

REPORT BY JULIAN JONES ON A EUROPEAN CONSERVATION ACTION NETWORK VISIT
TO LA BRENNE and CONGIS-SUR-THEROUANNE IN FRANCE : OCTOBER 10th – 25th 2008

As the day of departure approached the idea of a fortnight's placement /working holiday on French nature reserves took on a more challenging aspect. Would I cope OK with the work? Would it rain non-stop; would I get injured? The idea had sounded great back in the winter when I read about the European Conservation Action Network (EuCAN) which was set up by the Kingcombe Trust and Butterfly Conservation Dorset. Kingcombe is well known to DWT members in West Dorset for its environmental education courses and wildlife centred activities. EuCAN is a newish venture which began in 2007, taking advantage of EU funding under a Lifelong Learning Programme.

The essence of the scheme is that volunteers with an active or potential interest in nature conservation visit other EU countries to link with and assist conservation partners there. We travel as a group; in my case a group of 13 volunteers and two highly capable leaders all packed into a large minibus and towing a trailer full of tools, luggage etc onto the overnight Portsmouth Brittany Ferries crossing to Caen in Normandy. From there we drove gradually south to 'La Brenne', a region of man-made lakes studding a flattish landscape in the Loire area, south of Tours and west of Chateauroux. The second week saw us drive north east, skirting Paris to arrive near Meaux in an area between Eurodisney and the Champagne region.

As the scheme is open to anyone in the labour market aged over 18 (but not in education) my fellow volunteers covered a wide range of ages from early 20s to mid 50s. On this occasion there were more women than men, but it probably evens out when all EuCAN trips are considered. There have also been trips to Hungary and the Czech Republic this summer, and a March visit to La Brenne. For all trips there is a preparation weekend at Kingcombe where one meets at least some of your fellow volunteers and the Group leaders, Nigel Spring and Kathy Henderson.

So, returning to the trip, was trepidation justified? Definitely not. By lunchtime on our first day in France the sun was out, the temperature was matching our summer's warmest days and we had reached Coudemarche, SE of Le Mans where an English couple from Beaminster had bought a farmhouse and land. We were soon being shown around their land and admiring a Praying Mantis spotted by a sharp eyed colleague, then enjoying the first of many superb picnic lunches incorporating local bread, cheeses, pate, tarts and fruit. That afternoon we reached our base, a town centre gite in Mézières-en-Brenne, the largest town in La Brenne. We quickly settled in and sampled the town's sole bar then dined in style in Le Boeuf Couronné, a restaurant a stone's throw from the gite. Pretty soon we all knew each other's names and started a high speed bonding experience based on working, eating and socialising together plus sharing dormitories of varying sizes. There was time before bed to walk down to the local church with bat detectors and listen to different bat species like pipistrelle and noctule chattering away on their personal frequencies. We could see many bats flitting in and out of the church tower and circling it as they pursued moths and insects.

The next day, a Sunday, we familiarised ourselves with the area, and met Tony Williams, a British employee of the League for the Protection of Birds (LPO) who showed us round the Chérine nature reserve. From the hide we could admire scores of Great White Egrets, Little Egrets and herons. Blending into the background of reed stems were snipe, and Cetti's warblers were making themselves heard if not seen. We learnt that the lakes exist mainly to raise carp for sale at the end of the year. Lakes are drained to remove the fish, normally in sequence starting at the lowest lying and using the

next one up to refill the one below it. This commercial activity over the centuries has created around 1,000 shallow lakes, which are a magnet for migrating birds and superb habitat for wetland loving flora and fauna. Snakes, frogs, newts and butterflies are especially abundant. We saw evidence of wild boar which are hunted and, quite wisely, treat the reserves as a safe haven. We visited the large and modern Maison du Parc which is the tourist and information centre for the Brenne National Park, created in 1990. It covers 160,000 hectares but the great majority of the land is privately owned and conservation relies more on persuasion than strong regulatory powers or designations like SSSIs. The Maison had a fine looking restaurant but we had a picnic in the grounds which must have matched their chef's best effort!

Tony Williams decided the work priorities and over four of the next five days we split the group and our efforts over several tasks. We often worked alongside some of the reserve staff, communicating in a mix of English, Franglais and French. One day we were working with a group of adults with learning difficulties, digging up and transporting surplus water lilies from La Touche lake to establish them in other Brenne lakes. That was a pretty muddy task! It was important though because Whiskered Tern, summer migrants from West Africa, use the lilies to nest. The Brenne lakes are their largest breeding ground in Europe. We also spent many hours using brushcutters, bow saws, loppers and hatchets to create woodland avenues fringing the reed beds by Puraïs Lake. This would allow access for walkers and horses and was made wide and high enough for a tractor to maintain in the future. Vast amounts of wood, blackthorn, bramble etc were burnt in the process, and woodpiles were created from the larger logs. These will be very valuable for insects and other wildlife in the future. We often saw copyu swimming in the lakes, marsh harriers and kingfishers flying and large groups of cattle egrets standing in the fields with herds of attractive local cattle.

On our midweek 'culture day' we began by watching and assisting the reserve staff as they collected the fish from a drained lake. Each species was sorted, some for immediate relocation to another lake, others ready for transport and eventual sale. The catfish, which are an undesirable alien species in this ecosystem were doomed to die at this stage. Pond tortoises were far more kindly treated; they were measured, marked with a file on their shell and individually recorded by the reserve staff. Later in the day several of us hired cycles and toured part of the area, visited a spectacular chateau and boosted our wildlife sightings.

Moth traps were set out on a couple of nights and the more knowledgeable moth enthusiasts took great delight in identifying both familiar and rare species. The rest of us enjoyed the patterns and colours and tried to learn the names, many of which are quite poetic or refer to some small feature or nuance of the moth's markings. At the end of the week the Director of the Cherine Reserve invited us along with his staff to a drinks party which sealed our entente cordiale!

On the second Saturday we drove to May-en-Multien near Meaux and settled into a gîte located in the middle of a large riding stables where 30 or more horses reside. We hurried out to a reception in Congis-sur-Therouanne for a reception with the Mayor and several of the AVEN association members whose reserve we would be working on. The reserve, close to Congis, is called Le Grand Voyeux and has come about through the voluntary desire and effort of local people to make an area of flooded gravel pits into a reserve. It includes areas of reed beds where some 250,000 starlings roost each night. Their arrival is spectacular. I'm told their departure in the morning is even more so but I never got up early enough to verify that.

On Sunday morning we visited a local town (La Ferté sous Jouarre) on the River Marne. As well as the customary busy market we saw sobering memorials to the thousands of British soldiers who died in the

locality during the senseless slaughter of the First World War. Cormorants, black swans and kingfishers could be seen on the river. Later we had a good look round Le Grand Voyeux and its main hide. The tasks AVEN were keen to see completed were discussed. The lakes are deep, in contrast to La Brenne's lakes and we noticed that the steeply shelving sides limit the scope for reed growth. There was a fair variety of ducks, grebes, egrets & herons, swans & geese, moorhens, coots and the occasional rare bird like a green sandpiper.

The next morning we got down to work clearing false acacia (rubinia), willow, sallow, bramble etc from encroaching over reed beds or sightlines between the hide and the lakes. Several of the AVEN members worked with us and proved to be a very cheerful bunch. Over the next three working days we also erected a large, horseshoe shaped hide using posts, rails and willow bundles all obtained from cutting surplus willow and alder trees from lake-sides. It was especially satisfying to employ such a genuine permaculture technique. Only the nails came from outside the reserve. Tree felling was done by a combination of chain saw, bow saw or lopper depending on the size of the trunk. Watching the productivity of a chain saw powered by carbon-based fuel compared to human muscle power is a real reminder of the revolutionary change the internal combustion engine has brought about. It should also make us think about the way we squander fossil fuels and the problems we are creating for future generations. One has time to become philosophical on a project like this.

Our cultural day in the area included a tour of the Museum of the Seine and Marne region and a memorable four-course restaurant lunch in Jouarre with AVEN members. We followed that by walking to the crypt of a former church from the Merovingian era (7th to 8th century) linked to a substantial Abbey. There were many carved and sculpted tombs honouring sainted abbots and abbesses of the era and our guide explained that the columns supporting the roof were recycled roman columns. In the same town a trip round a small family run Brie factory called Fromagerie Ganôt included cheese tasting and the chance to sample the raw material, milk, which is all obtained from one local farm. Between us we bought a fair amount of Brie there to bring back to England.

An early finish on one of our working days gave an opportunity to ride some of the horses from the stables, courtesy of the owner of our gite. That was very enjoyable; grooming your chosen horse, picking the feet clean and getting the tack on then off into the countryside on a pleasant sunny afternoon. Only one of us fell off which wasn't at all bad. Luckily it wasn't me as I was on a 16 hands 2 inch horse, a long way up!

Our last day of work saw the hide completed with an additional screen to allow people to approach it without disturbing the birds. It was an impressive structure that could only have been completed with the sort of sustained team effort our visit permitted. An AVEN volunteer, Raymond, brought champagne to enjoy with our picnic that day and that evening, to round off our visit, we joined 15 AVEN members at the catering school of the local Lycée (college) where the students pulled out all the stops to impress the diners. They succeeded on every front.

On our third Saturday we set off for home, driving west to Caen in Normandy to catch the Portsmouth ferry. There was time to detour a few miles before Caen to visit Dives-sur-Mer where one can stroll around a remarkable market building of huge size and antiquity. France is obviously replete with such buildings since there was no hint inside or outside the market that this was worthy of tourist interest. In the UK it would have been owned by the National Trust or English Heritage and featured in numerous magazines, period costume dramas and so on. Back on UK soil we drove west dropping off people at various points and the trip ended for me in Dorchester after midnight. An immense amount had happened in just two weeks and I would recommend it to anyone game for a modicum of hard work

and possessing an appetite for good company, haute cuisine, an insight into foreign conservation and the culture of the area visited.

Julian Jones Nov 2008

Editor's Note. Reader's seeking details of the 2009 visits should contact Nigel Spring or Kathy Henderson on 01963 23559 or nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk