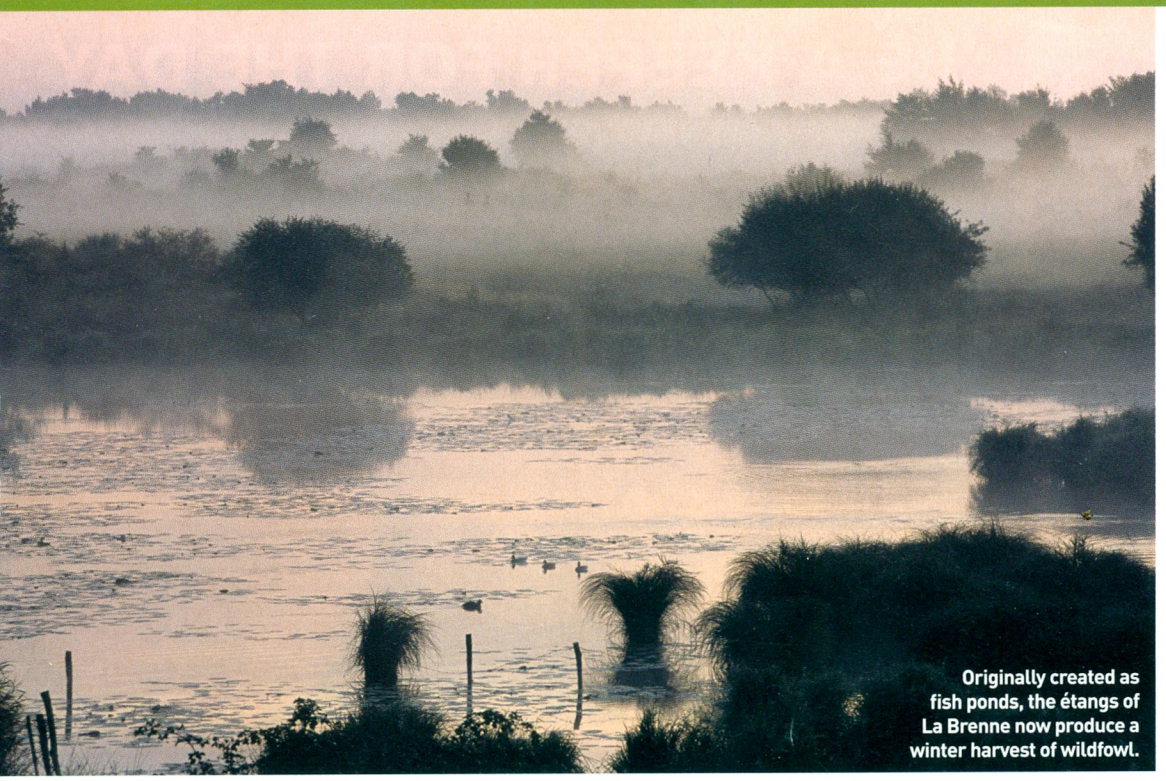


Originally created as fish ponds, the étangs of La Brenne now produce a winter harvest of wildfowl.

WINTER WILDLIFE FRENCH LEAVE

La Brenne

In the heart of France is a regional natural park that is a treasure house of species, says **James Parry.**

Where is La Brenne?
This unpopulated and unspoilt area is in the centre of France, between the towns of Poitiers and Bourges. It covers more than 1,500km^2, and has been part of the country's network of regional natural parks since 1989.

Which habitats are on offer?
La Brenne includes more than 3,000 lakes that were created in the Middle Ages as fish ponds, and still produce an annual harvest of carp, perch, pike and tench. The surrounding patchwork of meadows, lowland heath, hedgerows and woodland is excellent for birds, with more than 280 species recorded and an impressive list of rarities.

What can I expect to see?
You will find vast flocks of wintering ducks, with common visitors such as gadwall, shovelers, wigeon and teal mingling with scarcer species such as smew, red-crested pochards and ferruginous ducks. Up to 7,000 cranes can be present between November and March, feeding on surrounding farmland during the day and roosting around the lakes at night. Several hundred great white egrets also gather here from late summer onwards.

Is it just waterbirds, then?
Not at all. A mouthwatering array of winter raptors includes hen and marsh harriers, peregrines, merlins and white-tailed eagles. The latter can be surprisingly unobtrusive, spending much of their time loafing around on the ground or perched in trees. Though they are usually only present in winter, one individual remained throughout the summer of 2010. Also check out scrub and wooded areas for resident birds such as cirl buntings, crested tits, middle spotted woodpeckers and black woodpeckers.

Will I see other wildlife?
It's highly likely – native mammals include wild boars, red and roe deer, beech and pine martens, and wildcats. Winter can be an excellent time to find them – look for their tracks in mud and snow. To the north-west of La Brenne is the natural park of Loire-Anjou-Touraine, home to an increasing population of European beavers that is now spreading through the region's waterways.

Is it worth visiting La Brenne at other times of year?
Absolutely. Spring and summer are great for breeding birds and butterflies. And a diverse flora includes many rare aquatic species and 36 species of orchid, including the endemic Brenne orchid.

TOP SPECIES TO SEE

Hellio & Van Ingen

Raptors such as the WHITE-TAILED EAGLE migrate here from northern Europe for the winter.

Hellio & Van Ingen

During the winter, COMMON CRANES gather at the Étang de la Mer Rouge to spend the night.

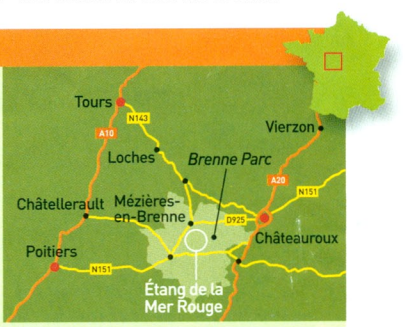
Jasper Doest/Minden/FLPA

Small numbers of SMEW (this is a male) visit La Brenne during the winter months.

NOW YOU DO IT

GETTING THERE
- By air to Poitiers, Tours or Limoges, all served by Ryanair.
- Public transport to La Brenne is limited, so a car is essential. Bike hire is available after you arrive.

PLACES TO VISIT
- At the lake Étang de la Mer Rouge, common cranes fly in to roost an hour before sunset.
- Try the Étangs de Gabriau, du Sault, des Vigneaux and de Piégu for wintering ducks; the Étang de Ricot is best for smew.
- Chérine Nature Reserve is good for raptors.
- Try the Forêt de Lancosme or the holiday centre at the Étang de Bellebouche for woodpeckers.



FURTHER INFORMATION
- Chérine Nature Reserve www.cherine.reserves-naturelles.org
- Maison du Parc www.parc-naturel-brenne.fr/parc/maison-parc
- There are hides and trails at the best birding sites. Though many of the lakes are private, they can be viewed from adjacent roads.

Hellio & Van Ingen/hellio-vaningen.fr