

LEONARDO NEEDS YOU!

What does the name Leonardo mean to you?

A painter? a scientist? a brilliant Renaissance mind?

You may be wondering what this has to do with conservation....

I have recently (October 2008) returned from fifteen days fully funded conservation work in France.

It was an amazing experience, and I was not necessarily a typical choice for the trip.

I am in my mid fifties, and already involved in quite a bit of conservation work for the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust, including my role as volunteer warden at Jones's Mill nature reserve in Pewsey.

The Leonardo da Vinci section of the European Union Lifelong Learning Programme funds all sorts of projects including EuCAN (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 has partners in France, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland.

EuCAN is looking particularly for those who have **not** tried practical conservation work before, who may like to have a go in a supportive group environment, so I consider myself lucky to have been given the chance to go.

Before you contact Nigel Spring for further details (Nigel is the man who founded the Kingcombe Trust) let me tell you more about what you might expect if you are accepted.....

We (fifteen volunteers along with Nigel and his partner, Kathy, a minibus and a trailer full of tools and wellies) took the overnight ferry from Portsmouth to Caen, eating in a local pub before we boarded.

We were a mixed group, all ages, though mostly younger than me, and from all walks of life.

Some of us had met at a preparation weekend in the summer, where we had surveyed butterflies and trapped moths for identification. Some had been trained in brushcutter use.

Over the two weeks we learned a lot about each other, and ourselves, and had lots of fun, French cuisine, wine, culture..... and hard work of course.

There was a great sense of camaraderie and enthusiasm. We were kept busy.

The minibus took us south for the first week, where we met an Englishman, Tony Williams, who has worked for the Ligue de Protection des Oiseaux in the area

we were visiting (Brenne) for many years - it is an area of manmade lakes, originally for stocking fish. There is still a fish industry in the region. The Cherine Reserve where Tony works is now largely managed for birdlife (hen harriers, whiskered terns, great and cattle egrets) as well as for dragonflies and plants, including the extremely rare Parnassus-leaved Water Plantain. We also saw European Pond Terrapins and Coypu (the latter being a pest) It was interesting to gain insight into the practices and problems of managing the reserve.

One of the group spent a couple of days in hospital having been bitten by a snake, but I think this is not a normal occurrence on the trips! he did make the mistake of picking it up.....

The second week was spent about eighty miles east of Paris, where an area of land that had been used for gravel extraction had been given to the locals. It was now managed as a nature reserve with a wealth of wildfowl on the lakes. Here we were welcomed by the local Mayor, and presented with red baseball caps! It was good to mix with the local people - there is not a strong culture of volunteer conservation groups in France it seems, so hopefully some of our enthusiasm rubbed off.....all the work we did was very much appreciated, and those involved in the local projects joined us where possible. To summarise some of the activities we were involved in.....

- moth trapping and identification
- identifying butterflies, birds and plants
- bat detecting
- digging and moving water lilies - very muddy
- extreme table tennis (optional)
- horse riding
- cycling
- Scrabble
- opening up tracks through woods
- scrub clearance and bonfires
- brushcutting to create open grassland
- watching a fantastic display of starlings coming in to roost
- building a large willow structure to be used as a hide near lake. This was a fantastic team effort involving cutting the willow where it was invading a reedbed, designing the structure (some trial and error, and creativity), tying the willow into bundles, erecting posts and putting it all together.
- visit to agricultural museum
- visit to the traditional Brie factory
- champagne picnic.....

For more information, contact Nigel Spring, Tel: 01963 23559
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www.kingcombecentre.org.uk

I would be happy to chat informally with anyone who would like to contact me first. (Tel: 01672 569241)
In 2009 trips are planned to Poland, Hungary and France.
Don't miss this opportunity to improve your skills and knowledge, and have a great time.