

Uncommon Invertebrates

Dragonflies by Sandy West

Flying over a pond, pool or perched on a flower, dragonflies are a sure sign of summer. They are recognizable by their large bodies; four long, horizontal wings; and the way they hover and zip around. Dragonflies can reach speeds of up to 35 miles an hour and fly just as gracefully backward by lifting off vertically, helicopter style. Their compound eyes are so large they nearly touch, and each one has about 28,000 single eyes, or ommatidia.



Watery Beginnings:

Dragonflies begin their lives in the water. Around midsummer, females hover over bodies of fresh water and dip in their abdomens, laying eggs that hatch in about seven to eight days. Called naiads or nymphs, these larvae stay in the water for up to three years, hunting aquatic insects, mosquito larvae, or small fish with a lower jaw that reaches out and opens up sideways, snatching prey into their mouths. They may even cannibalize other dragonfly nymphs.

Nymphs propel themselves quickly by sucking water into their abdomen and then spitting it out. They undergo between six and 15 molts before emerging as fully formed adult dragonflies, a process that takes about 12 hours. Adults live only about a month, hunting flies, mosquitos, and midges. Their arms slant upward, forming a type of basket and enabling them to scoop up prey in flight.

Dragonflies are important to their environments both as predators (particularly of mosquitos) and as prey to birds and fish. Because these insects require stable oxygen levels and clean water, scientists consider them reliable bioindicators of the health of an ecosystem.



We have always had many butterflies and other creatures in our yard but when we added a pool several years ago the dragonfly population really increased. They swoop over the pool, often several at a time and perch on the flowers and bushes. They are a joy to watch and fun to photograph when they land. Based on research it looks like the species we have is the Steam Bluet and the Regal Darner.

Some surprising facts:

Around 7,000 species of true dragonflies are alive today, and, together with the closely related damselflies, they form the group Odonta, which goes back 325 million years. The largest insect that ever lived was the dragonfly-like griffinfly, which darkened the skies 300 million years ago with a two-foot wingspan.

There are two insects that look similar and both are often called Dragonflies. Damselflies are smaller than dragonflies, with bodies that typically range between 1 1/2 inches and 2 inches, while dragonfly bodies are typically longer than 2 inches. Dragonflies also have larger eyes.

The Dragonfly in art and literature often symbolizes change, transformation, courage and happiness. The dragonfly like the butterfly is one of the few insects that people enjoy seeing and it has been used in artwork from Tiffany stained glass lamps to jewelry and fine art.



Photo Credit: pixabay, Insectidentification.org
References: pubs.ext.vt.edu, insectidentification.org
nationalgeographic.com, ucmp.berkeley.edu