

Blackthorn, Bugs and Boar

European Conservation Action Network (EuCAN) visit to La Brenne,
France
9th – 24th October 2009

Report by Anne Roberts

The run up....

Earlier this year whilst I was taking my regular scroll through some environmental job-search webpages, I stumbled across an advertisement for the EuCAN project, which immediately caught my eye. The project appealed to me for several reasons. First and foremost, I was right in the middle of deciding I needed a change of career direction. I have always been involved in the environmental sector and for the past few years had been working in a policy role, but I'd decided what I really wanted to be doing was a more 'hands-on' job, directly involved with wildlife conservation. So, I was busy trying to build up as much experience as possible through voluntary work and training courses to help me with my job prospects...and a funded opportunity to take part in 2 weeks practical conservation management sounded ideal. I'd also been thinking about what to do for a 'holiday' this year. Contrary to those who might opt for 2 weeks lying by the poolside, my criteria for an ideal break away are to meet interesting people, spend time outdoors doing something active and to absorb the nature and scenery of a new place. I thought a trip with EuCAN would do exactly this.

Attending the preparation weekend in June at the Kingcombe Centre in Dorset was a treat in itself. We were lucky enough to have a fabulous weekend of sunshine...perfect for butterfly spotting! The 2 days of moth identification, exploring local nature reserves, bat detecting and butterfly transects (not to mention the superb food!) really whet my appetite for the La Brenne visit. My husband had also applied for the EuCAN project and got a place on the trip to Western Poland in August 2009. He returned with some wonderful stories and fantastic photos and video footage of the wildlife, so my expectations for the La Brenne trip were high!

The trip itself...

24 hours of travel marked the start of my trip...bus, train, minibus and ferry, joining forces with Nigel and Kathy (the project organisers) and 10 other volunteers along the way. Some I had met already at a preparation weekend at Kingcombe whilst for some this was our first meeting, but after sharing a delicious meal by the harbourside in Portsmouth, an overnight ferry to Caen and a days travel southwest through France in what would affectionately become known as 'The Fun Bus', we were all getting to know each other, discovering common interests and sharing the first of many laughs.



We arrived at our home for the next two weeks...a gite in the small town of Mézières-en-Brenne, at the heart of the Parc Naturel Régional de la Brenne. A 'parc naturel régional' represents a similar designation to a National Park in the UK, and La Brenne, a 160,000ha area consisting of over 1400 man-made fishing lakes (known as 'étangs'), provides important wetland habitat supporting an abundance of wildlife. The lake at La Touche (**pictured left**) is one of the sites where we worked during our visit.

A mosaic of other habitat types including broadleaved woodland, grass meadows and heath add to the ecological diversity of the area. La Brenne is perhaps best known for some of its charismatic bird species such as the Purple Heron (*Ardea purpurea*), Black-necked Grebe (*Podiceps nigricollis*) and Whiskered Tern (*Chlidonias hybrida*), but in addition the area provides habitat for many dragonflies and damselflies, supports France's largest population of the European pond tortoise (*Emys orbicularis*), and boasts 99 recorded species of butterfly (as a comparator, we have 57 species of butterfly recorded in the UK). The whole of La Brenne is also a Natura 2000 site (Natura 2000 refers to a network of sites designated under European Directives for their conservation importance, either as Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) under the Habitats Directive or Special Protection Areas (SPAs) under the Birds Directive).

I didn't have to wait long for my first wildlife experience. No sooner had we deposited our luggage in the gite, it was straight out to visit the nearby La Cherine nature reserve. It was a beautiful sunny day and as we spotted a majestic Red Deer stag (*Cervus elaphus*) from the minibus and Marsh Harriers (*Circus aeruginosus*) soaring overhead, I felt we had truly arrived in La Brenne! The weekend's wildlife adventure continued with exploration of the local area and visits to bird hides at La Maison de la Nature, Ricôt and Faucault, spotting Snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*), Great Egret (*Casmerodius albus*), Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*), Tufted Duck (*Aythya fuligula*), Pochard (*Aythya farina*), Lapwing (*Vanellus vanellus*), Great Crested Grebe (*Podiceps cristatus*) and Little Grebe (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*).

Sighting of Coypu (*Myocaster coypus*), which occurred regularly throughout our fortnight in La Brenne, caused quite a stir and whilst these large aquatic rodents are undoubtedly cute to look at, they are an introduced species regarded as a pest in La Brenne. I spotted my first glimpse of Wild Boar (*Sus scrofa*) from the mini bus as 3 'piglets' scampered across the road, and throughout our stay we observed further signs of these mammals in the form of tracks and runs through the vegetation. Later in the fortnight I would also get my first taste of Wild Boar, cooked in a delicious casserole by Nigel! Hunting is very prevalent within La Brenne and we encountered groups hunting for boar and game birds.



My most memorable moment of the first weekend in La Brenne was our Sunday afternoon visit to the Maison du Parc. Here I was lucky enough to get a close up view of the beautiful Small Emerald Damselfly, *Lestes virens* (pictured left). I find dragonflies and damselflies fascinating, and was delighted to have my first sighting of this particular species, especially as I was able to observe them mating. The male clasps the female around the neck whilst she curls her tail round to collect a sperm parcel from under the males abdomen.

Hovering over the lake at Maison du Park, we also watched dozens of pairs of the Common Darter dragonfly (*Sympetrum striolatum*). The males and females remained attached after mating as the females dipped their ovipositor into the water to lay their eggs.

While La Brenne is beautiful in the daytime, I found the night's wildlife activity just as intriguing and on several evenings I took a walk outside with my bat detector. As expected I found a lot

of feeding activity over the river that runs through Mézières, picking up both *Pipistrellus* and *Myotis* species. There was also a buzz of bat activity around the church where we found Noctule bats (*Nyctalus noctula*), spectacularly lit up catching moths and other insects by the floodlights of the church.



We also set out moth traps on three evenings. Following the preparation weekend at Kingcombe, I had become enthused by these remarkable and beautiful insects, so was delighted to have some more practice at moth identification. We recorded 39 species of moth in La Brenne; some were easy to identify and some proved more challenging! A Large Ranunculus (*Polymixis flavicincta*) is **pictured left**.

The work that we carried out in La Brenne was directed by Tony Williams, an employee of La Ligue pour la protection des Oiseaux (LPO), which plays a similar role to the RSPB in the UK. The Parc Naturel Régional de la Brenne contains many Nature Reserves and other areas of privately owned land. We worked on several different sites during our stay, all of which were managed by the LPO. Working alongside Tony and the other site wardens, we were able to learn about the conservation goals and the habitat management work that was needed at each site.

Our tools for the fortnight were bow saws, loppers, rakes and brushcutters. I could summarise most of our work using two words...‘scrub bashing’ (a familiar term for many conservation volunteers!), but I will elaborate on this as I feel it is important to understand a bit more about why scrub clearance is relevant to conservation work. Left unmanaged, scrub vegetation will encroach on wetland and grassland areas, leading to a gradual change of habitat type and eventually leading to a climax community of woodland. Whilst this succession is natural, in today’s world where greenspaces are limited and increasingly threatened by development, there is often a need to actively manage the countryside to ensure that we maintain a mosaic of different habitats in order to support a diverse range of wildlife. Thus, scrub clearance in wetland, grassland or heathland areas can be an important tool in conserving the distinctive flora and fauna of particular habitats.



At La Touche we cleared trees and scrub such as blackthorn (*Prunus spinosa*), dogwood (*Cornus sanguinea*) and willow (*Salix* sp.) from the edge of the lake (**pictured left**). This would help to maintain suitable lakeside margins for dragonflies.



La Touche also has areas of grassland meadow (**pictured left**), which provide important habitat for many butterfly species, notably the Alcon Blue (*Maculinea alcon*). This butterfly has a fascinating life history intrinsically linked to ant colonies. Adults lay eggs on the Marsh Gentian (*Gentiana pneumonanthe*), and the first larval stages feed on this before dropping to the ground. They are then taken in by ant colonies, which continue to feed the butterfly larvae as if they were ant larvae. The larvae will overwinter within the ant nest before pupating and emerging as an adult the following spring.

EuCAN volunteers on a previous trip had spent time clearing blackthorn from the grassland meadows at La Touche, and on our visit we returned to these sites to cut back blackthorn regrowth. Our October visit to La Brenne was far from the optimal time of year for butterfly spotting, although we did record some sightings in the grassland including Clouded Yellow (*Colias crocea*), Wall Brown (*Lasiommata megera*), Common Blue (*Polyommatus icarus*) and Small Copper (*Lycaena phlaeas*). I would love to return to La Brenne during the summer when the butterfly season is in full swing and try my hand at identifying a few more of its numerous and beautiful butterfly species!



Our lunchtimes each day consisted of plentiful picnics with breads and cheeses bought locally in Mézières each morning. The speciality in the region is the local goats cheese.

Some of the group took the opportunity for a quick 5 minute 'power-nap' in the sun following one of our picnics at La Touche (**pictured above left**), whilst nearby a group of hornets (*Vespa crabro*) were far from sleepy as they gorged on the fallen apples (**pictured below left**).





The second site we worked at was Étang Purais. Here, we were again working to clear blackthorn re-growth to maintain a suitable grassland meadow habitat to support butterflies and other invertebrates. We also expanded the grassland clearings by tackling some areas of more established blackthorn. Clearing a tangled mess of head-high blackthorn is no mean feat, even with a brushcutter, but a mammoth group effort saw this task successfully completed by the end of our first week, so we all went into the weekend feeling very satisfied (if a little scarred and scratched from our thorny encounter!). Work paused briefly to take a snap of the gorgeous but alien-looking Praying Mantis (*Mantis religiosa*) (pictured left).

One of the hot topics of conversation in our first week had been the Cranes (*Grus grus*) and our trip was timed perfectly to spot the first arrival of these winter visitors in La Brenne. The birds migrate from the wetlands of Northern Europe and Asia to over-winter in Africa and Southern Europe. Tony reported the first sighting of 24 cranes on Thursday 15th October, so with our first free morning on Saturday an enthusiastic group of us set out on a Crane-spotting mission! We were lucky enough to find a flock of over 200 Cranes near Rosney. We watched these strangely elegant long legged birds take off from the field and fly in a spectacular elongated 'V' formation over our heads, whilst listening to their distinct trumpeting call. More Cranes would continue to arrive in La Brenne and in our second week we had the wonderful sight of around 300 cranes emerging from the horizon over Étang La Mer Rouge at dusk, as they flew into their overnight roosts in the reedbeds.

On the middle Sunday of our visit, the Randonnée took place. This is an annual Mézières event and hundreds of local people set off on foot, bicycle or horseback to complete a day-long circuit in the countryside. Being a keen cyclist I was really looking forward to this, although I wasn't quite prepared for the lack of brakes and gears and the near-vertical saddle on the bike that I hired! Never the less, I soon got to grips with my bike and thoroughly loved the chance to get out on the road and see more of the picturesque surrounding area.



The route was split up into sections with a core circuit and optional add-on loops in the morning and afternoon for those who were game! Four of our group decided to brave the extra 20km in the afternoon to complete the whole 72km route (pictured left), and I'm so glad that I did because about 10 minutes from the end I caught my first and only glimpse of a Red Squirrel (*Sciurus vulgaris*) although unfortunately I wasn't quick enough with the camera to get a snap shot of this handsome mammal.

During our second week of practical work we worked on the Chérine nature reserve.



A group of us spent 2 days clearing scrub, mainly blackthorn and bramble, from an area surrounding a bird hide (**pictured top left**). Julian, the warden for this site, was very particular in his instructions that the vegetation should be cut in such a way as to create a pleasing view from the bird hide, but at the same time ensuring that some dense vegetation was left to provide nesting habitat. This highlights the point that nature reserves often need to be managed not just for wildlife, but also for people, taking into consideration issues such as health and safety, public amenity and the importance of access to nature.



Using brushcutters (**pictured, middle left**) we cleared an area of blackthorn to open up a small pond area (**pictured bottom left**). However, the pond was completely dry, evidence of the particularly dry summer the region experienced this year.



After the work was completed at this site we moved to the nearby site 'Les Essarts', an area of old stone quarries, where we again cleared blackthorn and bramble and uncovered more dry ponds.



The final site we worked in was a wet woodland area of the Chérine reserve. Under the direction of Eric Male-Malherbe, we removed willow to open up clearings and improve the habitat for dragonflies (**pictured left**). Eric explained that over the last decade, since management work has been carried out at this site, species of dragonfly regularly seen have increased from less than 10 species to around 20 species. The rare Yellow-spotted Whiteface (*Leucorrhinia pectoralis*) was last recorded here in 1991 but the hope is that with appropriate management the species may return to the area. Over the

last 20 years, 61 species of dragonfly and damselfly have been recorded in La Brenne, and with its diversity of aquatic habitats, including open water, marsh, ponds, ditches and wet woodland, it is one of France's most important areas for dragonflies.



On our last afternoon in La Brenne, we visited a nearby goats farm, owned by naturalist and moth-enthusiast Denis Vandrome. Undoubtedly the wildlife encounters that will stick in my mind the most from La Brenne were of the small, winged insect variety and the last day was no exception! Under a UV light on the back wall of the farm we were treated to a fascinating array of moths, including the huge Clifden Nonpareil (*Catocala fraxini*), (**pictured top left**). Whilst resting this moth was relatively well camouflaged against the stone wall, but as soon as it flew, it displayed a spectacular bright blue underwing.



A subsequent walk around the grassland meadow next to the farm revealed an Oberthur's Grizzled Skipper (*Pyrgus amoricanus*) (**pictured middle left**), and the wonderfully delicate Winter Damsselfly (*Sympecma fusca*).



We then visited the picturesque town of Angles-sur-Anglin, set within a limestone gorge (**group picture, bottom left**). Here we spotted a Brown Hairstreak butterfly (*Thecla betulae*). This seemed an almost ironic end to the trip as I reflected on how much of our visit had involved cutting down blackthorn, the larval foodplant for this species! We had joked that blackthorn had become our sworn enemy over the fortnight, and we had the scars to prove it, and yet in many areas it would be important to conserve blackthorn to support populations of the Brown Hairstreak. This encapsulates to me the intricacies of conservation management and how important it is to have a thorough understanding of the habitats and biodiversity we are trying to protect, as well as the importance of having 'joined up thinking' to ensure effective management on a wider spatial scale.

Looking back

I could have written far more about my visit to La Brenne..the wildlife, the sites, the work, the people, the food, the fun...I could have gone on for pages more! I hope that this report has given at least a taster of the work of a EuCAN volunteer and has successfully shared with you some of my personal highlights and thoughts on what was achieved.

In writing up my report, I have had a chance to reflect on whether the trip met with my original hopes and expectations and the answer has to be a resounding yes:

Improving my knowledge and skills...from brushing up on my brushcutter technique, to moth i.d. and a better understanding of habitat management...these are all helping to develop my experience within the sector I want to pursue for a career.

Meeting new people...a range of ages, stages and backgrounds but all with a love of nature in common. Some fascinating stories and experiences to share and new friends made. Spending time with others who are passionate about conservation inspires me and I hope that this enthusiasm will remain infectious.

Outdoor activity...there was certainly no shortage of this...walking, raking, burning, cycling, sawing, lopping...sunshine, rain, water, mud...be prepared to work hard (and play hard) on a EuCAN trip!

The wildlife and culture of a new place...so many special wildlife firsts...the cranes, the red squirrel, the winter damselflies, as well as the chance to sample the culture and history of La Brenne...including of course the delicious local goats cheeses, and the exhausting 70km randonnée!

On a personal level, a lot has changed for me during 2009, including moving jobs and I am very happy to say that my passion for nature has been re-ignited this year. The EuCAN trip has certainly played a part in that, and I would thoroughly recommend this project to others.

The European Conservation Action Network was established in 2007 by The Kingcombe Trust, a charity based at The Kingcombe Centre in west Dorset, dedicated to conservation and environmental education (Reg. Charity no. 1054758), 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, Belgium, Poland and Romania. Further information can be obtained from www.eucan.org.uk or from Nigel Spring (tel: 0044.1963.23559/mobile: 0044.7981.776767.Email: nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk).



A Tree Frog (*Hyla arborea*) at the Chérine nature reserve.