

# La Brenne October 2009



**Working in La Brenne, France  
European Conservation Action Network  
9th-24th October 2009  
By Gary Ellcome**

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## Introduction

The European Conservation Action Network (EuCAN) 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.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) ).

## Overview

When the message from a colleague appeared in my inbox early December 2008 offering free conservation trips to Europe it immediately caught my attention. I am a volunteer ranger for the South Downs Joint Commission and have a keen interest in practical conservation tasks. Not only was I chosen to join the trip to La Brenne in October but I was lucky enough to be selected to undertake training to use a brush cutter. I spent a fantastic January weekend at the Kingcombe Centre in Dorset where I was inducted in to the world EuCAN and schooled in the dark art of the brush cutter.

I left Kingcombe with a real enthusiasm for the forthcoming trip, however in the following months my thoughts turned to other matters and it wasn't until the end of my summer holiday in August that the excitement started to build in earnest. I read the kit list supplied by Nigel and diligently packed everything including a tick hook, how I prayed that I wouldn't need to use it. As I live in Portsmouth I made my way to the Bridge Tavern where I met Nigel, Kathy and the 10 other recruits. After supper we boarded the overnight ferry to Caen where I was assigned to a four berth cabin with 3 of my new best friends. In this intimate setting the four of us bonded very quickly and the battle to become the dominant snorer commenced.

We disembarked the ferry in darkness at 6am on Saturday morning and after stopping at Sées for breakfast and Beaulieu Les Loches for a picnic lunch we arrived in Mézières-en-Brenne at 3.00pm and settled into our gîte. The rest of the weekend was spent visiting local nature reserves, bird watching, sightseeing and plenty of eating.

During our stay we completed 9 days of practical conservation work at a variety of locations. We worked at La Touché clearing trees and scrub along a track beside the

lake. We also worked at Étang Purais. EuCAN had worked at both places before so we were clearing re-growth and expanding the clearings beside Étang Purais and the track through the wood. As part of our cultural experience Nigel had arranged for us to take part in La Randonnée on the second Sunday. When he explained the activity I was relatively enthusiastic, however Nigel's description of the event would prove to be slightly vague.

## **La Randonnée**

Randonnée is a French word which loosely translates to ramble or long journey. In French the verb randonner originally meant hiking, but could also be used for bicycle, horse riding or even skiing events. This type of event takes place all over France in a similar format but with differing degrees of difficulty or distance. The Mézières en Brenne 21<sup>st</sup> Randonnée D'Automne is an organised long-distance event open to walkers, cyclists and horse riders of all ages and abilities. The participants follow a designated and marked route of 35km with an option to undertake two additional circuits of 18 & 20 km leading to a potential distance of 73km. The route would cover a mixture of road and off road tracks with water stops and refreshment stops at intervals. Marshalls were placed on parts of the course where careless randonneurs may be tempted to make foolish detours or where the route crossed a main road.

I had not cycled anything more than a couple miles in the last few years but felt fairly confident that I could keep pace with my peers for 35km. It was decided that Penny should spend the day recuperating following a difficult week fighting a nasty cold. Val and Julian had elected to take part as walkers which left Nigel, Kathy and eight of us volunteers cycling.

## **Stage1- Mézières – Breakfast**

We had breakfast at the Salle des Fêtes in Mézières at 7.30am. The village hall was a bustling centre of activity with people registering for the event and claiming their breakfast of cake and coffee, while the car park was filling with participants and horse boxes. I had foolishly chosen not to test drive a hired bike the previous afternoon leaving me with a stubborn red Peugeot cycle. Of the 21 gears it would only allow me to select 2, the saddle was made of a material with a comfort rating of granite, the tyres were pumped to near blow out levels



STARTING IN THE SQUARE AT MÉZIÈRES

and the handlebars were too low leaving me in an uncomfortable riding position.

We gathered in the square with lots of other cyclists, walkers and horse riders and after a welcome speech by the Mayor, M. Camus, the bike ride started. We tried to ride as a group but there were a few teething troubles with the hired bikes and we soon started to become strung out along the first section of the off road route. It seemed that a large number of cyclists overtook us at this point but we soon got going again and settled in to a comfortable pace. The weather was overcast and slightly damp with a chilly breeze. After around 45 minutes of riding we arrived at the first water stop where we took the opportunity to regroup and discuss our progress. Everyone was now getting used to their bikes and the next stage of the route was smooth roads which came as a relief. At around 10am we were directed in to a field where we were to take advantage of the well provisioned refreshment stop.

### **Stage 2 – A field just outside Les Papieneres – Morning break**

It was here that I had my first alcoholic drink of the day. The organisers had certainly made a big effort with the catering and my second breakfast consisted of a sausage sandwich and a banana washed down with a fortifying cup of crisp white wine. The crowd soon started remount their bikes and continue the journey.

Another welcome stretch of level tarmac helped us to make good progress and we soon reached the 25km mark where we had to make our first decision about the distance we intended to cover. Only Trevor opted out of the first additional circuit and he decided to wait for the rest of the group to complete the extra 18km and rejoin then continue to the lunch stop.



SECOND BREAKFAST

The first few kilometres were level roads where we passed hunters with shot guns waiting to shoot at wild boar from their elevated platforms. The route took a turn off road on to some extremely rough lime stone tracks where I was concerned my bike would shake apart on a fast downhill section. The route started to get tougher with on and off road sections and some moderate hills. As a group we started to get separated in to smaller groups. I was among the first to rejoin Trevor at the junction where he had spent the last hour practicing his French with the marshal. Over the next 15 minutes all but 2 of the group had reached this point and were looking back down the road for Sarah and Roger.

Hunger got the better of us and we headed towards the lunch stop at a slower pace hoping that the missing pair would catch up.

The tracks turned to soft sand at this point and we started to pass strange looking obstacles that turned out to be cross country horse jumps. The centre at Bellebouche on the edge of its large lake was a welcome sight.

### **Stage 3 – Bellebouche – Lunch**

We parked our bikes and regrouped with Roger and Sarah appearing after 10 minutes. Lunch was due to be served at 1pm but the queue was beginning to grow so we visited



LUNCH AT BELLEBOUCHE

the refreshment tent where Tom bought me a very welcome beer. There were long wooden tables and benches set up in a couple of marquees for us to consume our food so we reserved our place in the time honoured English way of covering the table with bags and jumpers. The food queue was now moving at pace so we joined to receive our feast. The whole meal was served on a compartmented plastic plate holding a chicken leg, fries, half a boiled egg, coleslaw, pear tart, cheese and a roll. This was washed down with a glass of red wine from the table and half a litre of water. The meal was exactly what a cyclist needed after covering around 45km. The group was starting to look somewhat jaded as we saddled up around 2.15 pm to continue our journey.

We decided that we would stay together as a group with the slowest member setting the pace to avoid being split up again. I noticed that there didn't seem to be so many other randonneurs along this next part of the route. Apart from two river crossings this section was generally flat with decent tracks and roads so we meandered along at a steady pace. Soon we reached the second water stop and in no time at all this 10km section led us to the final refreshment stop outside a quaint farmhouse at 3.30pm.

## **Stage 4 - Top Loop – Afternoon break**

There were a handful of people taking advantage of the refreshments when we arrived. I was offered some of the local cider which was poured from what looked like a fuel can. The liquid had bits floating in it with a real hit of apple flavour followed by an after taste of petrol. The group of volunteers had a decision to make at this point, do we take the 6km route back to Mézières or do we tackle the extra 20km loop and complete the full route. There was still a good few hours of daylight left and I didn't feel particularly exhausted at this point although I was a bit saddle sore, so I decided to go for the full distance. Roger, Sarah, Nic and Trevor headed for home while Amy, Tom, Anne and I set off for the final stage.

For the first 5km the going was good and our spirits were high although oddly there were no other randonneurs in sight. The track led us down a steep hill past a house and in to their back garden, the track stopped at a chain link fence. After carefully studying the map and a short recon of the area we found what appeared to be a continuation of the path. We carried on fairly confident that we had made the right decision and the route started to resemble the one on the map again. On our arrival at a village called Saulney we hit a main road but there were no arrows on the floor to indicate the route so we decided to follow the main road as it looked to be heading in the right direction. After popping out the other side of the village and being faced with around 1km of steady climb we decided to back track to the junction with a minor road. Following this road for around 10 minutes brought us back on track and the landscape opened up in to rolling hills and farm land. It had turned in to a beautiful late autumn afternoon and although the ascents were becoming steeper and the roads rougher the views were fantastic. We were now being followed by a red jeep and the thought struck me that we were now the only riders on this section of the course and maybe the last randonneurs to finish. The jeep pulled over at the junction with a main road and its occupants encouraged us to take this welcoming downhill section of smooth asphalt. After around 2 km of gliding I realised that we were approaching the out skirts of Mézières and this news lifted us for the final push.



TOM AND AMY IN THE HILLS OUTSIDE SAULNEY

## Stage 5 – The Finish Line

Riding through the familiar streets of Mézières I felt slightly euphoric to have ridden 73km of at times challenging terrain. We arrived back at the gite where Kathy presented us with our rosettes. It was a touching ceremony that included a group photo. I headed for the shower with stiff legs followed by a well earned nap in my bunk before supper.



THE 73KM GROUP LEFT TO RIGHT  
AMY, ANNE, GARY & TOM



THE 53KM GROUP LEFT TO RIGHT  
NIC, TREVOR, ROGER & SARAH

## Conclusion

I was amazed that we all finished that day without a single puncture or mechanical breakdown to our bikes, although we were a little saddle sore ourselves. On reflection I think the reason that we saw no other cyclists on the last section of the route was that it was really intended for the lycra clad serious riders not the inexperienced tourists, however I don't regret going the extra distance.

The whole trip was amazing and although my favourite part was the Randonnée, there were lots of highlights including spotting my first Coipu, watching a flock of cranes coming in to roost and blackthorn slaying with the brush cutter. I will take away many treasured memories not least the shared experience of time spent with my fellow volunteers at work and play. They are an outstanding bunch of individuals who came together for a common purpose.

Organisée par :  
la municipalité et  
les Cavarniers de la Brenne



**MÉZIÈRES-EN-BRENNE**  
**18 OCTOBRE 2009**  
**21ÈME RANDONNÉE D'AUTOMNE**

