

2009

Mézières-en-Brenne



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Conservation Field Trip

09-24/10/2009

It was after I finished my degree in Wildlife Conservation at Plymouth University that I decided to broaden my horizons in the name of conservation. After many an hour trawling through website after website and various forms of wildlife / conservation literature, looking for a beneficial worthwhile cause, which of course with minimal expense. I finally descended upon an opportunity with EuCAN (EUROPEAN CONSERVATION ACTION NETWORK). A two week conservation field trip in Mézières-en-Brenne, Southern France.

Back in January of this year, 9th -11th to be precise! I was invited up to The Kingcombe Centre in west Dorset, in preparation for the two week conservation field trip that lay ahead. The weekend incorporated clearing thickets of blackthorn, bramble scrub and small trees with hand tools suitably provided for the job in hand. Wildlife monitoring, the ecology, history, language and culture of the partner countries was also all part of the preparation weekend. The opportunity for additional power tool training was unfortunately fully booked, so I was rescheduled to do this in August 2009.



The Kingcombe Centre

It was just after lunchtime on the 9th October when I eventually left my house in order to arrive at a meeting place near to where Nigel and Cathy (our hosts) live. Van packed and I was off to meet my fate. The journey was going well until I got nearer to the Dorset border, whereby I encountered many roadwork's' causing huge delays. I thought to myself, knowing I had to meet at between 16.30-16.45; I just wasn't going to make it! I eventually rolled up at 16.44 just in time, phew!! Loaded my bags onto the minibus and we were off.

Arriving at the Bridge Tavern in Portsmouth at about 20.30 where we had supper (very nice!) and exchanged stories, all before boarding our ferry which was scheduled to leave Portsmouth at 22.30. It was an overnight ferry so we had shared cabins for four (cosy!) and docked in Caen at 05.00 French time, disembarking at 06.00 on the 10th October.

We were off, driving down through France, the road systems are great and the views of the countryside fantastic. It was now about 08.00 when Nigel decided to stop at the small village of Sées for a traditional breakfast of croissants and coffee (mmm!). For such a small village it had a fantastic old cathedral.

The Gothic cathedral dates from the 13th and 14th century and occupies the site of three earlier churches. The west front, which is disfigured by the buttresses projecting beyond it, has two stately spires of open work 230 ft. high. The nave was built towards the end of the 13th century. The choir, built soon afterwards, is remarkable for the lightness of its construction. (*Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Sées*)



We left Sées at about 09.30 after looking round the local market and on to the little quaint village of Beaulieu Les Loches for lunch, whereby we had a lovely picnic in the local bandstand. An historic town with yet another fantastic old abbey church.



A great abbey church named *Belli Locus* dedicated to the Holy Sepulchre was founded in the early 11th century by Foulque Nerra, Count of Anjou, who is buried in the chancel. In 1011 Pope Sergius IV donated some relics of Saints Chrysanthus and Daria and Fulk himself a piece of the Holy Sepulchre he stole from his visit to Jerusalem to the abbey.



Main Entrance to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.



Church of the Holy Sepulchre (1885). Other than some restoration work, it appears essentially the same today.

We were now on our final leg of our journey leaving Beaulieu Les Loches at about 14.00 and reaching our final destination of Mézières-en-Brenne, at about 15.30. We were all staying in a typical French gîte, (Photo) comfortable and adequate. After unpacking we all met downstairs in the communal dining area for a nice cup of tea and to get ready for first taste of bird watching.



On route to La Chérine Reserve a few of us spotted a male Red Deer (*Cervus elaphus*) very close to the side of the road, what an amazing sight!



The Red Deer (*Cervus elaphus*) is one of the largest deer species. The Red Deer inhabits most of Europe, the Caucasus Mountains region, Asia Minor and parts of western and central Asia. It also inhabits the Atlas Mountains region between Morocco and Tunisia in north-western Africa, being the only species of deer to inhabit Africa. Red Deer have been introduced to other areas including Australia, New Zealand and Argentina. In many parts of the world the meat (venison) from Red Deer is used as a food source.

Arriving at La Chérine Reserve at about 17.30 our group walked to one of the bird hides where we spent an hour bird watching. Knowing very little about the area of France I was in I wasn't sure what kind of wildlife to expect. Well to my surprise there was such an array of different species of birds, Marsh Harrier, Swans, Ducks, Egrets and Herons to name but a few, fascinating!

The marsh harriers are birds of prey of the harrier subfamily. They are medium-sized raptors and the largest and broadest-winged harriers. Most of them are associated with marshland and dense reed beds. They are found almost worldwide; excluding only the Americas. Until recently two species were generally recognized: the Marsh Harrier (*Circus aeruginosus*) and the African Marsh Harrier (*C. ranivorus*). The Marsh Harrier is now usually split into several species, sometimes as many as six. These are the Western Marsh Harrier (*C. aeruginosus*), Eastern Marsh Harrier (*C. spilonotus*), Papuan Harrier (*C. spilonotus spilothorax* or *C. spilothorax*), Marsh Harrier Swamp Harrier (*C. approximans*), Réunion Harrier (*C. maillardi maillardi* or *C. maillardi*) and Madagascar Marsh Harrier (*C. maillardi macroscelus* or *C. macroscelus*).



(*Circus aeruginosus*)



Egret (Genera *Egretta* or *Ardea*)

An egret is any of several herons, most of which are white or buff, and several of which develop fine plumes (usually milky white) during the breeding season. Many egrets are members of the genera *Egretta* or *Ardea* which contain other species named as herons rather than egrets. The distinction between a heron and an egret is rather vague, and depends more on appearance than biology. The word "egret" comes from the French word "aigrette", referring to the long filamentous feathers that seem to cascade down an egret's back during the breeding season.

It is now the 11th October and after a traditional French breakfast of croissants and coffee at our gîte, our day was planned to scour the local area. One of the first things I noticed whilst travelling in the minibus up to the bird hide at La Maison de la Nature, was the lakes of Brenne : a real mosaic of habitat types, where water, woodland, heaths and meadows (sometimes dominated by the red sandstone "buttons") mix to provide for a particularly ecologically rich area. The Brenne is one of Frances' most important inland wetlands.



Before lunch we stopped off at the Ricôt hide and finally had our picnic lunch at La Maison du Parc.



La Maison du Parc.

After lunch we all took a gentle stroll around the grounds to see what kind of wildlife was about. To my amazement there were Green lizards, Fox Moth Caterpillars, Grasshoppers, Pond Skippers, various species of Dragonflies and Butterflies.



Fox Moth (*Macrothylacia rubi*)

Macrothylacia rubi, the fox moth, is a lepidopteran belonging to the family of Lasiocampidae. They are found from Western Europe to Central Asia. The wingspan of the male is 18 to 25 millimetres. They take flight from May to July, and live in open woodlands and prairies, inhabitant many different species.

A dragonfly is a type of insect belonging to the order Odonata, the suborder Epiprocta or, in the strict sense, the infraorder Anisoptera. It is characterized by large multifaceted eyes, two pairs of strong transparent wings, and an elongated body. Dragonflies are similar to damselflies, but the adults can be differentiated by the fact that the wings of most dragonflies are held away from, and perpendicular to, the body when at rest. Even though dragonflies possess 6 legs like any other insect, they are not capable of walking.



Small Emerald Damselfly
(*Lestes virens*)

Dragonflies are valuable predators that eat mosquitoes, and other small insects like flies, bees, ants, and butterflies. They are usually found around lakes, ponds, streams and wetlands because their larvae, known as "nymphs", are aquatic.

It was now mid afternoon, so back on the minibus and off to Foucault hide. The surrounding landscape was an amazing biological diversity, responsible for an abundance of wildlife of



which the best known are the birds: Purple heron, Black-necked grebe, wetland warblers, Bittern, Whiskered tern, Short-toed eagle... not to forget the Coypu a large, herbivorous, semi aquatic rodent to be found in the lakes.

The Purple Heron (*Ardea purpurea*) is a wading bird in the heron family Ardeidae, breeding in Africa, central and southern Europe, and southern and eastern Asia. The European populations are migratory, wintering in tropical Africa; the more northerly Asian populations also migrate further south within Asia. It is a rare but regular wanderer north of its breeding range. It is a large bird, 80-90 cm tall, with a 120-150 cm wingspan, but slender for its size, weighing only 0.5-1.3 kg. It is somewhat smaller than the Grey Heron, from which it

can be distinguished by its darker reddish-brown plumage, and, in adults, darker grey back. It has a narrower yellow bill, which is brighter in breeding adults.

Purple Heron (*Ardea purpurea*)

The Whiskered Tern (*Chlidonias hybridus*) is a seabird of the tern family Sternidae. This bird has a number of geographical races, differing mainly in size and minor plumage details. *C. h. hybridus* breeds in warmer parts of Europe and Asia. The smaller-billed and darker *C. h. delalandii* is found in east and south Africa, and the paler *C. h. javanicus* from Java to Australia. The tropical forms are resident, but European and Asian birds' winter south to Africa and southern Asia. This species breeds in colonies on inland marshes, sometimes amongst Black-headed Gulls, which provide some protection. The scientific name arises from the fact that this, the largest marsh tern, show similarities in appearance to both the white *Sterna* terns and to Black Tern.



Whiskered Tern
(*Chlidonias hybridus*)

The coypu, or nutria (*Myocastor coypus*), is a large, herbivorous, semi aquatic rodent and the only member of the family *Myocastoridae*. Originally native to temperate South America, it has since been introduced to North America, Europe, Asia, and Africa, primarily by fur ranchers. Although it is still valued for its fur in some regions, its destructive feeding and burrowing behaviours make this invasive species a pest throughout most of its range.



Coypu Swamp Beaver (*Myocastor coypus*)

Within the Parc there are very many species of insect, especially dragonflies. Within the forests are Red and Roe deer, and Wild boar, in large numbers. No less rich, the plant life of Brenne, from orchids to centuries old oaks, vast reed beds to heaths, may still hold many surprises.



Wild Boar (*Sus scrofa*)

Wild boar (*Sus scrofa*) is a species of pig, including at least 16 subspecies, and part of the biological family Suidae. It is the wild ancestor of the domestic pig, an animal with which it freely hybridises. Wild boar are native across much of Northern and Central Europe, the Mediterranean Region (including North Africa's Atlas Mountains) and much of Asia as far south as Indonesia.

The day ended back at Mézières with a quick scrub up and change of clothes before supper.

Finally our first day of physical work (12th October)! An early breakfast and then on to La Maison de la Nature at Chérine to meet Tony Williams our host and an employee of La Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux (LPO). We had a brief introduction to the ecology of the Brenne from Tony and gave him a brief introduction of ourselves, to why and what we aim to achieve here in la Brenne over the next two weeks.



We all went to work at La Touche, meeting Joel (Photo) at the site; he is the member of staff responsible for this reserve. We cleared the trees and scrub with the use of loppers and bow saws, making several bonfires as we went along the track beside the lake. Lunch was a picnic with traditional fare of French delights. Work finished at 16.00 and we returned back to our gîte, for a well



earned rest and supper, which was cooked by two of our group, very civilized!

After breakfast (13th October) we all went to La Maison de la Nature at Chérine to look at the moths caught in the trap, which Nigel had very kindly put out the night before.

After looking at most of the moths and identifying them, we all went back to La Touche



where we continued the work from the day before and made several fires to burn the material. The day's work finished at 16.00 and then back to our gîte, for a cleanup and supper.

For the third day running we were all back at La Touche (14th October) and worked in three separate groups. The first group finished the clearing and burning of the previous day's work. The second worked in the wood clearing some trees aided by Nigel and his emphatic use of his petrol driven chainsaw, in order to improve the habitat for Snake's Head Fritillaries and the third group cleared the notorious Blackthorn and scrub regrowth in the meadow, aided by the use of petrol driven brush cutters. Again the day's work finished at 16.00.

At 17.00 we all went to La Maison de la Nature and met up with our resident host Tony Williams (Photo), who had organised a talk about the butterflies of La Brenne.



La Brenne is known to have 99 breeding species of butterflies, with a total of 250 breeding species within the whole of France, whereas the UK only has 57 breeding species. Unfortunately the use of pesticides and herbicides in recent times has had a detrimental effect on the decline of certain species. As butterflies are good bio indicators and susceptible to environmental change, regular counts are needed in order to keep track of species numbers. The British Butterfly Conservation scheme has monitored changes in the abundance of butterflies throughout the United Kingdom since 1976. Over the 33 years of the scheme, recorders have made over 170,000 weekly visits to 1500 separate sites, walking over 375,000 km and counting over 12.5 million butterflies! This particular scheme is also implemented in the La Brenne region.

After a fine talk by our resident host Tony we all had supper back at the gîte.

Breakfast was at the normal time (15th October), but some of us went to the Mézières Market, thus leaving for work at Étang Purais a bit later. On arrival we were split into two groups, one group working beside Étang Purais and the other not too far away at the track through the wood. The idea here was to continue the work such as clearing regrowth and expanding the clearings that previous EuCAN groups had accomplished. Work finished at 16.00 and then back to the gîte to get cleaned up before supper at Le Petit Parc in Vendœuvres.

After breakfast we were all back to work at Étang Purais (16th October) having not quite completed the previous days tasks. I had my first taste of brush cutting, quite enjoyable, but just couldn't get the harness right, so by lunchtime my shoulders were killing me. We met up with Tony Williams and a colleague of his from the LPO for lunch. After lunch more scrub clearing and fire burning to round the day off at 16.00. Back at the gîte our supper was prepared and cooked by two more of our fellow group members and whereby our evening's entertainment ended with wine tasting, which of course was organized by Nigel (Photo).



At last it was Saturday (17th October) a day off, hoorah! Breakfast wasn't until 9.00, so a bit of a well earned lie in was greatly appreciated. Bird watching first thing, was the order of the day, arriving at Étang Gabriau at about 10.00. Shortly after leaving Étang Gabriau and on to Rosnay, we spotted huge migration (200+) flock of Cranes (Photo) quite spectacular and the highlight of the day by far. It was nearing 11.00 by now so it was decided to stop off at a little café at Rosnay before returning to the gîte for lunch.

After lunch and in preparation for the annual event, the 21eme Randonnée D'Automne on the Sunday, bicycles were hired from the nearby tourist office.

It was now mid afternoon and Nigel had decided that we would visit the church at Paulnay. Built in the 12th century, remarkable for its magnificent front ornate with sculptures as well as for its frescos.



Paulnay Church



Soon after leaving Paulnay Church we all went to a nearby goat farm belonging to a delightful Dutch couple Annick and Franz Haalboas. After looking round the farm at the goats and seeing where the cheese was produced, we were all asked if we'd like to sample some of the different cheeses. Reluctantly I sampled a tiny tiny piece! It was now time to get back



onto the minibus and back to our gîte, in preparation for our lovely supper at the Hotel Au Boeuf Couronné.

Sunday the 18th October and a big day lies ahead of us, the annual event of the 21eme Randonnée D'Automne. So firstly an early breakfast at the Salle des Fêtes in Mézières at 7.30 followed by collecting our hired bicycles.



We gathered in the main square of Mézières with lots of other cyclists, walkers and horse riders and were given a welcome speech by the Mayor, M. Camus. The route consisted of road sections in conjunction with off road wooded



sections. The event started at about 08.30 and the first refreshment stop along the route was 11km in, to which we arrived there at about 09.30. A further 8km into the ride is where you could continue on the shorter route or do an additional 18km on another part of the course.



By now it was only 10.30 so the majority of us went for it. It was about 13.00 when we all met up again for lunch at Bellebouche. Bellebouche lies in a beautiful setting with a big lake. Hot food and of course beer was par for the course. It was now 14.00 so back in the saddle for the final leg of the course and back to Mézières. On returning to Mézières we were all presented with a rosette for our efforts, after completing 53km. Back to the gîte for showers and a

quiet night in, whilst resting our aching bodies and sore bottoms!





We all had an early breakfast (19th October) as we had to meet Tony Williams at La Chérine Reserve for 09.00. The plan was to work at two separate sites, one of which was a Butterfly Transect field. This involved three of our group brush cutting, whilst three more forked up the material to be later burned. Unfortunately the fire had to be abandoned because it was too windy. The second site involved clearing bramble and blackthorn from the former stone quarries. As La Brenne had

an extremely dry summer the existing small ponds were completely dry. The idea here was to open up the area in order to improve visibility for bird watching from the small hide. We finished work at 16.00 and we went to Étang La Mer Rouge to see the Cranes coming into roost in the reeds. They began arriving at 18.50 appearing as beautiful wavy lines on the horizon. We went on to Le Blanc for supper at La Flambée.



An early breakfast and then all back to La Chérine Reserve for 09.00 (20th October), to finish off the previous day's work beside the small bird hide. The rest of our group went across the track to another site of old stone quarries called Les Essarts, which in previous years EuCAN has worked on before. We cleared blackthorn and bramble from around the dry ponds and started to clear the fence line so a new fence could be erected. Julien (Photo) who is responsible for this area worked with us. We had our usual picnic lunch together and everybody worked at Les Essarts in the afternoon. Finishing at about

16.00, we all went back to the gîte, to get cleaned up before supper.

Breakfast was back at the usual time of 08.00 (21st October) and as it was a very dull and dreary morning, so it was decided that we would all have a day of culture. After breakfast it was on the minibus and off to La Maison de la Nature to meet up with Tony Williams in order to have a good look around at all the displays at the centre.



After leaving Tony Williams at La Maison de la Nature, we were heading for Le Blanc which is the main city of the Parc naturel régional de la Brenne, on the banks of the Creuse River.

We all stopped off at a little café where we had coffee before going to the Ecomuseum.



The Ecomuseum I found was very interesting, particularly the huge display of taxidermied birds and the history of Le Blanc. It was back to the gîte for lunch followed by a free afternoon, to which the majority of us went bird watching. Supper was takeaway pizza

from the local bar in Mézières, fantastic!

Breakfast was at 08.00 (22nd October) and then off to watch the draining of the pond and transferring of fish of Étang La Touche at 09.15am.

The first lakes were built in the Middle Ages, many emptied during the Revolution; it wasn't until the 20th century, between the wars, that the lakes took on their present appearance and modern fish-farming developed. Today there are some 1400 lakes in the Brenne (most private), which makes it one of the most important areas of lakes in France. The lakes are inter-connected in series.



The Brenne's lakes are traditionally used for fish-farming. 2000 metric tons of fish are produced each year; 65% of this is carp, together with tench, pike and perch making up the remainder of the catch of which most is exported.

Fishing the lakes takes place anytime between October and March. To be fished a lake is partially emptied, so that the only water remaining is in a deeper section next to the sluice.

The fish are then collected together using a large net, lifted out by hand net and sorted, weighed and placed in oxygenated tanks on the lorries of fish traders.



The first lakes to be emptied, and thus fished, are those downstream, it then fills with the water emptying from the next lake up, and so on until the uppermost lake in the series, which is filled by rain water draining from the land around.



It was now 11.00, so we all went to work in the woods at Chérine under the guidance of Eric (Photo). Eric is a self taught dragonfly / damselfly expert, and the work we carried out was done in two groups clearing mainly sallow and willow to open up clearings for dragonflies / damselflies. We piled up the brush and then helped Remy, the warden, load it into a trailer so he could take it away for chipping later. We had lunch together and then five of our group went to finish the work at Les Essarts clearing the fence line and burning all we cut. The others continued with the morning's work at Chérine. We all finished work at 16.00 and then back to

the gîte.





After we had all showered and got changed, we were all invited to La Maison de la Nature for drinks and nibbles at 17.30. The director Jacques Trotignon and the rest of the staff thanked us very much for all effort and hard work and we had done over the last fortnight.

It was now getting on for 18.30, so we had to make tracks back to the gîte for a delicious wild boar stew and some more red wine.

An early breakfast for our last day of work (23rd October, to which we all went back to work at Chérine for 09.00.

Again working in the woods with Eric and Remy (Photo), finishing off the previous day's workload. We all had a break at about 11.00 and a few of us went with Tony Williams to finish off the scrub clearance in the transect field. Work stopped at 12.00pm and then all back to the gîte for lunch. After lunch we all went to another goat farm, to look at the animals and taste the cheese.



We went on to the interesting town of Angles-sur-Anglin where we explored the ruined castle overlooking the river Anglin, and had coffee and ice-creams a little later, in a local bar. It was now time to get back to the gîte in time to clear up and pack to enable us to have an early start the next day. Our final evening meal was at the hotel Au Boeuf Couronné in Mézières, where we all had a splendiferous meal including Pike roulade with sorrel. We were joined by our hosts Tony Williams, Joel and Julian.

Our final hours in Mézières (24th October) packed and ready to go at 08.00. On the way back



we stopped at a service station for coffee and had a picnic lunch in Falaise just south of Caen, where we admired the ruined castle in a slight drizzle.

We reached Caen at 15.00 and had only a brief wait before boarding the ferry, which left at 16.00. It was a fairly rough crossing, but I spent most of my time in the comfy recliners on one of the lower decks.



We had supper on the boat at about 18.30 and all seemed quite normal, or so I thought. It wasn't until I got out of my comfy recliner and on the way to the restaurant area, that I felt the full force of the ferries rolling motions in the swell. Eventually I made it to the restaurant area, where I met up with some of the others. Choosing my food wasn't a problem, it was getting it to a table in one piece, now that was a challenge! Made it!



The ferry docked on time at 21.00 at Portsmouth and we all got back onto the minibus. One by one we were dropped off at our original pick up points, which for me was quite emotional having spent two



weeks with a great bunch of people. Finally it was my turn to say "Goodbye!" and with a lump in my throat I did.

Overall I learnt a huge amount in such a short space of time, both in terms of conservation and cultural differences as well as personal communication. A great experience and the people in the group will stay with me throughout my life.



Before!



After!

As conservation work requires sustained effort to maintain habitats in a condition suitable for the conservation of the targeted species. It would be interesting to return to the sites in the future to see if the work continues to be done. It would also be interesting to know if the presence of EuCAN has any impact on the number of volunteers in la Brenne.

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.kingcombecentre.org.uk or from Nigel Spring (tel: 0044.1963.23559/mobile: 0044.7981.776767.Email: nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk).