

Winged creatures of the night

I have recently returned from fifteen days conservation work in France, fully funded by Leonardo (more of this later).

There is much I could write about - the people, the camaraderie, the work, the food, the culture, the fun, facing my fear of horses, the snake encounter, the extreme table tennis.....

....but I will tell you here about some of the nature memories which have left their mark.

Dusk was the time to enjoy the starling displays in the sky above the reedbeds where we worked by day; up to a quarter of a million we were told - silhouetted swirlings overhead before settling suddenly into the reeds, burbling and chattering.

Other creatures of the night we encountered were the bats, mostly pipistrelles, but occasional others, dipping for insects above puddles, flitting in streams above the village waterway in Mezieres-en-Brenne not far from our gite, circling the church spire nearby, feasting on moths attracted by the floodlights. The buzz of our bat detectors told us when a moth had become a meal.

For me the moths were the main stars of the night.

In Wiltshire, or wherever I happen to be, I have a leaning towards plants, especially small insignificant flowers that take on a magnificence under a hand lens. The intricacies of a moth's wing have a similar appeal, magnified on the screen of a digital camera.

At Kingcombe, where we met in June for a preparation weekend, I was exposed to a huge variety of these creatures and their descriptive names - Lime Speck Pug, Mottled Beauty, Pebble Prominent, Clouded Silver.....

Helping to set out the traps in Kingcombe Meadows - the brilliant flowers barely visible in the twilight - didn't prepare me for the numbers and variety that settled overnight. The traps appeared to be little more than a very bright light attached to a wooden frame and surrounded by a pile of old eggtrays.

Standing round the same traps the following day, carefully lifting and examining the eggtrays, we found treasure. It was a good way to connect with some of the people

I would be travelling with later in the year.

There were shared exclamations of delight, as both familiar and unexpected moths were discovered, dismay as one flew off without closer examination.

There were experts on hand to share their enthusiasm and knowledge. They helped us through the process of identification, and added words to our vocabulary.

There were 43 different species that morning at Kingcombe, and another 41 at Powerstock Common. I was fascinated.

In France, in the Brenne, the trap was set up in the Cherine reserve near one of the many lakes. The object of the exercise was to add to the moth records so that Tony (the reserve warden) could continue to monitor any change.

There was a Red Underwing, a Setaceous Hebrew Character, a couple of Chestnuts, and Green Brindled Crescents, as well as the well-named Merveille-du-jour - too many to be named here. I was hooked.

The advantage of moths (over butterflies) is that they sit still while you have a good look, even tolerating your fingertip as a perch for a while.

The challenge is the identification, and the sheer numbers.

In France there are around 10,000 species - the UK has perhaps a quarter of this amount; still enough to occupy several lifetimes.

Though some are distinctive (the hawkmoths for example), many are not, and the books contain pages of what appear to be the same moth, but then you learn to look closer.....it is not, however, necessary to identify a moth to appreciate its delicate beauty.

Unfortunately, the second week of the French trip did not provide us with a moth opportunity - it was too cold.

As with flowers, moths are best in summer, so I will have to be patient, though until then there is time to study the recommended books, and the photographs I took. I will try to remember some of those names.

So the trip has inspired another area of interest, further appreciation of our natural world, which never disappoints. I will buy, or make, a moth trap, and share this new-found passion with others.

The European Conservation Action Network (EuCAN) was established in 2007 by The Kingcombe Trust, a charity based at The Kingcombe Centre in Dorset, dedicated to conservation and environmental education (Reg. Charity no. 1054758) in association with Butterfly Conservation.

The project is funded through the Leonardo da Vinci section of the European Union Lifelong Learning Programme. It has partners in France, Hungary, Poland and the Czech republic, where placements are available in 2009. No prior knowledge or experience is needed.

Further information can be obtained from www.kingcombecentre.org.uk or from Nigel Spring (tel: 0044.1963.23559 email nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk)

