

## **EuCan trip to La Brenne 5<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> February 2010**

### **Heather Thompson**

Before going on the EuCan (European Conservation Action Network) placement to La Brenne, France, I wasn't sure what to expect but I knew what I wanted to get out of it. I knew little about conservation and next to nothing about butterflies. However, as someone wanting to get into the conservation sector in the future, it seemed like an ideal opportunity to gain ID skills and more knowledge of conservation issues, whilst meeting people with similar interests and discovering this region of France.

#### **LE VOYAGE et LE LOGEMENT** (the journey and accommodation)

Our group of 14, some of whom I'd already met at a preparation weekend in Dorset, included our extremely knowledgeable EuCan leaders Nigel Spring and Kathy Henderson. EuCan have a policy of not flying in order to reduce carbon footprints and so we travelled by ferry and minibus. We had our first few drinks and got to know each other on the ferry which was apparently a calm crossing but which rolled far too much for my weak stomach! Travelling to La Brenne in this way gave us plenty of opportunity to stop off for many 'chocolat chaud', wanders around picturesque little towns such as Sées and chilly picnics. It also meant that we could see the French countryside unfolding on our way to our base for the next two weeks, Mezieres-en-Brenne, and stop off to visit some of Nigel and Kathy's friends, Nick and Julie Baldwin, at their beautiful and very rural house.

Mezieres-en-Brenne was a small village that had everything we needed including a bakery, grocers, restaurant and bar about 20 seconds away. It was typically 'French' with the grey slate roofs, a canal running through and wooden window shutters. We were staying in a 'gite', sharing rooms in small groups with snorers being put together wherever possible. For some reason myself and my roommate Emma both picked the top bunks, which meant 2 weeks of climbing up and down the ladder every time we dropped or forgot something. We seemed to be well paired, both being as (un)tidy as each other.

#### **'LE PARC NATUREL REGIONAL' DE LA BRENNÉ** (La Brenne national park)

Over the two weeks we learnt all about La Brenne, its wildlife and the conservation work carried out there. La Brenne national park, in the 'department' of Indre in central France, is a region made up of around 2,200 man-made lakes or fishing ponds, most of



them privately owned. The area is one of France's most important wetlands. The diverse habitats found there mean a great diversity of wildlife including bitterns, black necked grebes, little egrets, great crested grebes, European pond tortoise and wild cats to name but a few. It was interesting to learn about the conflicting interests between the conservationists, fish farmers and hunters, as all three groups keen for an abundance of wildlife in the area - but for very different reasons.

From Tony Williams, a butterfly expert who works for the LPO (la Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux - the French equivalent of the RSPB), we learnt that, at 250, the number of butterfly species in France far outnumbers the 57 in the UK. Many that are rare in the UK are common in La Brenne such as the Brown Argus. Several species, including the Woodland Brown, are benefiting from increasing fuel prices and the demand for wood as their ideal habitat is open space within woodland. This information really put the clearance work we were doing into context and what initially seemed destructive became constructive. His talk was accompanied by a slideshow of amazing butterfly photos, many obtained by placing animal dung in partial shade and watering it. Apparently within 2 hours all sorts of beautiful butterflies will be attracted to the minerals and salts.

Laura Van-Ingen, who also works at the 'Maison de la Nature', gave us an interesting presentation about the surveying and monitoring work that she is involved in, including that of the Black Whiskered Tern of which a third of the total French population is found in La Brenne. La Brenne is also an important habitat for the European Pond tortoise which are tracked by attaching radio transmitters onto their backs. During our stay we also learnt about the invasive species in the area such as the coypu which destroys aquatic plants and burrows into the banks of the fishing ponds and for which traps have been set up.



## **LE TRAVAIL** (the work)

Our main task over the two weeks was to clear a large area of blackthorn in order to create suitable habitat for the Alcon Blue butterfly which lays its eggs on the Marsh Gentian flower. This involved using loppers and bowsaws (and powertools for those suitably trained) and burning. Skills learnt included fire-lighting in the snow, a tricky task involving a matchbox ripped up

in panic, stealing smouldering embers from other more established fires, bleeding a lighter dry and a lot of determination from myself and Emma. We also had to beat out the fire once it jumped so we didn't destroy the whole reedbed and fuel the negative reputation that environmentalists generally have in France.

Despite the cold weather, the working atmosphere was good and Kathy always made sure that we were well fed and had regular brew breaks. We had amazing picnics that were different everyday, once in the sunshine but more often around the fire to keep warm. One day the sun did come out which boosted morale somewhat and we formed a chain, to make light work of shifting lots of logs into a pile, accompanied by much singing. Twice we were joined by locals with special needs. Their enthusiasm was infectious and we all enjoyed potatoes baked on the fire and toasting marshmallows.

We were accompanied by Joel Deberge, manager of this part of the reserve, who was grateful for the work we'd done. I was surprised to find out that there isn't the same volunteer mentality in France as the UK, in fact Joel seemed slightly suspicious as to why anyone would want to come and do this work. Apparently if EuCan hadn't come they would have had to get machinery in to clear the blackthorn - damaging the land. Whilst the work was quite repetitive it was satisfying at the end of the day to see the area that had been cleared and to know that our efforts were appreciated by the reserve managers and that we were making a difference to the local wildlife.



### **LES GENS** (the people)

One of the best things about the trip was the real mix of people, experiences and areas of knowledge. From Rob's ancient tree knowledge and cheesy jokes, Mark's amazing cooking for large groups and rousing sing songs, Emma's stories of celebrity interviewing and reviewing and Lisa's obvious love of wildlife from a childhood in South Africa, to Helen's tree climbing expertise, Michael's infectious laugh, Neil's work hard play hard

attitude, Andrew and Louise's extensive bird knowledge and Rich's photographing and recording talents (even if the camera conveniently came out during work time;) - everyone brought something different and interesting to the group dynamic.

The evenings were spent playing many games of often strictly policed Boggle and Jenga, or meeting locals in the bar for pre-dinner drinks (as it closed at 8.30 on weekdays we had to get in their early) and playing pool or table football.

It was also inspiring to meet various people involved in conservation or simply leading sustainable lives alongside nature, from everyone working on the reserves of La Brenne and the compost toilet at the couple's house we visited on the way down to Denis, the goats cheese fabricator, who left the goats to live in the field with the donkey once they were too old to produce milk and who used the owl-inhabited 12<sup>th</sup> century chapel on his farm as a shed for his scarecrows and bikes.

### **LA CULTURE** (self-explanatory!)

Another important part of EuCan trips is experiencing the culture, which inevitably means sampling the local food and drink. We ate at local restaurants, always had delicious food and generous portions which occasionally resulted in us asking for 'le doggy bag'. Homemade meals concocted in the gite's cramped kitchen cannot be forgotten either. Food highlights included an amazing chestnut soup (exclusively for vegetarians) and unusual dishes such as wild boar. We bought locally made goats cheese rolled in ash and smoked carp from the market, did some wine tasting and sampled Julien's tasty homemade blackthorn liquor. It's safe to say that we ate (and drank!) amazingly well.

### **LE BILAN** (all in all...)



Already back in Wigan after an unforgettable and intense couple of weeks, with burn holes in my fleece, remains of blackthorn scratches, firmer biceps and songs of the unfortunate decline of a hatless man on Ilkley Moor stuck in my head. From the morning walk with Kathy to buy up half the bakery, then to the local Aladdin's cave of Lahcen the 'epicier', it really felt like we were part of small village life - even before we went to the bar.

It was really satisfying to be able to identify birds (correctly!) with the smew and great crested grebes being the personal favourites. Even on our day off



myself, Emma and Rich biked to a hide in freezing weather to do some birding. Other people's enthusiasm was infectious, not least that of our leaders Kathy and Nigel - who was always pointing out a log pile or hen harrier whilst navigating the French roads and drivers! I learnt a lot from them and whilst we may not have seen a single butterfly due to the chilly weather what we did see over the fortnight: fox, cranes, wild boar (both alive and on our plates), coypu (again both dead and alive...but not on our plates...although I hear coypu is indeed edible) more than made up for it.

The EuCan trip to La Brenne has made me much more aware of conservation issues and the natural world when I am out and about. All in all, it was a fantastic and unique experience and one that I would definitely recommend to anyone interested in conservation and wildlife.

### **Highlights**

- My 25<sup>th</sup> birthday. The group treated me to a lovely veggie meal and decorations, hand-made gifts and a huge chocolate cake before an eventful evening of dancing and air guitar in the bar. Definitely one to remember!
- The story of Julien winding down the window at the visitor centre of the reserve, taking a gun with silencer and shooting a coypu (for whose tail he will earn 1Euro) before continuing with his work. Not something that I can imagine happening amongst conservationists in the UK!
- An eventful afternoon of horse riding which was great fun, despite getting galloped off with by an ex-racehorse, and a chance to see some of the surrounding countryside and local farms.
- Rousing renditions of various traditional English songs in restaurants led by Mark and performed for the bemused waitresses.

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