

### **Ceirios Davies: EUCAN France 2008**



*Sées gothic Cathedral in the mist, one of our picnic lunches, and local market produce.*

In early October an excitable and nervous group of EUCAN volunteers from the UK gathered for a ferry voyage over to France. Our first sleepy glimpse of France in the morning was of the town of Sées, and its gothic cathedral looming above us in the mist. We explored the French market together, pastries, cheese, sea food, local fruit and vegetables displayed enticingly. No market went unmissed in our two weeks, and we experienced the delights they had to offer as our daily picnic lunch of local bread, cheese and meat. On our first day in France we continued our journey south, stopping only at Courdemanche to picnic and glimpse our first wildlife. During our days off we explored museums of culture, visited local traders in their workshops such a brie factory, and were shown inside churches and temples.



*Some of our experiences: Polish Koniks used to graze marshland, French cattle, and the Church spire in Mézières-en-Brenne that had bats flitting around it every night, and a French market.*

### **The Conservation work**

#### **Parc naturel régional de la Brenne**

The economy is still very much connected to this diverse Nature Reserve, and La Brenne maintains its cultural heritage by continuing fish farming, shooting of Red and Roe deer, Wild boar, and wildfowl. It was within this vast area of wetland habitat we carried out habitat management to provide suitable habitat for the breeding of whiskered terns. We worked together (with reserve staff and a local group) on the hard task of removing Water Lily rhizomes from the sticky clay area around a lake, where they were encroaching too much upon dragonfly habitat. The Water Lilies were then to be re-planted at a later date alongside other lakes to create additional habitat for the terns.



*Just one of the green frogs (froglets of which hopped between us whilst digging up Water Lilies!) and Reed habitat at La Brenne, Catfish removed from the fish pond.*

The conflicts and the management of the reserve were apparent all around; coypu traps, exterminated musk rats, and wild boar culling. Additionally invasive catfish are eradicated annually from the fish ponds, as they compete with the stocks of carp being farmed for the European Market.

We also cleared a pathway through dense scrub, we did not know what was at the other end, but kept working along it until we broke through into a beautiful grassland habitat. It was in such grassland on the reserve that we had had our last glimpse of several butterfly species of the year in the autumn sunlight.



*A hummingbird hawkmoth feeding on lavender, a wall lizard, a pond terrapin having being recaptured and recorded by the reserve staff.*

### Le Grand Voyeux, Congis-sur-Thérrouanne

At this wetland reserve we worked alongside a group of permanent French volunteers. Daily we harvested willow that was encroaching too much upon reedbed habitat. The members of the voluntary group which established the reserve were planning on a building a permanent hide over looking one of the larger lakes used by the many birds visiting the reserve, but in the meantime a temporary hide was required so that visitors could bird watch without disturbing the bird life. Together we constructed a temporary hide from the harvested willow. Initially bundling the willow saplings together we then wove them into large screens, and created a 'fortress' from our combined efforts!



*A panel being woven, we gather in our willow enclosure, completion draws close!*



*Just some of inhabitants included a massive flock of starlings, which we witnessed several times whilst working on the reserve. It was amazing to see so many individual birds become one large sinuous mass before roosting noisily together.*

## Conclusion

The Leonardo Da Vinci fund allowed me and 14 other volunteers from the UK to complete a series of conservation tasks in France. Not only was it an adventure to rural France, experiencing local food, culture, and tradition, but it also is hoped that our efforts will enthuse French volunteers to be initiated within conservation in their own country. At present France is in its infancy in realising the potential of volunteers to carry out conservation work, it is hoped that our efforts will enthuse French volunteers to maintain self sufficient projects relying upon only local volunteers. Within my two weeks of volunteering; I experienced many species for the first time, made new friends, spent time in the French countryside, and learnt of the conservation challenges unique to France.



*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 and Poland. Further information can be obtained from [www.kingcombecentre.org.uk](http://www.kingcombecentre.org.uk) or from Nigel Spring (tel: 0044.1963.23559; email: [nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk)).*