

# *LA BRENNE*

*9th - 24th October 2009*



*In Memory of Black Thorn  
By Amy Curtis*

# 1. Expectations

Back in March a very good friend of mine told me about a fabulous opportunity to volunteer and get involved with some conservation work in Europe, in the past I had dabbled in conservation volunteering with the BTCV, but still eager to get involved and learn more about genuine practical conservation work, I signed up!

Equipped with bags of energy and a desire to spend some time outside learning about protecting wildlife and habitats I was very pleased to be accepted onto the programme.

It all started at the preparation weekend in June at the Kingcombe Centre, Dorset. The combination of beautiful rolling countryside, the brilliant sunshine, the butterfly surveys, and the moth trapping had quite a memorable impact on me.

I hadn't anticipated learning so much and had never really thought too much about moths before, but when the traps were opened on the first morning they revealed such a large variety including the fabulous elephant hawk moth it was quite a sight for a first timer! Nor was I expecting to be so captivated by the chase of the butterfly survey, I 'think' I learnt to identify painted ladies, meadow browns, large whites, common blues and skippers. The generous hospitality, warm welcome and superb home baked cakes offered to us when we arrived and throughout our stay were also very much enjoyed and appreciated!



The Kingcombe Centre, taking down the yurt – June 2009

Needless to say this fabulous weekend filled me with enthusiasm and excitement for the trip ahead. Four long months later and the journey continued en Francais, and what a journey it was...

# 2. The Team

Having met a few other members of the group at the preparation weekend I was looking forward to meeting the rest of the team. Luckily we all got along very well and became a fully functional little family for the fortnight! There were ups and downs along the way and our endurance was tested by a lack of sleep, physical fatigue, long stretches of mini bus travel, a very choppy ferry crossing, bunk-beds and various coughs and colds (and hangovers), but despite all of this we got along fabulously.

Of course, the friendships were also helped along by a very large helping of local French wine, excellent food and culture, croissants, more croissants, cheese, more cheese, the challenge of a game of pool at the local pub, the soothing autumn sun and the stunning beauty of La Brenne.

Thanks also to the carefully thought out and practical planning and patience offered by Nigel and Kathy the organisers who kept us fed, watered, informed and occupied at all times, and who also provided us with a memorable soundtrack to the trip including progressive eighties rock and Polish punk - unforgettable!



Picnic at Beaulieu Les Loches

**The Team as featured in this photo from left to right are:**

Anne 'The Butterfly Enthusiast', Gary 'No stretch of Black Thorn is too big', Roger 'The Pool Hustler', Tom 'The Fire Starter', Nic 'The not so novice Brush-Cutter anymore', Nigel 'The Chainsaw Operator', Penny 'The Expert Taxonomist', Sarah 'The good pair of Loppers spotter', Kathy 'Knows Best', Val 'The Cook', Julian 'The now digital Photographer', Trevor 'The Joker', and me (behind the camera) 'The Forker'.

### *3. Our Hosts*

**Tony Williams and La Maison de la Nature**



*Tony at La Touche during the fishing of the lake*

We were introduced to Tony very early on and spent the morning of our second day looking around the centre where he is based. It was here that Tom discovered the remains of a smooth snake, a very rare thing in the area we are told, well done Tom!

We spent a lot of time at the centre during our stay. Tony kindly gave a detailed introduction to the ecology of the area and the work they are doing to monitor the many species of birds, butterflies and dragonflies that visit, as well as the large population of turtles. He also discussed the differences in attitudes towards conservation between local residents and other authorities and how this affects the way the land is managed.

The centre was also host to the moth trap that Nigel set up on various occasions to trap and record any passing night visitors.

At the end of our trip the team at the centre kindly thanked us all for our hard work and treated us to an evening of wine and nibbles where we all shared the highlights of our trip.



*One very chilly morning at the moth trap*

### **Joel, Julian and Eric**



We first met Joel at La Touche, it was also my first introduction to Black Thorn. We worked with Joel on various sites including an epic Black Thorn clearance at Etang Purais to preserve the meadow.



We met Julian during week two at Cherine for more scrub bashing and fire starting...along with Joel and Tony he was also very involved in fishing the lake at La Touche on our second to last day.



Eric introduced us to an area of woodland at Cherine that has attracted a lot of attention due to the growing numbers of dragonfly that have been recorded over the past 5-10 years. A welcome break from Black Thorn!

### **La Brenne**

A remarkably beautiful landscape and peaceful place...



*La Touche*



*The Git*



*Tony's butterfly transect field*



*Etangs Purais*

### **Hotel au Boeuf Couronee**

Thanks to Bernard for cooking up many a delicious feast for us helping to soothe away the sting of our Black Thorn and bramble scratches...



## Le Belem

Thanks to Bar Belem for pool and late night opening on a Friday, the perfect remedy to a hard week at work in the fields!



## 4. The Work

### Wetland

Our first 2 days of work had us scrub bashing along the banks of a lake at La Touche. This was my first real encounter with the Black Stuff and a lesson in how to use a bow saw without destroying the blade, an art I only really achieved by the end of week 2!



*Nic - day 1 with the brush-cutter...*



*Now we can see the lake again!*

It was here that we were introduced to the schedule of things to come...



*Biscuit Break at 11, an after lunch snooze in the sun & a very excited doggy!*

On day two Sarah spotted a Coypu (or was it a Muskrat?) all close up and personal and hiding by the bank of the lake, probably trying to avoid the chainsaws, loppers and falling elms. The locals and professionals alike curse the Coypu for it's pest like qualities, eating all the lily pads, disturbing vegetation and harming native species...However, this pesky rodent became a regular source of entertainment to us during our stay and I think it fair to say that (despite all the bad stuff) many of us developed a particular fondness for their buck teeth and undeniable cuteness!

In addition to the gorgeous sunshine and satisfying work at La Touche in these first few days, we were also accompanied by many birds including herons, swans, coots, ducks and egrets.

We returned to the lake again on our second to last day (much to the excitement of the very friendly doggy) to observe the fishing of the lake. Not only did it mean that we got to start work later than usual (by this stage my body was almost broken, the desk job doesn't prepare you for this kind of daily physical toil), but we also got to experience how the lakes are managed and sustained, the wriggling fish and frantic movement of catching, weighing and storing them created quite a buzz and a little bit of drama for us. It was also a fantastic photo opportunity, one that we all took advantage of!



Tom (the aquatic biologist) gets his hands wet at last...job done!!!

## Woodland

On our third day of work we went back to La Touche but broke off into three different groups. Myself, Nic, Trev, Val and Julian (and Tom and Sara later on) went into the woods and were tasked with cutting down some of the smaller trees to increase the clearing where Snake's Head Fritillaries have been spotted.

A very satisfying day's work was had by all and felling trees with a bow saw felt like quite an achievement! Nic and I discovered that double the arm power was better than one and teamed up to bring them down together one by one, let's just say we had a system and it worked! However, it was a group effort and at the end of the day my fellow crew and I were very proud of our log pile!



*Very satisfying work ...*



*A close up of the impressive log pile!*



*The new clearing*



*A well disguised frog*

## Meadow

On the fourth day of work I was confronted with the biggest cluster of Black Thorn bushes a sight that I never care to see again! The location: Etang Purais – at first Joel teased us by suggesting that we need only clear the re-growth around the edge of the cluster – I thought it too good to be true. Not so lucky, it didn't take long for him to change his mind and before we knew it we were tasked with clearing the whole lot...



*Massive Black Thorn cluster – too big to even fit in the frame!*

In the morning there were 4- myself, Nic, Anne and Kathy, after lunch there were more - Tom and Trev, and Joel popped by to give a helping hand or two. The second day on site and the whole team plus Tony got involved! By Friday afternoon we had beat the beast and cleared the whole cluster, hoorah! Scratched, burnt, battered and fatigued, we returned to the git for a well deserved supper of curry beef prepared by Trev and Gary followed by a wine tasting session prepared by Nigel and a night in the pub, followed the day after by many sore heads - le grande hangover!

### **A Breakdown of the Epic Black Thorn Bash**

#### *Day 1*



*The wild black beast fights back...*



*Starting to get somewhere...*

#### *Day 2*



*Making good progress...*



*Back breaking bashing...*



*Mmm lunch, baked potatoes cooked in the fire, nice idea Kathy!*



*Nearly there.....*



*Done!!!*

Other visitors included...



*Italian Football Shirt Bug*



*Praying Mantis*



*Tree Frog (so cute!)*



*Bug*

**Tony's Butterfly Transect Field - Cherie**

Week two kicked off with more work clearing – you guessed it – the Black Stuff but a little easier going this time, small clusters that were no challenge for the Brushcutters (thanks Nic, Anne and Gary). This is also where I learnt the art of 'forking' and fuelling the fire.

Unfortunately due to a brisk wind the fire almost got out of control and all hands and stomping boots were quickly required to stamp it out. After that we continued to cut the smaller clusters and stow the debris in clearings within the larger bushes to make room for more grass to grow in the meadow.



*The broken fuel cap – Oh Trevor!*



*The transect field*



*Praying Mantis larval case*



*Forking good fun!*

## *5. Frogs, Moths and Fungi*

### **A few of my favourite things**

A very special part of the trip for me was getting the opportunity to spot and observe many different types of wildlife in their natural habitat. Being very new to the conservation game this was a real treat and I was also very delighted to put my new camera to good use and discover the magical wonder of my macro setting!!! Unfortunately the wild boar and stag were too quick and the migrating crane too far away to capture but were an awesome and memorable experience none the less!



*Frog song at La Maison de la Nature*





*Otter poo?*



*Frog in Wolffia Arrhiza at La Maison du Parc*



*Mating Damselflies*



*Green Lizard*



*Beetle*



*Large Ranunculus*



*Merveille Du Jour*



*Pink Barred Sallow*



*Corpu fan*



*Snail amour*



*Fungi found in the woods at Cherine during a break from scrub clearing on our last day at work.*



## *6. Good Times*

It has to be said that without a doubt everyday was good times, waking up to coffee and croissants (thanks Kathy, Val and Sarah), setting off in the bus, deciding if it was a wellies or a boots day, 11 o'clock biscuit break, warming up in the sun, basking after lunch, lunch – you can never have too many picnics, finishing up at 4pm, back on the bus for a beer at the git, laughs and jokes, dinner out, interesting facts, bat walks and detectors (thanks Anne and Penny), pool, Borat (Tom!) and of course the satisfaction of a hard days work in the field! Since I have returned and every time I visit this report to write another bit I smile from ear to ear and remember all the fun we had on our trip to La Brenne!

### **La Randonnee**

Now, this was a truly amazing day, let it be said that the French sure know how to organise a fantastic community event...

At 8 o'clock in the morning of Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> October feeling extremely cold and a little tired and hungry we awaited the official starting call. Little did I know I was about to embark on a 70k bike ride, experience beautiful views, be offered a fabulous spread of food and cider at 10am and endure the most extreme case of saddle sore I have ever known in my life! It was the highlight of the trip (The Randonnee that is, not the saddle sore!).

Everyone made a huge effort to come together and share in the adventure and challenge of it all. The generosity and welcome from the local people who organised water stops, cider stops, food and wine was superb and very much enjoyed by all. The sun shone all day, it was a unique and eventful day, a real slice of country life and Anne even spotted a red squirrel!



*8am starting point - le Hotel de Ville Mezieres en Brenne, awaiting instruction!*



*First pit stop 10am (avec cider)*



*Enjoying the ride*



*Lunch queue*



*Lunch*



*Horse and Cart*



*It's starting to hurt*



*Taking it easy*



*Travelling Ted enjoys the view from the back pack*



*Final pit stop where the group split and the final four carried on to conquer the last 20k!*



*The route*



*The final four return!*

## *7. What next....*

On my return to London I fell quickly back into the turmoil of city life and work commitments but as we break into the New Year I have made a promise to locate some local organisations that can offer me more opportunities to develop skills and knowledge and contribute to preserving the wild spaces in London.

Through a bit of research I have identified a selection of organisations to approach and am in the process of contacting them to try and set up some volunteering sessions for the coming months and I hope to be able to continue building this network and discovering all the hidden habitats that London has to offer.

I hope to stay in touch with members of our team and am always willing to get involved in other projects or opportunities that come up if I can, if anyone reads this and needs an enthusiastic forker for a project then get in touch!

As for the Black Stuff, I am sure our paths will cross again and as the scars fade the thought of picking up a pair of loppers and bow saw and getting stuck right in is starting to appeal again.

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Further information can be obtained from [www.kingcombecentre.org.uk](http://www.kingcombecentre.org.uk) or from Nigel Spring (tel: 0044.1963.23559/mobile: 0044.7981.776767.Email: [nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk) ).