

CHASING DRAGONS

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Photo by: Mike Thomas

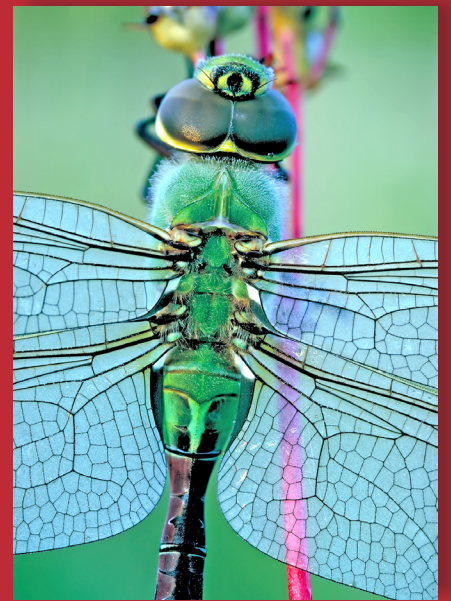


Photo by: Mike Thomas

Dragonflies are amazing insects. They can fly forward, backward, hover in place and turn abruptly. Each of their two compound eyes contain thousands of lenses, allowing them to see in every direction except directly behind them. They also have three additional eyes that have simple lenses. Dragonflies can tell us if our environment is healthy. They need healthy aquatic systems as they lay their eggs in the water. They also need upland areas where the adults catch their prey on the wing. Plus, they also have really cool names like dragonhunter, comet darter, unicorn clubtail and black-shouldered spinylegs. Some damselflies live but for a week or two as adults, while some of the dragonflies migrate thousands of miles in the fall and can live as “nymphs” (the immature stage) in a pond for several years.

DID YOU KNOW

Fossil ancestors of dragonflies have been dated to the Earth's Carboniferous period, some 325 mya.

The largest fossil dragonfly ancestors had wingspans of 30”, about the wingspan of a crow. A pretty large insect!

There are some 5,000 species of dragonflies and damselflies in the world and they live on every continent but Antarctica. In Connecticut, 157 species have been seen.

Large “darners” can fly at speeds of up to 30 mph.

Dragonflies eat insects. The “Dragonhunter,” a large “Clubtail” dragonfly, patrols brooks and rivers, catching smaller dragonflies.

DRAGONFLY MIGRATION

In fall, you can sometimes see large numbers of dragonflies flying across a field or along the beach. Like birds, these dragonflies are migrating. Dragonfly migration was, until recently, not well understood as is the migration of the monarch butterfly. We now know that common green darners, large three

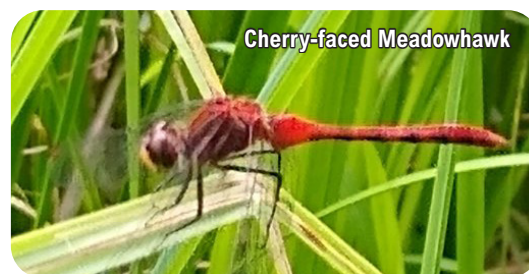


Photo by: Jay Kaplan

inch dragonflies, fly down the coast to the southeastern states, where they lay eggs and die. The next generation spends winter as adults, then lays eggs and dies. In spring, a new green darter generation returns

north to Connecticut and other northeastern states. The fall migration south can cover almost a thousand miles. However, this is nothing compared to the fall migration of a dragonfly known as the globe skimmer or wandering glider, an insect that is found on every continent except Antarctica. Little is known about the movements of this dragonfly around the world, but it has been discovered that one population of wandering gliders flies across the Indian Ocean each year, a distance of 11,000 miles and the longest known migration for any insect.

What is the difference between a Dragonfly and a Damselfly?



Photo by: Isaac Rosenthal

DAMSELFLY



Photo by: Isaac Rosenthal

DRAGONFLY

Dragonflies and damselflies belong to the insect group known as “Odonata.” Dragonflies are large, fast fliers, and hold their wings out like an airplane when at rest. Damselflies are small and thin, their flight is more “fluttery,” and they hold their wings up over their backs at rest. The hindwings of dragonflies are larger and a different shape than the forewings. In damselflies, the forewings and hindwings are similar in size and shape.

DRAGONFLY LIFE CYCLES

Dragonflies lay their eggs in water or on plants in or near the water. When the eggs hatch, the young dragonflies, called “nymphs,” crawl below the surface and rest on the bottom of the pond, brook or river. Some of the larger darners may remain in this stage for a year or more. Even as nymphs, dragonflies are fierce predators, and catch and eat insects, small fish and salamanders. When the time comes, the nymph crawls out of the water onto a rock, plant stem or other object. The exoskeleton splits down the back and the adult dragonfly emerges much as a butterfly emerges from its chrysalis. Like a butterfly, it takes a while for the adult dragonfly's new exoskeleton to harden, and its wings to unfurl so that it can take flight.

Where to find Dragonflies?



Photo by: Isaac Rosenthal

Large darners and other migrating dragonflies can be seen well into October as they fly southward. Look for them in large fields or especially along the Connecticut coast. Other “pond” dragonflies and damselflies persist at the weedy edges of ponds and marshlands until the first frosts. Some of the larger darners will be on the wing through October. Late dragonflies, like the autumn meadowhawk, have been recorded into early December.



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