

Report: EuCAN PLACEMENT – La Brenne

Set amidst the most tranquil of landscapes and natural beauty lays a special place called Mézières-en-Brenne. A beautiful small French village surrounded by La Brenne's National park and protected areas that are home to many interesting species ranging from the rare Whiskered Turn birds, to the pre-historic looking pond tortoises as well as over 90 Butterflies! La Brenne is truly a spectacular place!

It was all but a surprise when I casually opened my email to almost fall off my chair with excitement when I read the words 'Good news! We would very much like you to join us for the EuCAN placement in La Brenne.' First thing I did was call my family in South Africa - the official start of my long desired journey of beginning to work towards a career in Conservation – La Brenne here I come!

Suitcase packed (a stupidly large one I might add) passport in hand and off I went! South Hampton it is where I will meet the rest of the crew and together begin the exciting journey to La Brenne.

After collecting everyone except Michael who we met at the Restaurant, we headed off to the Ferry port and were pleasantly welcomed at the restaurant with a lovely decorated table and our soon to be yummy pre ordered dinner.

Boarding the Ferry was an easy process and once allocated our cabin cards we then dropped off our goodies in the cabin and made our way for a night cap in the blue lit lounge area before having a brief nights rest.

05h30 the alarm went off followed by a 'charming' French voice signing Opera coming out of what appeared to be the night stand... Welcome to France and WAKE UP!

After a series of giggling fits, us girls met up with the rest of the crew and enjoyed breakfast before docking and continuing on our journey.

The drive was spent mostly sleeping and occasionally waking to Nigel's voice pointing out an interesting view or fact about the landscape. We broke the journey a bit by stopping in a gorgeous little village called Sées where we were treated with a delicious hot chocolate and croissant. We had some time to wander around the local buzzing market and visited a very old and character filled Church towering in the centre of the village.

Next Stop was lunch at Julie and Nick Baldwin's farm called La Grande Fontaine. A very cute farm house that is impressively Eco-friendly and has a tremendous amount of character- exactly the type of place I hope to live in and own one day! I was especially impressed with the compost loo, as well as loved the kitchen that had something interesting in every corner. Julie treated us to a delicious home made soup followed by organic veggies, a variety of cheeses and fresh bread. We finished off with a colourful and tasty Fruit tart. Tummies full and satisfied, we then took a walk around the property. Rob the tree hunter spotted some lovely trees and well the tree hugging began.



We arrived in Mézières-en-Brenne at 5pm. Helen and I joined forces in a room that would for the next 2 weeks be our sleeping haven. The rooms were clean, crisp and comfortable! I soon discovered the wonderful water pressure and thankfully I now knew peace we had unlimited hot water which in the two weeks to follow we very much appreciated after a days work.

The group then met in the local bar where some rugby was showing before we enjoyed our first dinner at the Hotel across from our Gite called L'Hôtel Au Boeuf Couronné. It was here that I tasted my new favourite soup – Roasted walnuts, garlic and croutons- YUM!



On Sunday morning we had a nice relaxing breakfast followed by some exploring of the surrounding area. First we went to La Maison de la Nature which is the information centre for the Chérine nature reserve, and from there we walked to the Cistude bird Hide. I felt so inexperienced when everyone whipped out their fancy binoculars and telescopes, but thankfully to my rescue Nigel offered me the use of his binoculars and I got to have a peep through the telescope when I liked. We were spoilt with views of the lake and all types of birds namely Great Egrets *Casmerodius albus*, Common Pochards *Aythya farina*, Smews *Mergellus albellus*, Great crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*, Mallards *Anas platyrhynchos*, Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*, and many more.

At the Ricot hide we saw more species among them being Great Heron *Ardea cinerea*, Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra*, and a Common buzzard *Buteo buteo*.

Then at Maison du Parc tourist centre which was a little drive away, we found a perfect picnic spot outside, and enjoyed a lovely lunch. I also made a donkey friend and was greeted by the cute unusual French sheep. At the tourist centre I bought my hubby a Valentines gift, admired all the local produce and crafts, and then enjoyed a slide presentation explaining different aspects of Brenne. After a walk at Étang La Mer Rouge where Rob found a caterpillar of an unidentified butterfly, we set off back to the Gite for some free time and later on an introduction to Tony Williams. For dinner we enjoyed another wonderful meal at a restaurant overlooking the lake at Gabrière .



Monday the 8th was our first days work and so after breakfast we all boarded our bus and headed off to meet Tony for an informative talk at Maison de le Nature. Following the talk we went with Tony and Joel to our site at Étang Purais. Bow saws and loppers in hand, the habitat creation began! With everyone's good efforts, the Blackthorn, Bramble and Willows started to disappear into the fires made, and at 4pm when we finished we were pretty proud of what we had done. That night back at the gîte we were treated by Mark, and Heather to a wonderful meal and afterwards some of us enjoyed a few entertaining games of Jenga and card games.

On Tuesday we continued to remove Blackthorn, bramble, Dogwood and Willow at Étang Purais, and I got to give the brushcutter a good go and was pleased with my 'field' that I worked on and then raked afterwards.

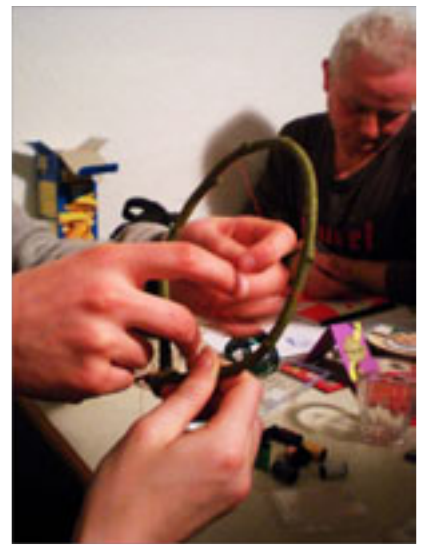


Wednesday was a great day as we were joined by a group from Le Foyer who have special needs. We were inspired by them when they got stuck into cutting and raking, and we all thoroughly enjoyed our lunch of baked potatoes and picnic eats, as well as marshmallows on the fire! Later in the day the snow began to fall and I saw my first proper snowflake in perfect formation which was very exciting. That night's hot Michael stirred up a wonderful Nigerian chicken dish which even caught the vegetarian's attention.



Due to the snow that had fallen during the night, we were unable to work at the sight. The road to the tourist office was OK so we went there to an interesting exhibition of a man who did a journey of following the migration of Whiskered Turn birds from Mali in Africa to La Brenne in France. A few of us decided to walk back to the gite which turned out to be an icy walk to say the least. It was however beautiful as we explored some of the forest and got a lovely close up view of a Blue Tit collecting twigs along one of the lakes. Once we got back to the gite some of us got our creative juices flowing in our room where we started on our collection of gifts for Heather birthday on Friday. Neil sanded attentively at the heart shaped piece of Willow Mark had cut for us. Helen, Richard and I tested out our drawing skills while Rob and Michael worked on the card. Later on Tony's wife Micelle came to give a French lesson where I learnt a few good sayings and words namely 'J ai faim' *I am hungry*, 'Je proh ma doche' *I want to take a shower* and 'Avey Vous' *Do you have...*

Later that night once Heather was 'sent' to her room, everyone got involved around the communal table and added their creative touch to the birthday poster. With the help of Kathy and her water paints, the end result was stunning! The sanded and oiled heart with engravings was ready, Richard and Helens dream catcher made from natural items was the perfect finish, and so off to bed it was!



Friday morning came and Heather was appreciative for her birthday message on the white board, little did she know what we had planned for her later that evening. We continued work at Étang Puraïs and after completing the fire break we tried to burn the grassland but did not succeed as the snow was making it an impossible task. Once we arrived back at the gîte Richard, Rob and I began our spicy curry dish which went down pretty OK considering its strength.

Heather was really happy with all the presents, and loved her cake that was decorated beautifully by the local bakery. We all trotted off to the bar where we had a night of dancing, meeting locals and having a fantastic time! Social integration was marked full marks that night as some of us even attended a house party that went on quite late indeed.



The next day a late breakfast came with a smile and while some went on a crane 'hunt', others spent the day mountain biking and relaxing. On our bike ride, Helen and I got our first close up view of a Coppu. We were quite amused by its thick long tail and horrible yellow teeth. I could then imagine the destruction it causes with those teeth and later on found out just how much damage they do especially for the whiskered Turns where they eat the water lilies on which the birds create their nests.

The rest of the afternoon was spent reading some of the interesting books Kathy and Nigel bought along, as well as the odd card game here and there.



Sunday was a day of exploration. We went on a lovely walk around La Touche and Michael came to an abrupt halt where he heard some grunting. Mark being the brave volunteer snuck up to find the tracks of wild boar. On a mad chase we ran to get a glimpse of about 20 Wild Boar desperately running away for cover. Ironically though we think we chased them into the hunt going on nearby when we heard a series of shots. Poor wild boar! The group did however thoroughly enjoy the Wild Boar that they ate the following Thursday. The field that we had a walk on was where the previous years group had worked to allow Marsh Gentians to grow for the rare butterflies called the Alcon Blue *Masculinea Alcon* to lay their eggs on.



We then went to a café in Lingé to enjoy some warmth and hot chocolate before going to see the Paulnay Church which I found absolutely fascinating. Outside the building were excavated grave stone coffins that dated as far back as the 9th century! Inside the Church there were detailed paintings of mediaeval images displaying life in those days. The massive red door entrance caught my attention and had my lying on the icy ground taking photos; it was however worth the effort. Before heading to the gîte we stopped at a Forêt de Lancosme to see the St Sulpice old chapel. Near the chapel there is a natural spring which later locals told us is believed to have magic powers. In the forest I found some interesting Fungi and tried to track down the sound of a woodpecker but unfortunately had no luck in seeing it. We were also impressed with the amazing tall Oak trees that after Nigel teaching up a measuring technique, measured the height to be an estimated 30m. Later that evening we were pleasantly surprised with our decorated private venue at L'Hôtel Au Boeuf Couronné where we enjoyed a delicious Valentines dinner. Even the chef felt the love when he was serenaded by the group singing to him one of Marks taught songs... (Actually I think he thought we were all a little bit made)



Week number 2! Monday morning we were back to Étang Purais where we continued to clear away the scrub and willow, and really enjoyed the soup Kathy prepared on the fire for lunch. After work we headed back to the gîte before going to La Maison de la Nature for a talk from Tony and his colleague Laura Van-Ingen.

The talk was really interesting as Laura spoke about the Whiskered Turns and Pond Tortoises. It was interesting to find out that the birds live for more than 7 years and nest in the same place they were born at or 7km nearby. The ringing process of colour differentiation was also something new I learnt.

I was especially keen to hear about the Pond Tortoises and was fascinated to hear that France boasts being home to over 50 000 Tortoises a large portion being found in La Brenne. The tagging of the Tortoises is done by placing transmitters on some of them as well as marking of their shells.

Tony educated us with a slide show about the vast species of butterflies found in La Brenne. My favourite was the Swallow tail butterfly, the Marbled White butterfly and the Lesser Purple Emperor butterfly.

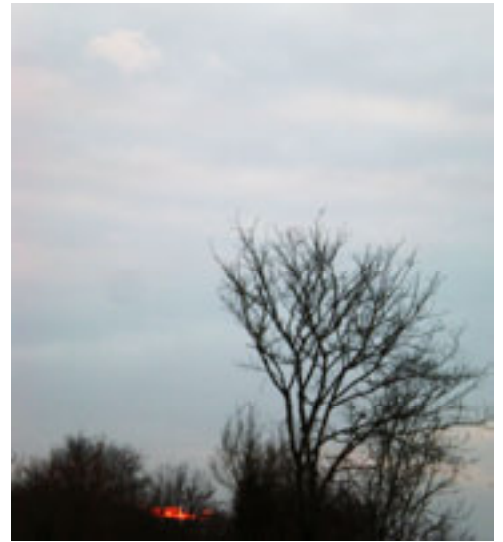
For the remainder of the night we had another lovely dinner and relaxing time at the gîte.



On Tuesday we went to Etang Purais to finish off work at the site. More Willow trees were cleared from an area where a shallow pond will in the future be created. The sun came out and brought with it a burst of energy from everyone! We all formed a line leading to the log pile and got a system going of throwing logs to one another making the job a fun and productive one. There was signing, laughing and lots of flying logs! Kindly Joel drove his truck to the site where we loaded it up with all the tools and some of us cheeky girls snuck in a lift to our bus.

After a brief stop at the gîte we went to Etang de La Rouge to watch the Cranes coming in to settle for the night. Dusk treated us to a magnificent pink sunset and we were spoilt with a close up view of the Cranes flying directly overhead us. The sound was incredible and we were even more spoilt when we witnessed a Wild Fox in hunting mode chasing after some geese in the field ahead.

Back to the gîte we were, and pancakes where on the go to celebrate Pancake Day.



Wednesday the 17th we met Tony at La Maison de la Nature and followed him and Julian to our new work site beside the D17 opposite Étang Miclos. The group split into 2 groups and worked on different sites clearing scrubs and opening up pond space.

That afternoon 5 of us were fortunate enough to go horse riding at a local Equestrian estate called Les Petit Champs in Mézières. I was very happy to meet my horse Amor and had an instant bonding moment with him! After brushing them down, cleaning their hooves and saddling them up, off we went and well literally off I did go when I fell off Amor due to not paying attention when standing on a slope and was frightened by another horse. Amor did however seem to feel bad and a quick cuddle session sorted us both out and we continued on the peaceful ride through the gorgeous country side of Mézières. Later in the afternoon some of the group assisted Rob on a tree hunt where with the help of a local, Henry Manteau, they had a close up look at a Sweet Chestnut tree with a girth of an impressive 6.3 metres.

After a tasty dinner that night were delighted when Manu a local young lady we had met and became friends with, stopped in for a visit and joined in for some signing with Mark and the group- our favourite song (that I still don't know the words to) goes something like 'Rare Ro the Rutland Bog bog down in the valley oh' ... very entertaining!



Our last day of work had arrived, and we were once again joined by the special group from Le Foyer. I immediately took to Nathalie when I gave her a piggy back over a large puddle and had a good old giggle! The group were really enthusiastic and got stuck in to the bramble and helped clear away what had been cut. After some tea and biscuits we bid them a sad farewell and didn't doubt that they would stay in our memories for a long time. Whilst working Rob managed to connect to Shropshire BBC radio where he had a radio interview and gave some information about what we were doing in La Brenne. We all gave a 'BONJOUR' shout out.

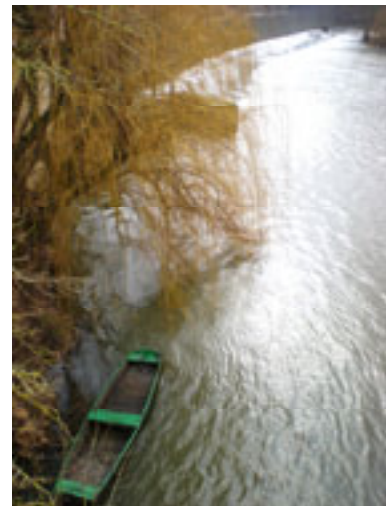


In the afternoon I had a usual fight with a Blackthorn that was being very stubborn and didn't want to come out of my boot making it impossible to work. I tried to cut it out and had a slight accident and chopped off a tip of my finger! Luckily the group came to the rescue and managed to temporarily sort it out with the first Aid kit. Julian then kindly drove me and Heather to the information office where Nigel and the whole group came to collect us before heading back to the gîte for a quick clean and then came back to Maison de la Nature for drinks.

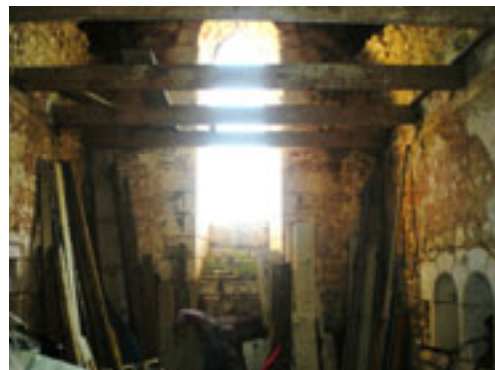
We had a lovely big thank you from Jacques Trotignon and the rest of the staff who work there, and were lucky enough to receive posters with personally signed messages from artist Francois Desbordes.

The Wild boar was really enjoyed that night, and us Veggies were treated to a delicious potato and sun-dried tomato bake.

Friday the 19th was our last official day in La Brenne. We had some breakfast and then went to a gorgeous little village called Angles sur l' Anglin situated right on a river. It was a postcard village and had loads of character everywhere.



After that we headed to a local goats cheese farm belonging to a friend of Tony's named Denis Vandrome. It was interesting to see how the process worked, and I was personally glad to see how happy the goats were. You could clearly see the owner loved and looked after them. On the property was a lovely old chapel dating back to the 12th century and inside it some of us got a quick glimpse of what we thought to be a Barn Owl due to its white colouring, dashing out from our disturbance.



We then drove to La Blanc and had a very fulfilling lunch at Pizza Bella. We had some free time to wander around the town and so off we went to explore the local supermarket and purchase some last minute presents and souvenirs.

Once back at the gîte, after a quick tidy up and packing session, we met at the bar and Dominic the barmen was kind enough to present us with some farewell Champagne. Our last dinner in the village was at the Hotel across the road and it was as delicious as ever, definitely a hint of sadness knowing it was the last.

At the bar our new local friends waited for us to join them, where we enjoyed our last night with them and ended up once again at Philips house to have one more very late night! It was sad to say goodbye to them when leaving the party after exchanging of contacts details, I really felt sad to go.



Waking up at 7.30 was quite a challenge but the prospect of sleeping in the bus helped. After some breakfast and a surprise visit by Philip and Manu to bid us off and a sincere thank you and goodbye from Tony... into the Bus and away we went! Au-revoir Mézières-en-Brenne, but see you again one day for sure!

The European Conservation Action Network 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 is funded through the Leonardo da Vinci section of the European Union Lifelong Learning Programme and has partners in France, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Belgium, Poland and Romania. Further information can be obtained from www.kingcombecentre.org.uk or from Nigel Spring (tel: 0044.1963.23559/mobile: 0044.7981.776767.Email: nigelspring@yahoo.co.uk).