



A Tale of Birds, Brambles and Binoculars



La Brenne October 9th-24th 2009
By Penny Smallshire

I was awoken early on 29th September by a voice shouting up from downstairs... “Check your email” bellowed my step mom as she was leaving the house. So, I did. “I think this is a freebie. Ring Anne.” the email said, along with a forwarded conversation highlighting that there were vacancies on her trip to France the following week. So, I did as any idle naturalist would do... I got straight on the phone and arranged myself a place.

After leaving my London shoe-shop life behind a couple of months previously, I had been looking for things to engage myself in while I decided my next step. Re-adjusting to Devon life came naturally, and had revitalized my passion for the natural world. As someone growing up surrounded by wildlife enthusiasts, I was surprised it had taken me all these years to realise my calling. All I needed now was a bit more practical experience under my belt. Perfect timing!

After a week of anticipation, the day finally arrived. I made my way to Southampton where I would meet the eager group of people who would be my company for the next two weeks. We met for a meal before going to the port, but all the while I was secretly forming a mental list of everything I wanted to see on this visit. I wanted to work hard and help out all I could on this trip, but curiosity will always get the better of me when there are things to be looking for.

Being a keen ornithologist, my list was dominated by birds. It was disappointing that most summer visitors would be on their way back to Africa by now, but I had to make the most of what was left....

1. Top of my list was **Black Woodpecker**, a species that I had briefly glimpsed many years ago on a family holiday, but had since failed to see on many occasions.
2. Also, the possibility of spotting flocks of **Common Cranes** on their migration route to Spain was exciting; I would have to be on constant alert looking at the skies – and listening for their magical calls.
3. Representing the mammals, I was itching to get more views of **Wild Boar** after seeing one in the Camargue last year.
4. Lastly, **Red Squirrel** – again, I have seen them before in France, but I will never tire of looking for them!

So with my list firmly implanted, we boarded the ferry....

After a restless night's sleep on board (I was bothered by a toothache which thankfully disappeared), we finally arrived in France. It was dark, wet and a bit too early in the morning to try getting any birds on my list, and there was still a long drive before we reached our destination. So I set up camp on the minibus, with a coat as my pillow, and tried to catch up on some sleep. But all the while my notebook and pen were within reach, for as soon as the sun was up, I knew my list would begin.

Fifteen species later, we arrived at Mézières-en-Brenne where we settled into the gîte – our home for the next 14 days. We spent the afternoon visiting a hide on La Chérine Reserve, where a further 11 birds were added to the list. These included



Marsh Harrier, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker (a good start on my search for the elusive Black Woodpecker!) as well as our first sightings of the invasive Coypu – unpopular with the Reserve, but very popular with its visitors!



The next morning was a misty start, impeding our views from the hide on the Reserve. We travelled to La Maison du Parc for a spot of picnicking and a walk. Here we had the first opportunity to challenge our ID skills when we found some pairs of mating damselflies. These being my father's area of expertise, I felt I ought to know what I was looking at, but the truth is I had no idea what could occur here! I should have really checked what species to expect before getting on that ferry.... We took some photos and hoped to ID them when back at the gîte, surrounded by the trusty field guides!

That evening on the way to have our meal, Nigel's shout of "PIGGIES!" from the driver's seat of the minibus prompted a mass standing amongst the passengers, just in time to see two young Wild Boar scamper off the road and into the bushes. That was one of my species ticked off quite early on!



Later that night Anne and I decided to impress everyone with our batting skills by taking our bat detectors for a walk down to the river. There were bats flying everywhere, and we were a little embarrassed to admit we couldn't identify any of them. Yet again, we had failed to make prior note of what species to look out for! But we redeemed ourselves by successfully naming our mystery damselflies as the Small Spreadwing.



Then it was Monday. The weekend was over. Now was the time to get down to some work – after all that was the reason we were there! I was awake early and raring to go, standing on the bridge with my cup of tea watching last night's bats coming in to roost. We spent the day at loggerheads with Blackthorn scrub in the glorious setting of La Touche, part of the reserve. We were removing it from the margins of the lake and along the track – though I spent most of the time removing it from my hair! It fought valiantly, but we were victorious, albeit bearing the scars to show

our efforts. That evening we set up a moth trap on the reserve; something to look forward to in the morning, the possibility of catching something exciting – a hawkmoth perhaps? One can always hope.

Sadly, no hawkmoths. The next morning we identified what we could on location, potted up the rest and went back to battle at La Touche. That evening I helped Nigel ID the rest of the moths and take some photos. As I was returning to the gîte, I was swiftly alerted to a noise coming from a small patch of woodland just down the road...could it be....Black Woodpecker? I was off at a gallop to track down the source of this distinctive call, a noise I had listened to many times on CD. I was disappointed in myself for being out of doors without my trusty binoculars – typical – but I did have my camera, so I stood patiently in front of the trees... listening... watching... waiting....

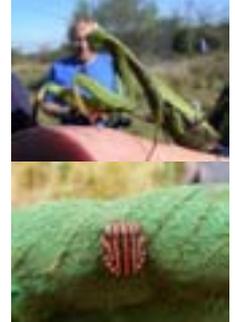
I returned to the gîte with a smile on my face. I had glimpsed the bird through the trees, and managed to get one photograph. Unfortunately, on inspection of the photograph I had taken, I seemed to have missed the bird completely. What I had was a glorious photograph of foliage. But also another tick on my list.





The next few days we continued our work, cutting Blackthorn regrowth and removing trees at various sites belonging to the Reserve. The task was fairly demanding, so there wasn't much time to birdwatch while we were working. My list was put on hold temporarily, but we did come across a few things as we toiled. On Wednesday we found a lost Tree Frog whose home it seemed we had carelessly destroyed; I helped it back into the nearest tree and apologised.

Thursday, we were told, was typically the day Common Cranes began arriving in La Brenne – some of which over-wintered. This was good news for my list! I kept my eyes open while skirmishing with the Blackthorn at Purais, but saw nothing. I was also beginning to feel a little under the weather after catching a cold and developing a nasty cough – I crossed my fingers that it wouldn't be anything serious. On Friday we were distracted from work at Purais by a Praying Mantis and Italian Football Shirt Bug – two insects I had always wanted to see! Then to top it off, we had distant views of a single Crane flying overhead! But one wasn't enough for me. Reports were beginning to come in of flocks of 20 or more. Things were looking hopeful.



That night we were treated by Nigel to an evening of wine tasting. Unfortunately by this point in my cold, I had completely lost my senses of taste and smell. I had to imagine the taste and give it a score, hoping my results wouldn't affect the final tally too much! We celebrated Friday night with a trip to the bar in Mézières. This proved to be the last straw for my suffering throat, and my voice began to abandon me...

...On Saturday morning I awoke to find it had completely deserted me. I felt appalling, but it was our day off and the prospect of some morning birdwatching was enough to get me out of bed. We were tipped off about the possible location of feeding Cranes, so hopped in the minibus and off we went. Lo and behold, they were exactly where we were told they would be. A few in the fields, then more beyond. We soon realised there



was a hundred or more. Brilliant! They proceeded to fly up together in one flock – there must have been over 200. It was better than I could have expected, I even temporarily forgot about the pain and discomfort I was in. We celebrated our success with coffee and hot chocolate. I sat, reliving the sight and sound of those graceful birds as they flew side by side in my head – talking about it with the others was still much too painful at this point. On returning to the gîte I was sensibly confined to bed for the rest of the day. I tried to catch up on sleep lost due to my cough – I was beginning to feel sorry for my room mates if they were getting as little sleep as I was! I avoided talking for the rest of the day,

hoping I could regain my voice. It would be just typical that I'd spot something truly fabulous and have no way of alerting the rest of the group. Even Nigel's attempts with Cognac, lemon and honey hadn't helped – I couldn't even taste the main ingredient, so it was somewhat wasted on me!

Sunday was the day of the much anticipated Randonnée – I had my bike ready to go, the route was all planned and everything was paid for. The only problem was that I could barely speak, move, swallow or breathe. As the alarm went off and people began to wake, I was immediately confined to yet another day of bed rest. And rightly so, as I hadn't slept a wink all night. I managed to catch up on some of the lost sleep, but began to feel restless at the thought of what I might be missing. So I hopped in a very hot shower, and got dressed in as many layers as I could. I packed a bag. Binoculars – check. Camera – check. Water – check. Throat sweets – check. I was ready to go. But where? I began to walk out of the village, checking on the way that my woodpecker friend hadn't returned – no luck. I headed out towards the reserve, but at the sluggish pace of a sleep-deprived person with breathing difficulties. I scanned the woodland for squirrels, hoping that maybe I'd see something that I could brag about when the others returned home, exhausted and sore from the ride.

The slow plod to the hide on the reserve was pretty uneventful, and by the time I arrived there it was almost ready to close! I had only half an hour to find something truly spectacular, to out rank everything else on my list, and to make the others green with envy. Then suddenly, there it was. A white bird, flying low over the water...was it an Osprey? It flew out of sight, but then reappeared on the top of a tree. I raised my binoculars...had a good look... and said to myself, "What the hell is that?" A white bird of prey with yellow legs? I was positively baffled. It was like a Buzzard, but the whitest Buzzard I had ever seen! My mystery bird took flight over the water, and disappeared out of view. I wanted to add the sighting to my list, but didn't know what to write! And to avoid spending the night locked in the hide, I then had to begin the journey back to Mézières – now with slightly more spring in my stride! I was desperate to get back to the bird book.



One by one, the rest of the group filtered back into the gîte, red-faced and sore-bottomed after their epic cycle. I showed them my mystery bird, and Nigel confirmed my suspicion that it was merely a very pale form buzzard. Nothing new for my list, but a spectacle nonetheless! My excitement waned somewhat on discovering that a group of the cyclists had seen a Red Squirrel – an exciting addition to the group list, but my own list was still lacking that all important tick. However, the trip it was not over yet.

Monday meant work again, and I was damned if this cold was going to ruin any more of the trip. The fever was gone, but I still had a chesty cough to contend with, and the frosty mornings weren't helping matters. My voice was gradually returning, but with a brand new husky sound. We went to a new site on the reserve – today's task was to beautify the view from an old hide in dire need of restoration. We had to re-discover overgrown ponds and prune the trees, keeping in mind all the while that it needs to look as natural as possible



from the hide! It was here that I met my new enemy; brambles. Not just any brambles – these were dead brambles. The worst kind. They pull, they rip, they tear – relentlessly! Tools were useless, as most of it came away by pulling at it with your hands. We spent a day and a half working this area, and were very pleased with the result: we stood back admiring the difference we had made, and tending to our latest injuries. That afternoon I set out in search of a pharmacy, and after an embarrassingly graphic mime of my symptoms I purchased some medicine for my cough, which by this point I imagined was keeping the entire floor awake at night.

That evening we were dining in Le Blanc, but stopped on route with the hope of seeing the Cranes come in to roost. I was dying to see them again. We got there slightly before the recommended time, and waited patiently. Then, in the distance, I spotted one lone bird coming in. We watched its descent, pondering if it was a straggler or a scout. We waited some more. I had my binoculars glued to my face, hoping desperately that we hadn't missed them. That's when I spotted a line on the horizon, a very distant line that was coming towards us. A line that was made up of hundreds of tiny dots. "They're coming!" I shouted. In flew 250 birds, followed by another group of about 50. The noise was extraordinary as before, and we watched them disappear out of view to spend the night in the reed bed. I couldn't have hoped for more. I put a double tick on my list.

We continued work for the next day and a half. I tried to avoid smoke from the bonfires as my throat was still struggling. Tuesday night we set up the moth trap again – another chance to catch my hawkmoth! In the morning it was raining, so work was cancelled. Instead we went to identify the damp moths – still no hawkmoth. But I did manage to identify *Eriogaster catax*, similar to the Eggar moths we see in Britain, and a protected species in the area. Despite this find, I was beginning to think we wouldn't see any really spectacular moths.



Wednesday afternoon we revisited Le Blanc and went to the Ecomuseum. The highlight for me here was cabinet upon cabinet of stuffed birds. Being not too familiar with my Latin names, this proved an interesting challenge for me to try and identify them – not quite the birdwatching I am used to!!



For the afternoon we undertook some traditional birdwatching at one of the drained lakes – the highlights being two distant wild boar on the water’s edge (double tick!), and then an injured Green Woodpecker in the road on the way home. We had magnificent close up views of the bird, which seemed fit enough when it flew onto Val’s shoulder, before heading off into the hedge to hide. What a surprise!

Thursday morning we witnessed the fishing at La Touche (which had been drained since doing our work there). They caught many pike, rudd and tench as they tightened the net in the remaining pool of water. The fish were weighed and put into holding tanks on the back of a truck.



Then we went to a new site to work for our last couple of days, under the supervision of Eric the “Dragonfly Man”. The site was in the woodland, a gloriously mossy green bog! We were clearing sallow to open up the area for dragonflies – this had previously been the home of the Yellow-Spotted Whiteface, which had sadly not been seen since 1991. The site had improved after they began clearing the sallow, so we were here to

do our part. The wood was cut and dragged onto a trailer to be taken away for chipping.

All day I worked to the distant sound of a Black Woodpecker, which eventually I felt I had to go and look for! I took a brief respite and went for a walk with my binoculars and camera. This time I was sure I would get that photo! I followed the sound until it abruptly stopped. I scanned the tree tops, creeping across the leaf litter... then I saw him – flying away in the opposite direction! I heard him calling into the distance: another missed photo opportunity, but another double tick on my list! Then back to work. We finished the day with drinks and nibbles at La Maison de la Nature, and a wonderful wild boar stew at the gîte.

We finished off work for Eric the next morning, then spent the afternoon visiting a goat farm. I was asked if I’d like to see a moth – “the one in the book on the Underwing page? The big blue one?” I vaguely remembered this so followed them round the building to where a light bulb was fixed to the exterior wall. And there, sitting calmly on the wall, was the most superb moth I have ever seen. It was simply enormous! After a gentle poke, it opened its wings for the cameras to show off its blue petticoat under its cryptic brown wings. It wasn’t until it flew off that you could fully appreciate its size – I could have easily mistaken it for a bat! And so ended my encounter with the Clifden Nonpareil!



We were shown around some meadows, where we found some stray damselflies. My father had reminded me to look out for the Winter Damselfly away from water – and so we found them! We then went on to a very picturesque town, Angles-sur-Anglin, where we enjoyed the views and ruins, and spent a couple of hours taking photographs

On returning to the gîte, we had enough time to pack up our things before heading out for our final meal – some pike that had been caught the previous day at La Touche. Delicious! We went for goodbye drinks at the bar, and were presented with champagne! Plans of an early night went out the window.



Saturday morning, we started early and loaded up the minibus. We waved goodbye to Mézières and began our sad journey back to Caen, trying to doze on the bus as we drove. Shouts of “SQUIRREL” from the front of the bus woke me with a start – a red squirrel ran across the road and into a garden. What a perfect way to end the trip – the final tick on my list! We stopped for a very English picnic in the drizzle at Falaise, and went for a small walk – stupidly without binoculars – and failed to identify the Firecrests or Goldcrests that called in the trees!



We boarded the ferry later that afternoon. Still trying to catch up on some sleep, we found reclining chairs to rest in. I set up camp by the window (so I could birdwatch, of course) and added the final four species to my bird list as we said goodbye to France. A tear came to my eye as we left, thinking of all the wonderful things we were leaving behind. I looked down at the scratches and cuts on my arms – reminders of the work we had undertaken, everything we had achieved to help the wildlife of La Brenne. I didn't even notice the strong swaying of the boat on the choppy sea as thoughts of what I had experienced filled my head – and thoughts of what to do on my return! I still needed a job, now my life in the shoe-shop felt a distant memory. I felt there were so many possibilities. I felt inspired.

