterflies was low and my knowledge even less. However with the focus of the project being mostly work associated with

the preparation of habitat for a specific species of butterfly I have since become more knowledgeable on the subject and hence consider it appropriate to introduce some information:

The Alcon Blue Butterfly.



[Left]
Picture ref Muculinea Alcon upper surface from <http://www.pbase.com/glazemaker/image/33454636>
[ref: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lycanidae>]

Maculinea alcon, more commonly known as **Alcon Blue** or **Alcon Large Blue**, is a butterfly of the Lycaenidae family and is found in Europe and Northern Asia. It can be seen flying in mid to late summer. Like some other species of Lycaenidae, its larva (caterpillar) stage depends on support by certain ants: it is therefore known as a myrmecophile. The butterfly lays its eggs onto the Marsh Gentian. In the region of the Alps they are sometimes also found on the related Willow Gentian (*Gentiana asclepiadea*). The caterpillars eat no other plants.

Alcon larvae leave the food plant when they have grown sufficiently (4th instar) and wait on the ground below to be discovered by ants. The larvae emit surface chemicals (allomones) that closely match those of ant larvae, causing the ants to carry the Alcon larvae into their nests and place them in their brood chambers, where they are fed by worker ants and where they devour ant larvae.



[Right]
Marsh Gentian Flower (*Gentiana pneumonanthe*)

When the Alcon larva is fully developed it pupates. Once the adult hatches it must run the gauntlet of escaping. The ants recognise the butterfly to be an intruder, but when they go to attack it with their jaws they can't grab anything substantial as the newly emerged adult butterfly is thickly clothed in loosely attached scales.

Over time, some ant colonies that are parasitized in this manner will slightly change their larva chemicals as a defense, leading to an evolutionary "arms race" between the two species.

Generally, Lycaenidae species which have a myrmecophilous relationship with the ant genus *Myrmica* are locked to primary host specificity. The Alcon Blue is unusual in this regard in that it uses different host species in different locations throughout Europe. It is known to use *Myrmica scabrinodis*, *Myrmica ruginodis*, and *Myrmica rubra* as the primary host within differing European zones.

The *Maculinea alcon* larvae are sought underground by the *Ichneumon eumerus* wasp. On detecting a *M. alcon* larva the wasp enters the nest and sprays a pheromone that causes the ants to attack each other. In the resulting confusion the wasp locates the butterfly larva and injects it with its eggs. On pupation, the wasp eggs hatch and consume the chrysalis from the inside. [ref: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maculinea_alcon]

Some of the work undertaken was preparation of new areas but much was clearing land that had already been prepared by groups in previous years.



Clearing was not restricted specifically to that of the Alcon Blue habitat and some work parties helped with woodland clearance. Nothing goes to waste and trees chopped down were destined for local wood burners.

Being February, the weather was variable and we experienced a full range from snow to bright sunny days. The cold frosty days were good for work of

marshy ground making it firm underfoot although some days it would have been nicer to be tucked up in front of a lovely warm fire fired by the logs we had stacked.

Despite our hard task master, work was not always manual and some days were devoted to taking in the locality, its culture and sights. We visited several local towns and villages and experienced the beauty of the region.



Some individuals almost had fun in their undertakings:



whilst some of the extra curricular activities were born with reserve and reluctance (!!) :



One of the highlights of the whole time was being able to experience a local phenomena of the feathered variety. We were still in time to see the vast flocks of cranes that winter in the Brenne area and on two occasions had the fortune to watch up to two thousand birds coming in for their night roost in the fields of cut crops.



One of the significant issues for France over the years has been workforce migration. Not that long ago La Brenne was highly productive throughout the region until modern trends saw younger people moving to cities and more concentrated industrial areas to find work. This has seen the old ways lost and what was a thriving area of production and self sufficiency become a shadow of its former glory with de-population and shrinking of economy. This is reflected in particular in the demise of the local fish industry. Being miles from the coast, before the days of quick travel, fresh fish was not in ready supply. However this was more than made up with the development of carp farms that has seen thousands of man made lakes develop since the middle ages. The decline in fish farming has seen many lakes fall into disuse and upkeep with only a portion of the original still commercially managed. Many of the lakes have been turned into leisure facilities providing private fishing lakes. Some have become owned or leased by the regional parks and managed as conservation projects. Some of these co-exist as still managed for fish farming.

We had plenty of opportunity to see the vast spread of lakes with bird watching trips as well as visits to a local museum dedicated to the history of the area. The local town of La Meziere has its own small museum dedicated to the fishing industry. Myself and a few others took advantage to see the museum by arrangement with the tourist office. It helped understand many aspects of the area. I found particular interest in how the ponds and lakes are constructed and managed. The lakes are formed by building a damn across a spring or water course flooding an area 50 to 500 yards in diameter or more. The lakes are shallow



most being no more than 2 yards deep.

They are all controlled by an emptying sluice gate behind which is a slightly deeper bowl. To harvest the fish, every two or three year cycle, a lake will be emptied and as the water level falls the fish collect in the deeper bowl behind the sluice gate. A net will be laid in this bowl and as

the fish congregate the net is drawn in. These lakes may be managed in sets of two or three



where one is drained into the other and managed on a rotational basis. As well as for harvesting the fish, leaving a pond or lake dry has purpose to sterilise the ground and manage vegetation growth. The nature reserve has various



arrangements for the conservation use of a number of lakes that form its resources. This varies from ownership or renting and can involve shared usage of a water. One such arrangement was a water used as part of the reserve still used in conjunction with a local enterprise to farm carp. We were fortunate to be present during the harvesting of this lake and able to see in action the partnership between the reserve and local people as well as the techniques in emptying the pond and catching the fish.

As well as the focus on the Alcon Blue butterfly, the crane and the carp farming, we experienced many other aspects of wonderful wildlife presence.

Tony Williams our local host and representative of the nature reserve lived local and with his hospitality we had the chance to observe hawfinches at close quarters at his home.



Being outside most of the day we benefited from different people's expertise in identifying wildlife phenomena. Of specific note was barn owls roosting in the local church tower.



That attracted several after dark sorties, most unsuccessful but bringing reward on one occasion with the sighting of a beautiful owl sitting on top of the church spire lit by floodlight and seen flying around attracted by the bat population. Sadly my photography prowess failed to record the bird but did capture the enthusiasm of the stalkers on what was a night temperature well below zero.

In addition, a moth trap set by Nigel Spring and Tony Williams brought the wonder of the moth world to us



Although not a photographer, I was fortunate enough to have invested in an all singing and dancing little camera prior to my trip that allowed my to record various topics of interest as we went about our work and explorations and I now hold a good archive of memories -

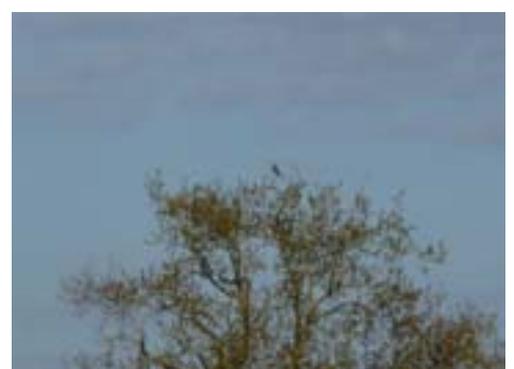


Above all, what I will never forget are the people who made the experience worthwhile:

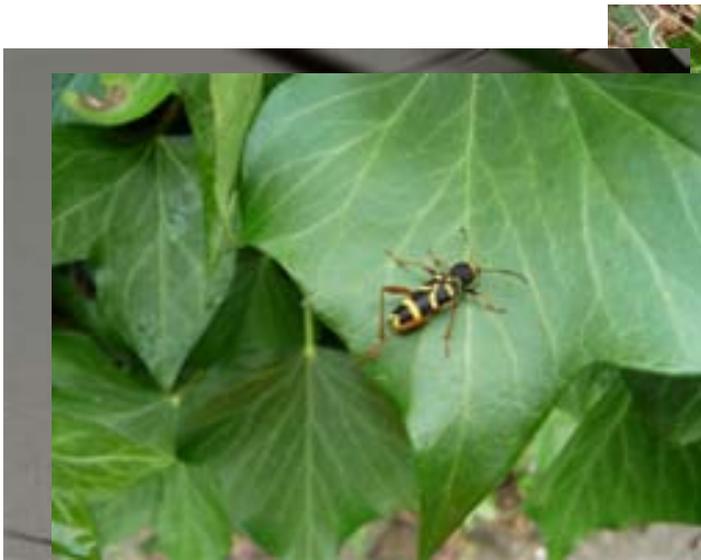


THE RETURN

I have an interest in France as a country and I had the good fortune to be in a position to follow up my Eucan experience with a sequel and to spend a further long weekend over Easter in La Brenne taking with me family members who all share an interest in nature.



Tony Williams was good enough to lend some of his time yet again to offer the benefit of his local knowledge and expertise in a visit to the Cherine reserve. We were lucky to spot turtles that had not been active earlier in February as well as hoards of cattle egrets and an elusive cuckoo that was just one of five we counted all calling at once. On top of that we saw some wonderful butterflies and lizard amongst a wealth of wildlife.



I have only touched on some of the content of what was indeed an unforgettable

experience. I have not covered my interest in the waterwheels and local industry associated with them nor have I gone into the interests I have developed as a consequence. To summarise where I am now, four months on, I conclude by offering some of the photography I have since indulged in:







Peter George – Hastings – June 2009