

Wildlife and Wetlands: A habitat Resource Explored. La Brenne and Le Grand Voyeux, France October 10th - 25th 2008.

The following article focuses on a conservation project funded by the European Conservation Action Network (EuCAN) in an attempt to promote environmental awareness and increase voluntary participation. In October 2008 volunteers from different backgrounds and age groups travelled from the UK to France to actively undertake a conservation project.

Participant List

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Introduction

Agricultural intensification over the last century has resulted in a considerable loss of aquatic habitat worldwide. Consequently, a multitude of stresses have been placed on remaining sites to provide habitats suitable for the colonisation and support of species reliant upon this resource for community structure.

Characterised by standing water and saturated substrate, wetlands, notably freshwater sites in particular are an important part of our biodiversity. They are one of the most productive ecosystems globally.

It is the aim of this article to briefly lead the reader through the management practices observed at both reserves in respect of their relevance to the habitat requirements of Odonata (Dragonflies and Damselflies for those not familiar with this order). Because

different odonate species vary in their sensitivity to varying degrees of water chemistry and pollution, the presence or absence of a species reflects upon the level and quality of the management associated with that particular water body.

Odonata are ideal indicators of water quality because of their reliance upon the aquatic environment for the majority of their life stages.

Partner Organisations:

In the La Brenne the 'Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux' (LPO), under the guidance of Tony Williams and the Director of the Cherine Reserve Jacques Trotignon is the principle organisation involved in the conservation of the wetlands. The AVEN Association in Congis-sur-Therouanne is the group formed to manage and develop Le Grand Voyeux Reserve.

The Work Sites:

- La Brenne lies between the Indre and Creuse Rivers and covers an area of approximately 1660 sq km of which 140,000 ha are RAMSAR designated. The Naturel Parc De La Brenne is an artificially created wetland ecosystem comprised of 1000 lakes, historically used for intensive fish farming. Here, low lying poorly drained soils have given rise to a mosaic of woodland, reedbeds, wet meadow and fen habitat, all supporting different populations of resident and transient species. The Cherine Reserve is the best protected of all reserves managed by the LPO. It covers 145 ha of open water, reedbed and woodland. Cherine supports 40 species of Odonata, including the rare *Eucorrhinia pectoralis* (White-Faced Darter).
- Le Grand Voyeux Reserve is a newly created site arising from the flooding of old gravel pit workings. It is a site of many open water bodies with some established marginal vegetation. It has the potential to become a diverse wetland resource.

Work:

- The group worked on a number of sites in La Brenne. On the first day one team removed blackthorn and scrub from a track adjacent to Etang Purais to improve access. The second team started to dig up water lilies from a marginal section of

Etang La Touche. These were to be used to re-establish a lily bed at a different site at a later date and were placed in a temporary nursery enclosure.

- Blackthorn was removed mechanically from an area of wet grassland to open up the site. This was a beneficial management practice to help additionally support the established population of Alcon Blue butterflies.
- On the most important management practices observed during our time in the Brenne region involved the age old practice of draining the lakes periodically. It was basically a fishing exercise, done to remove invasive species like catfish from the water body. The catfish, together with roach and rudd were sorted by hand and placed into containers for release, with the latter two species being returned to Cherine. Pond tortoises were also fished out in nets but these were weighed, sexes and measured prior to release.
- In Le Grand Voyeux Reserve the principle work was scrub removal between several hides and the cutting and bundling of willow. Willow cutting would over time allow for the water level to increase once the willow stump had died back. This in itself would allow the reedbed to grow and expand. Willow invasion appeared to be problematic on this reserve and ongoing work is required to halt the decline of reedbed structure.
- Further along the reserve are several large lakes and it was here that the willow bundles were used to create screen to offset disturbance to the bird life of the lakes. Holes had to be dug by the group in some rather hard soil in order to erect posts to support the willow screens. Observation spaces on the viewing platform were placed at varying heights and the overall structure was well supported and substantial. Its construction allowed for the avian species present to carry on undisturbed and uninterrupted, hence reducing visitor pressures.

Management Issues:

It was initially thought that draining the ponds in La Brenne would have a negative impact on odonate species using these resources. However, following observation and a hands on approach, the rationale behind the practice became apparent.

Over the short term, substrate had the potential to remain a viable habitat for the support of larvae and larval food sources even if the water body was dry for some time. The need to remove thousands of predatory catfish although horrific to see became clear as catfish as bottom feeders, stirring up sediment and depleting a limited food source.

As drainage of the ponds was done during the late autumn and winter months, larvae would be at their least active and that time of the year was considered the time of least environmental impact.

The removal of water lilies at Etang la Touche would halt recession of marginal vegetation, which in turn would increase habitat for odonate oviposition, perching and hunting.

The importance of substrate composition and vegetation structure cannot be over emphasised in that both impact on larvae and larval food species. Substrate seen at sites within La Brenne exhibited a rich invertebrate composition.

The AVEN Association has a wonderful opportunity to create a diverse wetland ecosystem at Le Grand Voyeux. At present the lakes lack vegetation structure and marginal planting to any excess. The removal of willow on a rotational basis, which is very prolific at the site will help delimit reedbed loss, raise the water levels and create more niches for a large number of species. Management could be directed towards the planting of marginal vegetation, both terrestrial and aquatic together with buffer zones. Because of the close proximity of the lakes and the connecting corridors at Le Grand Voyeux, the potential to colonise new sites within the reserve is a real possibility given favourable wind direction at prime dispersal times.

Overall, gravel pits globally support high numbers of odanata, and given proper management consideration, Le Grand Voyeux could be a model wetland site in that region of France.

Gites:

The group stayed in typical French 'gites' for the entirety of this project. As the project was divided these were located in the towns of Mezieries-en-Brenne and May-en Multien. They offered self-catering facilities and dormitory style sleeping arrangements. It provided a very pleasant base for the group.

Catering:

Breakfasts were prepared ourselves from foods sourced locally. Throughout the project the group had the opportunity to sample French cuisine on many occasions. This generally involved a visit to a local restaurant in the evening after work. Restaurants the group visited included: 'Le Boeuf Couronne' in Mezieries-en-Brenne; 'Le Petit Parc' in Vendoeuvres; 'Le Plat d'Etain' in Jouarre and the wonderful 'Lycee Technical' at Gue sur Tremes.

It was here at the technical food college that several courses were prepared and served by the students themselves. The evening was delightful. We were joined by members of AVEN. Several meals in May-en Multien were delivered nightly by a husband and wife catering team and were simply great. Notably the cheeses-rather the size of!

Leisure:

It wasn't all work! Evenings were generally free although we did have visits arranged on occasion. Out of work activities included:

- Drinks with Jacques, the Director of Cherine Reserve and a celebratory bash for Tony's birthday. Both were very enjoyable.
- *Gallinago gallinago* (Snipe) spotted from Tony's office window.
- The opportunity to spot that illusive bird. Having never seen *Casmerodius albus* (Great Egret), *Egretta garzetta* (Little Egret) and *Bubulcus ibis* (Cattle Egret) all in one location and at the same moment in time, the occurrence was simply great. *Ardea cineracea* (Purple Heron) proved another tick on my unseen species

list. Unfortunately I missed the Bittern at Le Grand Voyeux Reserve and as well as *Dryocopus martius* (Black Woodpecker).

- Several evenings proved ideal for bat walks. *Nyctalus noctula* (Noctule bat), *Pipistrellus pipistrellus* (Pipistrelle bat) and *Plecotus auritus* (Brown long-eared bat) were all seen during the visit, the latter an individual in a barn close to the accommodation in May-en-Multien.
- On the Wednesday of the first week many people hired cycles for the afternoon. Our little trio went to Azay-le-Ferron via a route off the beaten track. A lovely ride out with two great travelling companions-Julian and Jane.
- During our stay in May-en-Multien the group went horse riding. Several people hacked out while Chantal gave a lesson in the indoor manage. My mount, Ipaccon a grand boy of 17 hands plus was such a gentle giant.
- Identifying the numerous moth species collected the previous evenings prior to release.
- Drinks and downtime with the group in Mezieres-en-Brenne.

Richard's Magic Moments

It can be said that different people experience and remember different aspects and highlights of each project they undertake. On a personal note I had a number of what I term 'magic moments'; moments or experiences important and individual to myself.

Several are as follows:

- The mass landings and airborne antics of tens of thousands of starlings at Le Grand Voyeux Reserve. Never seen before but hopefully again.
- *Hyla arborea* (a Tree frog) along a path running adjacent to Etang Purais. I'd been searching all week but spotted this little delight by chance. Such a beautiful shade of green.

- Being introduced to the moths of Europe by Nigel who so enthusiastically took several of us to the light trap to assess the catch. So many brilliantly coloured specimens with differing wing configurations. I hope to study these night dwellers a lot more upon return.
- The two large *Catalpa bignoniodes* (Indian Bean Tree) within the grounds of a chateau found during a cycling afternoon with Julian and Jane to Azay-le-Ferron.
- Spending a few moments handling *Emys orbicularis* (Pond Tortoise) at Cherine Reserve.
- Working with such a good group of fellow volunteers and making new friends. And to Nigel and Kathy for working so enthusiastically to ensure everybody experienced as much as possible.

On the final Saturday the group left May-en-Multien for the return trip to Caen via Bresles. We stopped in Dives-sur-Mer to see a huge medieval open market and historically important church, listing all those who arrived in the conquest of England in 1066. Over the project period the group gained valuable experience and an insight into the management practices and effective measures input at local level to preserve and enhance these aquatic habitats.

On behalf of all who took part, thanks to Leonardo, Nigel and Kathy for a valuable and interesting visit.

Richard Cooper

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