

# EuCAN Environmental Conservation in La Brenne



## The purpose of conservation

By

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## Content

Executive summary.....	3
Introduction.....	5
The Conservation Work.....	7
Rationale .....	7
Discussion .....	8
Recommendation .....	8
References.....	10
Appendixes .....	11
I. Itinerary for EuCAN visit to La Brenne, 5 <sup>th</sup> to 20 <sup>th</sup> of February, 2010. ....	11
II. Map representation of the areas in La Brenne.....	18
III. Pictures of conservation work sites.....	19
Acknowledgment .....	21



## Executive summary

*La Brenne* is located in central France, it is a place known as the land of lakes as there are over 1300 lakes which are all man made for fishing, hunting and conservation of biodiversity.

Conservation work in *La Brenne* started privately in 1982, and finally took structure in 1989 under the umbrella of *Parc Naturel Regional de la Brenne* in France. *La Brenne* is one of the two Ramsar site (pg 6) in the whole of France.

Historically, the region used to be a forestry type of ecological system, and in the 15th century many trees were cut down to produce the energy needed to get iron from the iron ore discovery. With this systemic and progressive deforestation for economic interest, it soon became apparent that the soil could retain water because it was impermeable; hence the creation of lakes as a suitable alternative.

The actual conservation work is habitat recreation and continuous maintenance, which consists of cutting down and burning overgrown shrubs. Engaging in this activity is to help recreate the former ecosystem of open mix of grassland, which once existed many years ago, to support biodiversity growth in the region.

The main conservation work in *La Brenne* is habitat recreation, which requires continuous tendering, it is therefore expected that there would be measures in place to ensure that the work of habitat recreation would be maintained over the years to ensure that the land areas finally regain its meadow grassland characteristic. With some insight into the LPO management measures (pg7), it appears that the bulk of the conservation work is being undertaken through voluntary funding hence, our presence in France through the EuCAN project by *Leonardo da Vinci* programme funding scheme (pg 8).

However, from on site observation of previous conservation work, there seem to be very little or no maintenance done, as some of the undesirable plants have already started growing in these areas. This is due to the fact that there is no budget for 'support personnel' even to champion local resourcing of voluntary work.



I hope that this critical point would be appraised by the management at least to financially support conservation personnel to organise, resource and network for voluntary assistance especially within the locality and in France as a whole.





## Introduction

*La Brenne* lies in an area of central France south of the Loire, about 80 kilometres South-East of Tours and 80 kilometres east of Poitiers. It is home to many lakes, which have evolved as a result of the sustaining capacity of the ecology of the land. These lakes are man made for different functions such as fishing, hunting and enhancing the biodiversity of migrating birds, ducks and other aquatic living creatures.

*La Brenne* was historically a forest type of ecological region in the middle ages, which tends to sustain a relatively prosperous agricultural practice with booming population. However, the gradual deforestation of the region due to wood trees cut down for energy to separate Iron from Iron ore exposed the true nature of the soil as impermeable. As the forest diminishes it was discovered that water was being retained on the soil surfaces forming pools of water in many areas of the region. This emerging soil and ecological problems resulted in a continuously dwindling population in the habitat. Historic buildings such as the ancient railway station called *Lingé* and the very old school buildings, which according to history used to have very many children in attendance but now deserted, are some of the indicators of a once relatively highly populated region. Studies revealed that the soil texture could not hold water down hence a lot of subsistence agricultural practices were adversely affected and abandoned in what was once a booming agricultural region. This soil condition also indicate characteristic of most wetland areas.

These wetlands were later converted into lakes primarily for fish farming and hunting. The Monks introduced *Pike fish* however; this fishes were not very commercially viable as they were the bony type. This then gave way for the introduction of *Carp fish* around the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1989, *Parc Naturel Regional de la Brenne* was commissioned to look over the activities of the wetlands in line with the European Union directive. It spans an area of 1,672 km<sup>2</sup> (646 sq mi) located in the *Indre département* of France. It was founded December 22, 1982. However, the site has long been one of the two *Ramsar* conservation site in France and many landowners in the area are incorporated as partners in the *Parc*.



*Ramsar* sites are wetlands of International importance designated under the *Ramsar* Convention adopted in Iran in February 1971, which came to force in December 1975. Under this canopy some lakes were bought over in line with the European Union Bird's Directive. But the very nature of the Carp fish in some of these lakes does not support a good ecological balance for migrating birds nesting as they create turbulence and cause muddiness in the lakes.

In contrast to the fishermen, the interest of the hunters who are perceived to own the best lakes seem to be in line with the *Parc Naturel Regional* management for hunting wild birds, because a relatively clear and quiet scene is required which means less or no carp fish. But they do desire many ducks in the lakes. This is a point of conflict amongst the interest groups within the *Parc*. In some way these interests have to be synergised and brought to a balance for sustainable growth and development, hence the dear need of conservation. There have been discussion groups with the aim to bring to focus the various interests in agreement to the wise use of the lakes. This agreement is being regulated under the European Birds' Directive, which tends to harmonise the various interest groups including support for fishing.

Other lands that are not completely wetlands but with patches of wetness within the *Parc* are being enhanced to facilitate biodiversity. One of such area is the *Cherine Nature Reserve* where we carried out our conservation work in *La Brenne*. This area was once a wide expanse of mix open grassland with lakes but is now dominated by shallows, trees and shrubs. Some parts have overgrown into woodland primarily due to neglect over the years. The *Parc Naturel* management aim is to re-establish this open land as meadow grassland once again, which will support the growth of some particular flowering plants such as the *Marsh Gentian*. These flowering plants attract some species of butterflies like the *Alcon Blue* butterfly. It will also attract and encourage nesting of many migrating birds hence encouraging biological diversity in this area.



## The Conservation Work

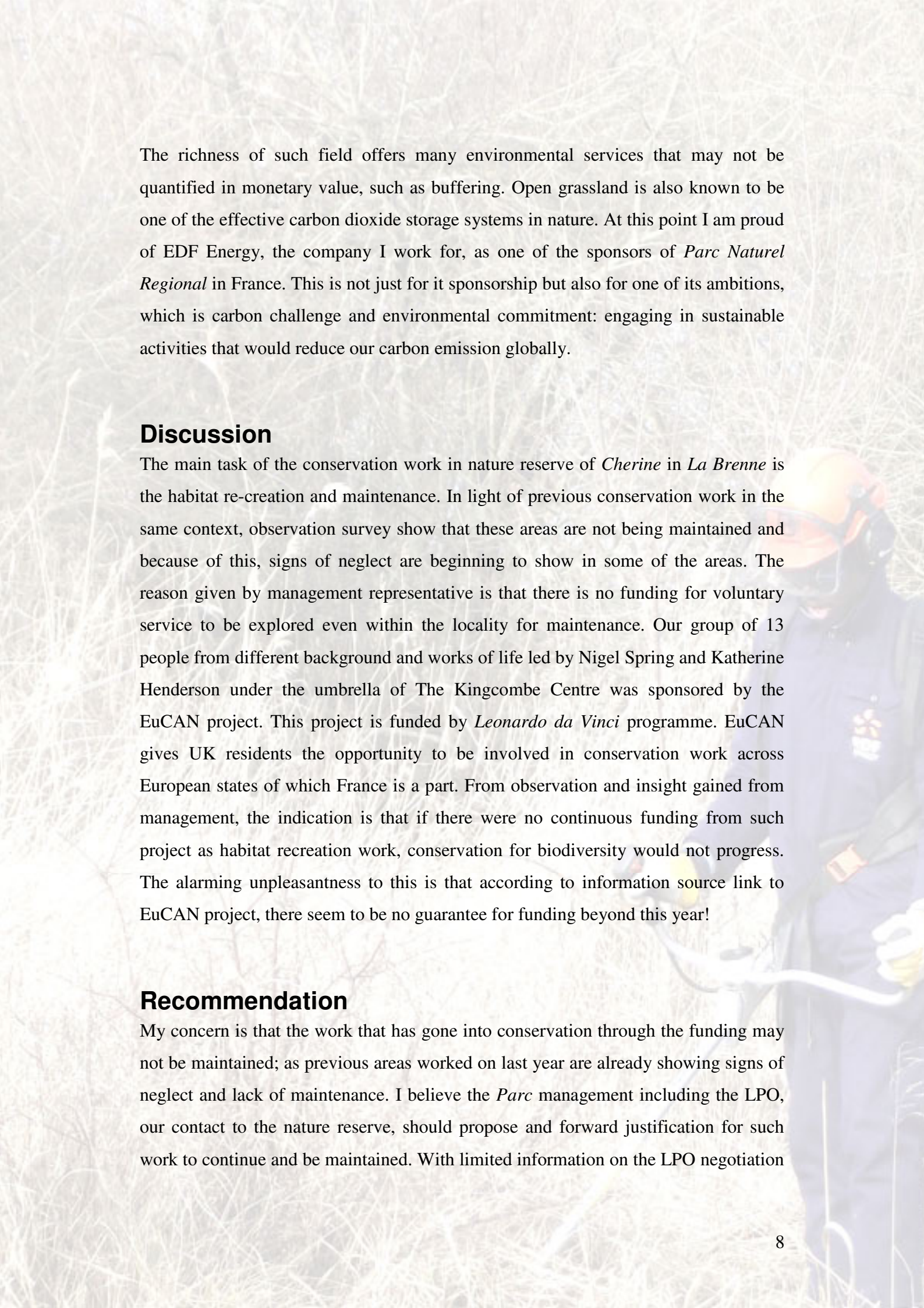
Work started on Monday after meeting with our contact to *Le Parc Naturel Regional* Management, Tony Williams, at *La Maison de la Nature*: the information centre for the nature reserve of Chérine where we worked. Chérine is part of the *Parc Naturel Regional de la Brenne*, which is an equivalent of the National Parks in the UK. Tony works for *La Ligue Pour la Protection des Oiseaux* (LPO), the English equivalent of RSPB. LPO is one of the management organisations under the *Parc Naturel*. Our conservation work under their direct management in Chérine is simply to remove as much as possible, the growing and dead blackthorns and willows, to cut down unwanted shrubs and burn them in strategically located areas within the grassland. This is to encourage a meadow of mixed species grass to grow and flourish in the area once again.

For some of us it was our first experience in making bushfire and burning cut down unwanted materials. And we perfected new skills, in the use of conservation equipment like brushcutting machines, learnt in a preparation weekend before our trip to *La Brenne*. Some put to use their skill of chainsawing and others engaged in other activity of ‘slash and burn’ as so popularly called, with various gardening tools. We also helped clear off willows from patch of wetland within the grassland area where a shallow pond is to be created in line with conservation purpose. We were also helpful in clearing shrubs off other grassland areas within the nature reserve opening up some existing ponds in that area.

## Rationale

Slash and burn is actually a way of changing the ecology of the land we worked on to encourage a meadow of mixed species of grasses to grow on the land. The mixed grassland is essentially dependent on habitat recreations and it is the rare habitat that does need to be conserved (maintained) for biodiversity. First as a conservation area, the presence of biodiversity is biologically argued to be an indication or measure of the health and function of the ecosystem of the area. Potentially, it has wider advantages that are far reaching beyond the region. Biodiversity increases the versatility of the area, and the richness of the open field helps in the pollination of other flowering plants that collectively give an aesthetic view of the area.



A person wearing a blue uniform and an orange helmet is working in a field of tall, dry grass. The person is holding a tool, possibly a brush or a small shovel, and is looking down at the ground. The background is a vast field of similar grass, extending to the horizon under a bright sky.

The richness of such field offers many environmental services that may not be quantified in monetary value, such as buffering. Open grassland is also known to be one of the effective carbon dioxide storage systems in nature. At this point I am proud of EDF Energy, the company I work for, as one of the sponsors of *Parc Naturel Regional* in France. This is not just for its sponsorship but also for one of its ambitions, which is carbon challenge and environmental commitment: engaging in sustainable activities that would reduce our carbon emission globally.

## Discussion

The main task of the conservation work in nature reserve of *Cherine* in *La Brenne* is the habitat re-creation and maintenance. In light of previous conservation work in the same context, observation survey shows that these areas are not being maintained and because of this, signs of neglect are beginning to show in some of the areas. The reason given by management representative is that there is no funding for voluntary service to be explored even within the locality for maintenance. Our group of 13 people from different background and works of life led by Nigel Spring and Katherine Henderson under the umbrella of The Kingcombe Centre was sponsored by the EuCAN project. This project is funded by *Leonardo da Vinci* programme. EuCAN gives UK residents the opportunity to be involved in conservation work across European states of which France is a part. From observation and insight gained from management, the indication is that if there were no continuous funding from such project as habitat recreation work, conservation for biodiversity would not progress. The alarming unpleasantness to this is that according to information source link to EuCAN project, there seems to be no guarantee for funding beyond this year!

## Recommendation

My concern is that the work that has gone into conservation through the funding may not be maintained; as previous areas worked on last year are already showing signs of neglect and lack of maintenance. I believe the *Parc* management including the LPO, our contact to the nature reserve, should propose and forward justification for such work to continue and be maintained. With limited information on the LPO negotiation



for such continuity, questions were raised on the maintenance of the conservation work carried out previously. Suggestions of how various organisations could be appealed to, for them to get involved were offered. I personally, informed the management representative that EDF Energy pays for its staff to engage in helping the community and getting involved in environmental work at least two days in a year. Since the company already sponsor the *Parc* it would be easy take advantage of this community scheme to arrange for interested staff in France to help out through the community management personnel. However and sadly to note, this does not even seem to be enough as the LPO may not be able to financially support a contact Personnel/Champion for the orientation of any volunteering person or group.

Friendly chats with locals within *Mézières-en-Brenne* where we stayed for two weeks revealed no interest in such voluntary conservation work; primarily, due to lack of incentives, in the midst of other socio-economic pressures. The hope is that the critical point of maintaining consistency in habitat recreation through the conservation work, to enhance an even growth of meadow in the area would be given thorough appraisal by the management; in order to financially support conservation personnel to organise, resource and network for voluntary assistance especially within the locality and in France as a whole.



## References

### Books

Parc naturel régional de la Brenne guide pratique, 2009.

### Web sites

<http://www.naturetrek.co.uk/wildlife-holidays-in-europe/detailsdb.asp?ID=100>

[http://www.parc-naturel-brenne.fr/english/contenu\\_accueilGB.htm](http://www.parc-naturel-brenne.fr/english/contenu_accueilGB.htm)

<http://www.jncc.gov.uk/page-161>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parc\\_naturel\\_r%C3%A9gional\\_de\\_la\\_Brenne](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parc_naturel_r%C3%A9gional_de_la_Brenne)

<http://holidayinfrance.biz/brennenaturalpark.htm>

Lectures by Tony Williams (LPO management Personnel) on Parc naturel régional de la Brenne. February, 2010.



## **Appendixes**

### ***I. Itinerary for EuCAN visit to La Brenne, 5<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> of February, 2010.***

Katherine Henderson.

#### **Friday 5<sup>th</sup> February**

We left Alweston at 4.00pm and collected Neil, Mark and Rob from Manor Farm B&B at Folke. We met everybody else at Southampton Airport railway station and went to the Still and West pub in Portsmouth where we met Michael. After a good supper we drove to the ferry port and boarded the boat which sailed at 10.45pm.

#### **Saturday 6<sup>th</sup> February**

We had an early breakfast on the boat and disembarked after a calm crossing at 6.45am (French time). We arrived in Sées at 8.30am, wandered round the town and watched the market come to life, before having coffee and croissants for breakfast in a little bar. We bought provisions for lunch and departed at 10.15am. We reached Nick and Julie Baldwin's farm at St George de Couée near Courdemanches at 12.15am. Their farm is called La Grande Fontaine. We had a lovely lunch and a brief look around before leaving at 3.15pm. We arrived at Mézières-en-Brenne at 5.00pm and settled into our gîte. We had a drink in the bar and watched the rugby before going to Bernard's (or L'Hôtel Au Boeuf Couronné) for supper.

#### **Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> February**

Day of Exploration 1: we had a leisurely breakfast and then spent the morning exploring the area. We visited La Maison de la Nature which is the information centre for the nature reserve of Chérine. We walked to the Cistude hide and then Ricot hide where we saw a male Smew amongst other species. We then drove past Gabrière to the Maison du Parc which is the tourist centre of the National Park, where we had a picnic on the tables under a timber framed roof. It was quite cold but we warmed up with some shopping afterwards, and watched several slide presentations which explain about different aspects of the Brenne. There was also an excellent exhibition about local small scale agriculture. Later we had a brief walk at Étang La Mer Rouge and saw 3 cranes flying in the distance.



We returned to the gîte and had free time for a little exploring round the town, watching rugby in the bar or relaxing. At 6.30pm Tony Williams arrived to meet the group and tell us a little about the area and what we would be doing

We went out to supper at La Gabrière, the restaurant overlooking the lake at Gabrière.

### **Monday 8<sup>th</sup> February**

Work day 1: we had breakfast at 8.00am and were ready to leave at 9.00am. We met Tony at La Maison de le Nature at 9.15am and had an informative talk about the work we would be doing. We also met some of the other staff. At 10.30 we went with Tony and Joel to our first work site at Étang Purais. We parked at La Chopinierie and walked what seemed like miles to the edge of the reedbed where we started to clear Blackthorn and Willow from the grassland. We finished work at 4.00pm

The local shop closes early on Monday so we shopped at the supermarket and created the first of many splendid suppers, and had a good evening in the gîte.

### **Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> February**

Work day 2: after breakfast at 8.00am we went to Chérine to find Tony at 9.00am. We followed him to Purais and parked at La Chopinierie, a slightly nearer place to continue working at the same site. We had 3 fires and cleared Blackthorn and Dogwood clumps from the grassland before mowing off the dead Molinia thatch. We also cut the Willow in several places. Joel joined us later. We had a proper tea break with the kettle boiling on the gas cooker and picnic lunch.

We returned home and had time to go to the bar before supper in the gîte.

### **Wednesday 10<sup>th</sup> February**

Work day 3: we got to work at 9.30am and the group from the Foyer in Le Blanc arrived at the same time. There were 6 adults with learning difficulties, and with Eric their carer they worked with us all day, but briefly disappeared because one of them had a medical appointment. They returned for lunch and we all shared baked potatoes and marshmallows. We got the tea break down to a fine art using the embers from the fire.

Work finished at 4.00pm and we went home for hot showers, a trip to the bar and supper in the gîte. Another wonderful creation helped on by boggle and jenga games in the background.



### **Thursday 11 February**

Snow! Several centimetres had fallen overnight so after breakfast at the normal time and a brief look round the (very cold) village market, we went to La Maison de la Nature to look at the exhibition on learn a bit more about the Brenne. We had coffee and then half the group walked home while the rest walked to the hide at Chérine admiring past work sites along the way. We saw a few cold looking birds. We returned to the gîte and all went to the bar for lunch and to thaw out.

We had a free afternoon with some people going to explore round the village, and at 6.00pm Michelle Williams came to give us a French lesson.

We had time for a drink afterwards and collected pizzas from the bar to eat at home.

### **Friday 12 February**

Work day 4: Heather's birthday, and she came down to breakfast to be greeted by a lovely banner on the white board. We worked again at Purais with Tony and later Joel. We cut lots of willow to open up an old pond and carried on clearing Blackthorn Dogwood and Alder Buckthorn from the grassland. The firebreak was completed and after lunch we tried a controlled burn of a patch of grassland. There was too much snow for it to work.

We returned home at 4.30pm, had time for a quick cup of tea before four of us went out to watch the cranes coming into roost over Étang La Mer Rouge.

We had a wonderful birthday supper with a splendid birthday cake and everyone went to the bar later. It was a very late night for some.

### **Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> February**

Day off!

Those that didn't want a lie in had breakfast at 9.00am and left at 10.15am for a crane 'hunt'. We went through Rosnay and then to the area south of Dinte village to find the maize fields where the cranes feed during the day. We saw huge numbers of them. We had lunch at La Maison du Parc to try out the carpe frites and fumé and then returned to the gîte after a quick look over La Mer Rouge.

We spent the afternoon as we wished, in the bar watching rugby or pottering about, and had supper in the gîte.



### **Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> February**

Day of Exploration 2: Andrew and Louise left at 8.30am when Tony arrived to take them to Chateauroux station. It was another cold day which we used to explore other places in the area. We walked round La Touche, particularly to look at the grassland which is now grazed for part of the year and is where we have done extensive work for the Alcon Blue Butterfly, *Maculinea alcon*. We stopped in 2 hides but it was too cold to see much, all the lakes being frozen. We had coffee and hot chocolate in the café in Lingé before going to see Paulnay Church, a mediaeval building with fascinating wall paintings. We returned home for lunch in the gîte.

Afterwards we went to The Forêt de Lancosme to see the little chapel of St Sulpice and the holy/magic spring. We were surprised to find the water amazingly warm. There were Hawfinches around too, feeding on the Hornbeam seeds.

We returned home and had the option of going to the bar for more Rugby.

We had supper at L'Hôtel Au Boeuf Couronné.

### **Monday 15<sup>th</sup> February**

Work day 5: we worked at Purais with Joel, Tony and Daniel who was on work experience from school. We continued to clear willow from the reed bed and scrub from the grassland. It was still cold but cups of tea and hot soup helped. We finished at 3.30pm in order to have time for tea and showers at the gîte before going back to La Maison de la Nature at 5.30pm. We had asked Laura Van-Ingen and Tony to tell us about the work they do and they gave us an interesting talk.

The idea of going to Le Blanc for supper followed by a trip to the cinema came to nothing when it appeared that everything was closed on Monday. We had supper in the gîte instead.

### **Tuesday 16<sup>th</sup> February**

Workday 6: the last day we all worked at Purais. Joel, Julian and Daniel worked with us on one final push to clear all the willows from an area they want to dig out to make a shallow pond. We stopped at 3.30 and Joel brought the truck down so that we could load all the tools (and some of the girls) for a bumpy ride back to the van.

We went out after tea to see the cranes coming into roost at Étang de La Mer Rouge but despite getting there at 5.40pm we saw far fewer than before, only a few hundred



and they seemed unsettled. Apparently a large proportion of them had spent the night out on the fields where they had spent the day.

Another good meal at the gîte with extremely well tossed pancakes to mark Pancake Day.

### **Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> February**

Workday 7: we met Tony at La Maison de la Nature at 9.15am (and reminded him to take the wild boar joint out of the freezer) and followed him to a new work site beside the D17 opposite Étang Miclos. We worked in two places, clearing scrub off grassland and opening up some ponds. We returned to the gîte for lunch and in the afternoon 5 people went horse riding from Les Petit Champs in Mézières. Everyone had a free afternoon except Nigel who went back to Purais to help Joel, Julien and Tony finish the burning, and Neil who co-ordinated the supper. At 4.30pm five people went with Henry Manteau in his landrover to look at a Sweet Chestnut tree with a 6.3m girth close to Mézières, and then an Oak with 5.6m girth at Les Vigneaux belonging to Monsieur Le Februne who then showed us the gîte he rents out.

### **Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> February**

Work day 8: the people from Le Foyer met us in La Maison de la Nature at 9.15am and we worked in the same two places again with the Foyer people helping on the grassland site. We stopped for a cup of tea at 11.30 and then Le Foyer people departed. Five people then went to the wood at Chérine to clear bramble from round old cut stumps and returned for lunch. We watched 6 cranes spiralling upwards overhead and saw 50 or more in a long skein flying northwards. Julien worked with us all day and came to the rescue when Lisa cut her finger. Mark went home after lunch to start preparing the splendid wild Boar stew. Work stopped at 4.30pm.

At 5.45pm we returned to La Maison de la Nature for drinks and a big thank you from Jacques Trotignon and the staff for all our work. We went back to the gîte for a delicious supper.



## **Friday 19<sup>th</sup> February**

### **A day of culture**

We had breakfast at 9.00am and then drove to Angles sur l'Anglin where we explored this beautiful old town and had coffee. We then went to Fonteland, the farm owned by Denis Vandrome, a friend of Tony's who apart from being an expert on moths, works with his wife to keep a herd of goats and to produce good cheese. After an interesting look round, we drove to Le Blanc where we had lunch at Pizza Bella near the river. We had a free afternoon exploring the town and visiting the LeClerc supermarket. We returned to La Maison de la Nature and four people went with Christian to look at two old trees, the rest of us went back to clean up the gîte and pack.

We went to the bar before going to L'Hôtel Au Boeuf Couronné because Dominic had invited us for Champagne, but he was asleep. We had a swift drink before our last meal at Bernard's which as usual was fantastic. Champagne from the bar came afterwards and a fond farewell from the locals that for some of our group went on till 4.00am.

## **Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> February**

We had breakfast at 7.30am and everybody was up, packed and ready to go at 8.00am. Tony came to say goodbye, but Manou and her friend arrived even earlier to share breakfast with us and wish everyone well.

It was an uneventful journey, with a dusting of snow lying on the fields on the way to Tours. We stopped for coffee and croissants at the service area north of Tours and then for a picnic lunch in very cold conditions under the castle at Falaise. We detoured to the Pegasus Memorial Museum where several of the group joined in part of one of the guided tours with a very articulate and helpful British guide. The archive film underlined the amazing achievements of the men who landed in Normandy on June 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> 1944 using only flimsy wooden gliders. We arrived at the port in good time only to find that the ferry had been delayed for two hours as it had been involved in a search operation for a Frenchman lost overboard from a fishing boat from Caen. Quick rescheduling of the arrival/overnight arrangements took place and the six hour crossing that followed was moderately calm. We had a very good supper in the self-serve restaurant and eventually arrived at Portsmouth at 23.45. We left Lisa with her husband at Portsmouth, Michael and Richard at the Premier Inn at Southampton airport so that they could catch an early train the following morning, and took the rest



of the group to Folke Manor Farm in Alweston. Neil picked up his car and drove home; Rob, Heather, Helen and Emma drove back up to the north the following morning, leaving Mark at Sherborne station for his train back to Cornwall.





## II. Map representation of the areas in La Brenne





### ***III. Pictures of conservation work sites***

Before working first side



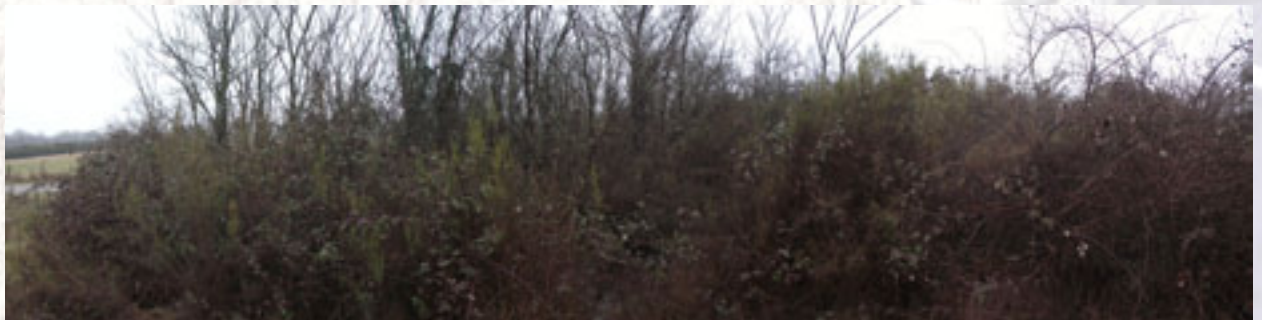
After day three same side



After day six



A different area site- Before





...and after





## Acknowledgment

Many thanks to Nigel Spring and Katherine Henderson for their exemplary leadership and to all the staff members of The Kingcombe Centre for organising a preparation weekend that seeded the EuCAN conservation trip.

Thanks to Tony Williams, Joel, Julien, Daniel who worked with us and help create an atmosphere with a sense of belonging and to Jacques Trotignon the director of LPO for his welcoming and appreciation gesture to us.

Thanks to the *Leonardo da Vinci* programme funding scheme, the funder of the EuCAN project, and to the members of the project committee whose initiative enabled many us in the UK to be able to go on a European funded conservation trip.