

European Conservation Action Network Visit to La Brenne, Central France

Having always been in awe of the natural world's magnificence and beauty, last year I decided to take a more active role to help to look after and learn more about it. I found a listing in a local magazine for the Lancashire, Manchester and North Merseyside Wildlife Trust offering practical conservation days. So I booked myself on to it, and after just five minutes into the practical day I knew that I loved the work involved and have been hooked ever since! The Wildlife Trust (WLT) hold practical conservation days every month which I have regularly attended since that first day of feeling inspired. The WLT also organise frequent environmental and wildlife workshops which has helped to further my knowledge and fuelled my desire to endeavour to understand more.

This desire to understand more led me to a conservation visit to France in February of this year that was organised by a passionate and enthusiastic soul named Nigel Spring and his equally zealous partner, Kathy Henderson. They established the European Conservation Action Network (EuCAN) in 2007 via their charity the Kingcombe Trust in Dorset which is dedicated to conservation and environmental education. The primary aim of EuCAN is to attract more people into volunteering for wildlife conservation in the UK and to develop partnerships for conservation in Europe. EuCAN now has partners in France, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland, and has enabled volunteers like myself to visit such countries to undertake practical and surveying work there. The trip was fully funded by the Leonardo da Vinci sector of the European Union's Lifelong Learning Programme.

The main objective of this visit was to develop and maintain good habitats for the butterflies of La Brenne in central France. The project worked in association with the Dorset Branch of Butterfly Conservation.

The Trip

The trip started on Friday 6th February in my home town of Wigan having been collected by the ever cheerful Steve Langhorne, a fellow volunteer on the trip, to begin our journey to Dorset from where we were meeting the other volunteers bound for the continent for two weeks of outdoor work. The journey was full of interesting conversation and excitement of what the coming two weeks had in store for us. We saw some strange sculptures along the way, about a dozen buzzards and snow...lots of snow!

Having arrived in Dorset we were greeted by a very pleasant lady at Folke Manor Farm bed and breakfast who kindly gave us tea and cakes whilst we got acquainted with volunteers Celia, Katie and Matt and waited for Nigel and Kathy. They arrived slightly later than scheduled due to the amount of snow on the road. They were shortly followed by other fellow conservation volunteers Nick, Jon and Peter.

Having loaded all our stuff into the trailer, next stop was for Portsmouth to meet other members of the team Natalie, Mary-Anne and Alan and on to the ferry destined for Caén.

After some initial perplexity involving the location of the 'hidden beds' in the space saving cabin, a short but decent sleep was had after a couple of vin rouges in the bar.

After breakfast on the ferry, sleepy eyes were greeted with yet more snow on the roads of Caén causing me to wonder if in fact we had left Britain at all! After a few hours of driving we stopped in the quaint village of Le Grand Luce where any doubt I had that we were still in Britain diminished at once - beautifully pollarded trees, people walking around with baguettes and smiling faces speaking Français - yes, we were definitely in France. We continued our drive southwards to meet Nick and Julie Baldwin (friends of Nigel and Kathy) at their farmhouse in St. Georges le Couée who are undertaking a challenging project to renovate their home. Their plan for the old farmhouse and land excited me and I was full of admiration of their efforts. I was impressed by a wonderful recycling idea that Julie had for insulating one of the rooms - using old glass bottles under the floorboards - genius!

Having been warmed up (which was very much needed) with some delicious home made soup we left the inspiring farmhouse and reached the gite, our abode for the following two weeks, in Mézières-en-Brenne by late afternoon. The two remaining volunteers Isfan and Laci (aka Lazlò) arrived shortly after, having driven an incredible distance coming all the way from Hungary. Now that's conservation dedication for you! We then met Tony Williams, who works for Bird Conservation Trust, La Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux (LPO) whom we will be working with.

The group were feeling rather tired after the travelling and little sleep, but our lethargic spirits were enlivened at the wonderfully homely restaurant, le Boeuf Couronné where I earnestly proclaimed that I had eaten the best dessert of my life.

The following day, we collected Tony from his home who directed us to a huge maize field where we could see cranes. As their Latin name suggests, they make a wonderful *gru gru* sound. It was the first time I had seen cranes and I was impressed by their majestic flight as some flew above us, migrating up from Africa for the spring. We also spotted a big rodent. With my failing eyesight and out of focus binoculars I could only make it out in the distance as a mass of waddling black across the grass verge by the roadside but I was reliably informed by others that it was indeed a coypu.

Another wildlife first for me was the sighting of a badger. Unfortunately it was dead! We then visited La Maison de la Nature where Tony explained some of the environmental issues and history of the area.

La Brenne is one of France's forty four Parc Naturels Régionaux (the British equivalent would be National Park). The area is comprised of over 2,000 lakes making the area an important site for many species of birds as well as amphibians and insects including rare butterflies. The lakes were created in the Middle Ages for fish farming and this still remains today an important cultural aspect of La Brenne. Indeed it is what helps to fuel the economy of the area. However in the past this has come at the price of some important ecological features of the area. For example, the reed beds used to be burned in order to create more space in the lakes for fishing. As reed beds are an important habitat for wildlife, including the elusive bittern, this had a detrimental effect upon the eco-system. Also, due to the over-use of herbicides water lilies can only now grow in 50 of the lakes, which is rather shocking considering that there are over 2,000 lakes in La Brenne.

Another environmental concern in La Brenne is the cultural passion for shooting. The problem is

that the hunters appear to have little consideration of what species they shoot. Hence the problem is that they may shoot an endangered bird, therefore hindering its already precarious chance of survival.

After the informative talk, we headed back to the gite for food and then to a bird hide at La Chérine where we spotted many birds including great crested grebes, cormorants, teal and heron. Later we went to La Maison du Parc at Rosnay which is a wonderful little place housing a shop selling quirky locally made goods, a bar, various educational displays about birds and an exhibition room displaying some very impressive sculptures by local artists. A very pleasant and fun time was had there and the day was rounded off at a splendid restaurant by a big lake at Gabrière.

Monday morning arrived, and it was our first day of work. Unfortunately I had been quite ill during the night, so was not well enough to join the group, so I had a rather uneventful day alone in the gite to recover. I chanced my arm at some French with the lady that came to clean the gite but discovered largely that I really need to practice more as I was very much not understood! Regardless of the unintelligible words spoken I felt it was a nice exchange; the lady had a warm nature, and seemed to welcome that I did at least attempt to speak her language.

Having tried to learn French, I attempted some Hungarian in order to converse with Lazlö. I soon discovered that it is a rather challenging language and it seems for now that I can grasp only a simple 'Seeo' (hello). Still every success has small beginnings, I tell myself!

The group arrived back looking somewhat weary, very wet and cold. However they tell me that despite the bad weather, they enjoyed the day and it sounds like that they achieved a lot. Their day consisted of clearing scrubland, and they informed me that I missed out on a delicious vegetable soup that had been made by Nigel and Kathy and heated up on the fire.

We all had some tasty vegetable pasta made by Kathy, Celia and Steve, and I spent the evening playing cards with Istfan, Matt, Natalie and Katie. I had an early night and was looking forward to a day of conservation and socialising.

We were greeted in the morning with sunshine and a traditional Hungarian breakfast called Leczo, which was delicious. We worked in an area called La Tranche, where the group had worked the previous day. We continued to clear some of the scrubland to create a glade, which is a good breeding habitat for butterflies. The group then divided into smaller groups to burn piles of blackthorn that had been cut on previous visits to the area. Peter, Jon, Istfan, Lazlö and I tried desperately to get a fire going. After several comedic attempts our determined efforts proved not to be in vain as we eventually succeeded. Another group also had a rather comedic yet necessary task of burning some blackthorn that was soaking in a small pond. And amazingly, they achieved success too.

In the evening we enjoyed supper at the gite and had fun playing cards again.

Wednesday 11th February

Today we went to La Chérine Reserve to move a log pile that had been created from a previous visit. Many of the homes in the area have wood burning fires, so we were helping to transport

the logs for such use. Whilst others helped, Matt and I could not help but find ourselves immersed in the awesome brilliance of the fungi and entomological world. We found some piles of wood teeming with life. All sorts of moss, fungi, insects and spiders were abundant and I was mesmerised observing a world within a world. Who needs fiction when you have the fascination of this wonderful world. After finally managing to tear myself away from the microcosmic world, I ambled around the woodland for a little while to soak up the beauty of the trees and the stunning silence which surrounded me. The only thing that interrupted the silence was the mellifluous tweeting of birds. It was pure bliss.

For lunch we picnicked in a sheltered area of an old barn, which came fully equipped with comfy seating in the form of bails of hay. We then had a short wander around the vicinity and Kathy pointed out some botanical features of the area which was very interesting. In the afternoon we started to clear some scrub in a local area called Mare des Éssarts (it is finally setting into my brain that French is not written in a phonetic style, so 'des' is not pronounced in an Only Fools and Horses Delboy fashion. I am slowly learning, much to the amusement of others!). Today we were working with some people from Le Foyer, an organisation which helps people with learning disabilities. The group seemed to enjoy themselves and they were very enthusiastic to help out. We were also joined by a journalist who wrote an article about the work we were doing there. The more exposure we get, the better equipped we are to inspire locals to have a greater respect for conserving the diverse wildlife in La Brenne.

In the evening Tony's charming wife Michelle delivered us an enjoyable French lesson at the gite. After our linguistic attempts, we dined at the homely Petit Parc at Vendoevers after some barmy surreal comedy conversation en route.

Thursday 12th February

Today we were treated to a day off work to soak up the culture of La Brenne. We started the day by being benevolently invited to Tony and Michelle's home in Rosnay for breakfast and to observe the hawfinches that regularly stop by for nibbles on their bird table. After croissants and coffee we visited a 12th Century church in Paulnay and then over to La Maison de la Nature to see an interesting exhibition there about birds. There are some interactive displays whereby one can hear the songs of various birds, one of which includes the bittern, which I discovered through the display has an unmistakable and unique booming sound.

After La Maison de la Nature we had lunch by a beautiful river and a very grand chateau. Some of us idled our time by skimming stones and as Peter came to see what we were doing he ended up losing his footing and landed on his derriere! Fortunately he was fine and caused us much amusement, particularly with his perfectly rounded muddy patch that was now indelibly on his backside for the rest of the day. After being sufficiently chilled on yet another cold day we were ready for a warm up with some coffee so we headed to a café in the nearby town of Le Blanc, before going to see some interesting exhibits in the eco museum.

The wonderful day was rounded off supremely with an incredible display of cranes occupying the delicately coloured skyline of the setting sun.

Friday 13th February

Today we were working on the grassland at Mare des Éssarts again clearing yet more blackthorn and cutting any regrowth using brushcutters, bowsaws and loppers. I contemplated about all the clearing of scrub that we had been doing here, and of my conservation work back home. It seems harsh to get rid of so much, and I question the validity of what conservationism is trying to achieve. I am led to contemplate this after becoming absorbed in the world of insects (a familiar thing to find myself absorbed in). I see that there are so many insects and spiders using the very habitat that we are clearing, and wonder about other animals that may find this type of vegetation an ideal home. One species gain is another's loss, I thought to myself. However, I think about the incredible diversity that exists here on earth and quickly realise and understand that it is such diversity that conservationism is trying to protect. If the blackthorn were to continue to develop to its natural state, it would dominate and some species of butterfly could easily be lost, as their survival is dependent upon certain plants for breeding which will now be able to flourish. The clearing of land has also opened up some small ponds which will be a great feeding place for butterflies and other insects such as dragonflies. Without the clearing of the scrub such biodiversity would not happen. And of course not all of the blackthorn is completely destroyed. Much of it is indeed left as a hedge for certain species that will find a welcome home there. So through the work we are doing, the diversity of plants and animals in the area is increased, enabling a more interesting and healthy ecosystem to exist.

It was another cold day today, and we took shelter inside La Maison de Nature for lunch and Tony gave us a slide show about the area and some of the rare butterflies that we are hoping to attract more of in La Brenne through our conservation efforts.

We continued our work at Mare des Éssarts and then headed back to the gite where we met Jo and Mark, a couple of volunteers from a previous EuCAN visit. I had a good chat with them and we all headed to the Gabrière Restaurant for a delicious dinner.

Saturday 14th February

Today we had a day off for doing whatever we pleased. Peter, Jon, Celia and Nick had predilection for solitude, ambling around Mézières en Brenne and surrounding areas and others hired out bicycles. I opted for the latter, and after a slight glitch due to Katie's bike chain snapping, we soon found ourselves enjoying the beautiful French countryside, with deserted rural lanes. We cycled around some lakes and passed many lovely little farmhouses. Steve, Mark and Jo later separated from the rest of us and headed for the Maison de Nature to meet up with Nigel and Kathy for lunch. The rest of us headed for the dulcet sounding place name of Bellebouche which I expect would be buzzing with activity during the high season but a camping resort that we found there was very much deserted in the cold weather. We continued to Vendoevres where we enjoyed a beer and then headed back to Mézières en Brenne, inadvertently taking the muddiest route possible! We saw two red deer along the way.

In the evening we enjoyed dinner and socialised in the gite.

Sunday 15th February

Today began as usual with a yummy breakfast followed by a short drive in the mini bus to a quaint and quintessential French small town named La Roche-sur-Posay. We ambled around the narrow winding roads to admire the architecture and mooched around in shops, amusing

ourselves with some odd things we found therein. We had a coffee served by the typical friendliness that seems to exist amongst the French. There was a strange game being televised in the café which consisted of people skiing in an ice rink whilst shooting at the same time. Very peculiar!

We then hopped back onto the mini bus and landed in one of the most pretty, picturesque places I have ever seen called Angles-sur-L'Anglin. Situated by a big river, it has beautiful buildings and huge ruins upon the precipice of eroding cliff tops. We gently walked around the place, in awe of the beauty we saw everywhere we looked. I felt that I could have spent several days simply wandering around there. We had a very relaxed lunch in a lovely little restaurant after which we continued to amble around the town and discovered some outstanding Harley Davidson's parked up, one of which Istfan pretended was his! We enjoyed a beer in the local bar before visiting a brilliant museum documenting some rock sculptures that were found dating back to the Middle Ages.

We all enjoyed dinner at the gite after a grand day out.

Monday 16th February

Today was spent clearing blackthorn from the grassland in an area called La Touche. We got a lot of work done today and had a couple of fires going to burn away the thorny scrub.

On our return back to the gite, Nick was full of praise and admiration for some wood piles which he has taken a real penchant for whilst on this trip! Wood piles are very much a part of the landscape here and some of them, I must agree are very neatly stacked!

I offered to cook for the group tonight, and soon realised that cooking a curry for 15 people is not as easy as it is for one, which is what I am more accustomed to. I now have a new found respect for cookery on this scale, as getting the quantity of ingredients correct is not an easy feat!

Tuesday 17th February

Today we had a big job on our hands! We were clearing an area that had been completely taken over by blackthorn. Fortunately we had more volunteers with us today as the people from Le Foyer came to join us again. And as the saying goes, "many hands make light work", this proved to be the case as we quickly opened up the area and had a couple of fires blazing to burn away the scrub.

We had a free afternoon, and some people went to Le Blanc. Kathy, Steve, Natalie and I chose to go horse riding through the countryside instead. I understand why Kathy loves this so much. Travelling on horseback is wonderfully relaxing and a great way to admire the passing landscape. After an excited horse managed to alarm us by cantering off and causing Kathy a minor fall, Steve was chatting away in French to our guide and helping to translate some of the features that we were passing along the way. Feeling totally relaxed and rejuvenated we went back to the gite for a French lesson with Michelle and then dined at a restaurant called Linge which served up some good grub.

Wednesday 18th February

Today was spent working at the same place as yesterday with the added help of Le Foyer once again. We made great progress and completed the task there. Another journalist came to see us to write an article in La Nouvelle République, the local newspaper.

In the evening some moth traps were set out at La Maison de la Nature to see what species could be found, and we dined and wine in the gite.

Thursday 19th February

In the morning, Peter treated us all to a tasty cooked breakfast in the gite and then we went to look at some of the moths that had been attracted to the trap. I also discovered to my amusement that the trap was set up precariously close to the lake which in the dark of the previous night I had done well not to fall into!

We worked back at La Touche again to clear blackthorn regrowth. We enjoyed a usual picnic lunch but this time in the sunshine. Hurray! We also created a track by cutting back encroaching foliage through a woodland which will enable easier access for those who use it.

Later in the afternoon after work, the group had been kindly invited to have drinks and snacks with the staff at La Maison de la Nature. We spoke with the director there, Jacques Trotignon and he showed us a slide show of La Brenne. We had a pleasant time there and later enjoyed a delicious meal made by Istfan and Lazlò back at the gite.

Friday 20th February

After breakfast today we went to see one of the lakes being fished. The lakes in La Brenne are fished through a system of drainage. The water is emptied via a sluice and the fish are collected by using a large net which is pulled out by hand. Most of the fish caught in these lakes is carp, which is a huge factor in driving the economy here by local sales and export.

Today was our last day of work in La Brenne and we finished off some work at Mare des Éssarts before going to pack our belongings and cleaning the gite. We had a little spare time and so Matt, Steve and I found a perfect little sunny spot in the picturesque village square to have a fun game of bowls, followed by another exquisite meal at Le Boeuf Courenné. We said our goodbyes to Lazlò who would be rising in the early morning tomorrow to make the long journey back to Hungary (Istfan was continuing his journey westward with us for his first visit to England).

Saturday 21st February

The day had come to depart La Brenne and we made our way to Caén in the mini bus, as I admired the architecture and foggy landscape.

We were aboard the ferry at 4 o'clock for a six hour journey back to Portsmouth where we enjoyed eating, drinking and general larking about.

After the long journey back, sleepy heads filled the mini bus, but soon re-awakened for a short time when we arrived back at Folke Manor Farm where we were in awe of the very starry night sky above us.

I have had a great time on this trip. It has developed my understanding of conservation issues and further inspired me to acquire more knowledge about the fascinating natural world. It has been a fun and soulful experience to live and work with like minded people and I would recommend anyone who likes the outdoors, nature and learning about cultural issues to do a EuCAN placement too. If that sounds like you, then you can obtain further information from www.kingcombcentre.org.uk or by calling Nigel on 01963 23559 or e-mailing: nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk.

Tracy Cumberbatch, 2009