

Ode News - An Occasional Newsletter for Dragonfly Enthusiasts in Southeastern Massachusetts

Volume I, Number I - April, 1994

Hi! Welcome to the first issue of *Ode News*! The inspiration for this newsletter came during an exciting summer observing dragonflies and damselflies in 1993. We made a great splash (sometimes literally!) into the world of odonates, observing approximately 50 species, and visiting about 30 different sites. After spending many hours in the summer sun, with sweat pouring down our faces, desperately trying to catch even a glimpse of the dragonflies whizzing by us (not to mention putting up with the ferocious Eastern Toe Biters!), we suddenly realized we were quite serious about odes. And the wheels started to turn . . . How about creating a census form so that data will be comparable from year to year? How about an annual Dragonfly Count, similar to the 4th of July Butterfly Count? How about a newsletter to keep all those interested updated about the status of odes on the Cape?

The format of *Ode News* no doubt will evolve with time. We are amateur newsletterologists as well as odonatologists. However, our feeling is that the more notes we take and the more people we have contact with, the more everyone will learn and the better able we will be to help odes when they need it most! Please write if you have any ideas for the newsletter, or if you want to submit anything for future issues!

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The 1993 Season

Fun and frustration filled the summer of 1993. As beginners we sometimes spent hours trying to identify just one individual. We understand for identification of some species it is necessary to catch individuals with nets and to look at them in the hand. In 1994, we'll probably try this and

hopefully have some luck! We wouldn't have gotten very far at all last summer if it hadn't been for Ginger Carpenter's book, *The Dragonflies and Damselflies of Cape Cod*. Also very helpful was Sidney Dunkle's book, *Dragonflies of the Florida Peninsula, Bermuda, and the Bahamas*. We looked for odes in all corners of the Cape - from Provincetown south to the Monomoy Islands and west across the mid-Cape to the Elizabeth Islands. Unfortunately we were so caught up in identification and photography that field notes were often forgotten. But we did take enough to come up with the following highlights of the 1993 season:

Single male **Long-legged Green Darners** (*Anax longipes*) were observed on three different occasions at Gould's Pond in Orleans. This dragon is a species of Special Concern in Massachusetts, and previously had not been recorded east of Dennis. The first sighting was on 4 July. A male of this species was also seen at Mary Dunn Pond in Hyannis on 6 July.

At least two unidentified **blue darners** (genus *Aeshna*) were seen at a vernal pool in Eastham on 14 June. At first we thought they were Black-tipped Darners (*Aeshna tuberculifera*), but Ginger records the flight period of this species as late July through early September. The early date suggests the possibility of Spring Blue Darner (*Aeshna mutata*, also known as the Spatterdock Darner), a species listed as state Endangered, recorded only once before on Cape Cod (7 June 1987 in Brewster by Ginger) and very rarely anywhere in Massachusetts. These two species are extremely similar in appearance and are safely identified only in the hand. We will make a special effort to solve this mystery in 1994!

One **Black-shouldered Spinyleg** (*Dromogomphus spinosus*) was observed resting on the sand at Hawksnest Pond in Harwich on 24 August. This was our only sighting of this handsome dragon during 1993.

Single **Swift River Cruisers** (*Macromia illinoensis*) were observed at three different sites: flying along a dirt road in the Punkhorn Parklands in Brewster on 3 August; patrolling along a dirt road near Higgins Pond in Wellfleet on 9 August; and flying and roosting along a woodland path near Elbow Pond in Brewster on 16 August.

A **Frosted Whiteface** (*Leucorrhinia frigida*) was observed at a vernal pool in Eastham on 14 June. Ginger recorded this early-flying species from Bourne and Falmouth to Hyannis, but did not find it on the Outer Cape.

Some interesting feeding behaviors we happened to "nodus"

- A Great-crested Flycatcher sallying out from a limb after Common Green Darners (*Anax junius*).
- Two unidentified hornets (possibly bald-faced, genus *Vespula*) devouring a *Sympetrum* in what seemed like seconds.
- A Swamp Spreadwing (*Lestes vigilax*) eating a Common Forktail (*Ischnura verticalis*) - head, then thorax, then abdomen, letting the wings drop to the water.
- An aeshnid, probably a Black-tipped Darner (*Aeshna tuberculifera*), foraging among the upper

branches of Pitch Pines (*Pinus rigida*) - it seemed to be snatching or spooking insects directly off the branches/needles of the trees.

Preview: Early emerging species (based on Carpenter, 1991)

Early May

Fragile Forktail (*Ischnura posita*)

Lancet Clubtail (*Gomphus exilis*)

Mid May

Variegated Damsel (*Chromagrion conditum*)

Northern Bluet (*Enallagma cyathigerum*)

Common Forktail (*Ischnura verticalis*)

Little Corporal (*Libellula deplanata*)

Corporal Skimmer (*Libellula exusta*)

Late May

Civil Bluet (*Enallagma civile*)

Doubleday's Bluet (*Enallagma doubledayi*)

Lateral Bluet (*Enallagma laterale*)

Barrens Bluet (*Enallagma recurvatum*)

Common Baskettail (*Epiptera cynosura*)

Stream Cruiser (*Didymops transversa*)

Johnny Whiteface (*Leucorrhinia intacta*)

Whitetail (*Libellula lydia*)

Species with flight periods ending in the first half of the season (month indicates the end of the flight period; based on Carpenter, 1991):

June

Lateral Bluet (*Enallagma laterale*)

Little Corporal (*Libellula deplanata*)

Corporal Skimmer (*Libellula exusta*)

July

Amber-Winged Spreadwing (*Lestes eurinus*) *
Eastern Red Damsel (*Amphiagrion saucium*) *
Variegated Damselfly (*Chromagrion conditum*)
Northern Bluet (*Enallagma cyathigerum*)
Barrens Bluet (*Enallagma recurvatum*)
Sphagnum Sprite (*Nehalennia gracilis*) *
Common Baskettail (*Epitheca cynosura*)
Frosted Whiteface (*Leucorrhinia frigida*) *
Johnny Whiteface (*Leucorrhinia intacta*)
Bluebell (*Nannothemis bella*) *

* These species begin flying in June; all others listed begin in May.

Site Profile: Baker's Pond, Dennis

Baker's Pond is accessible from Airline Road. There is a small dirt pull off on the east side of the road directly across from the pond. It is possible to walk completely around the pond, as long as the water level isn't too high. The pond is approximately 8 acres in size, with a maximum depth of 19 feet. The substrate is mostly sand. The edges of the pond are vegetated with typical coastal plain pond species: Plymouth Gentian (*Sabatia Kennedyana*), Rose Coreopsis (*Coreopsis rosea*), Virginia Meadow Beauty (*Rhexia virginica*), Golden Hedge-hyssop (*Gratiola aurea*), sundews (*Drosera* species) and various rushes (*Juncus* species). Care is needed to protect these fragile plants while walking along the pond shore. This was one of the most active sites we visited during the 1993 season. Ginger has recorded 34 species of dragonflies and damselflies here, and we observed at least 22 species last summer:

Spreadwings (*Lestes* species)
Evening Bluet (*Enallagma vesperum*)
Bluets (*Enallagma* species)
Speartail (*Ischnura hastata*)
Common Forktail (*Ischnura verticalis*)
Common Green Darner (*Anax junius*)
Sand Dragon (*Progomphus obscurus*)
The Prince (*Epitheca princeps*)
Calico Pennant (*Celithemis elisa*)
Halloween Pennant (*Celithemis eponina*)
Martha's Pennant (*Celithemis martha*)
Banded Pennant (*Celithemis monomelaena*)
Green Jacket (*Erythemis simplicicollis*)
Goldenwings (*Libellula auripennis*)
Black-faced Skimmer (*Libellula cyanea*)
Damson Skimmer (*Libellula incesta*)
Blue Pirate (*Pachydiplax longipennis*)
Amberwings (*Perithemis tenera*)

Ruby Meadowfly (*Sympetrum rubicundulum*)
Saffron-bordered Meadowfly (*Sympetrum costiferum*)
Yellow-legged Meadowfly (*Sympetrum vicinum*)
Red Saddlebags (*Tramea carolina*)

In Focus: The Forktails (Genus *Ischnura*)

Among the first signs of the ood season on Cape Cod is the appearance of the diminutive, colorful damselflies known as forktails. The genus *Ischnura* comprises at least 13 and perhaps as many as 15 species in North America, the exact number varying depending upon the source consulted. Five species have been found in Massachusetts and all of these are known from Cape Cod, though one only from historical records.

The forktails are among the smallest of the damselflies, with most only about an inch or so in length. The common name derives from a minute forked projection at the tip of the male's abdomen. They are a brightly and variably colored lot: some species are polymorphic, occurring in several color forms (particularly the females). To complicate matters further, in some cases the color changes with age (they're as bad as birds!). A unique feature of this genus is that the forewing stigma is a different color and shape from the stigma on the rear wing.

The **Common Forktail** (*Ischnura verticalis*) is one of our most characteristic oods, abundantly present in a wide variety of habitats from early May into September. The males are black and fluorescent green, with bright emerald green eyes. The thorax is green on the sides and black on top, with two distinct, narrow green shoulder stripes. The abdomen is mostly iridescent black on the upper surface, with a conspicuous bright blue "taillight" near the tip. The confusing females come in several color phases, the most common being orange and black, and often change color as they mature.

The **Fragile Forktail** (*Ischnura posita*) is also common on Cape Cod, though it is not as widespread or numerous as the previous species. The males are very similar to male Common Forktails, but can be distinguished rather easily (at close range) by the lack of a blue "taillight" and by the two shoulder stripes, which are broken, forming two green exclamation points "!!". The females are pale blue to grayish but typically show the characteristic exclamation points.

The **Speartail** (*Ischnura hastata*), also known as the Citrine Forktail, is a very small, dainty species, quite local in distribution on Cape Cod. The males are lemony yellow and black with a tiny red forewing stigma. Young females are orange and black, but become grayish to olive as they age. This is a shy, easily overlooked species; they prefer areas of dense vegetation with little water where they skulk low among the rushes and grasses.

Two species, **Kellicott's (or Lilypad) Forktail** (*Ischnura kellicotti*) and **Rambur's Forktail** (*Ischnura ramburii*) apparently are very rare in this area, the latter known only from an historic record. At least one Kellicott's has been collected here recently, at Elbow Pond in Brewster by Ginger on 13 July 1990.

References

Unlike birders, budding odonatologists are severely handicapped by a dearth of guides for the layman. Most references are very technical and geared toward in-the-hand examination of minute anatomical features. The following three publications are exceptions and highly recommended for "Cape Codonologists":

Carpenter, Virginia. 1991. **Dragonflies and Damselflies of Cape Cod**. Shank Painter Printing Co. Inc., Provincetown, MA. A nicely illustrated and delightfully written introductory guide. A watershed publication and the "Bible" for those of us in this area.

Dunkle, Sidney W. 1989. **Dragonflies of the Florida Peninsula, Bermuda, and the Bahamas**. Scientific Publishers Nature Guides, Washington D.C. Profusely illustrated with color photos; although covering an area 1,500+ miles distant, many of the species occur in the northeast.

Dunkle, Sidney W. 1990. **Damselflies of Florida, Bermuda, and the Bahamas**. Scientific Publishers Nature Guides, Washington D.C. A companion volume to the above; both are highly recommended.

If you are interested in ordering any of the books listed above, you might want to contact Patricia Ledlie!

Additional references

Corbet, Philip S. 1963. **A Biology of Dragonflies**. Quadrangle Books, Inc., Chicago, IL. Out-of-print, but considered an excellent introduction to the biology and natural history of odes.

Garman, Philip. 1927. **The Odonata or Dragonflies of Connecticut**. State Geological and Natural History Survey, Hartford, CT. A very technical manual, long out-of-print and not easily found.

Gibbs, R.H. Jr. and S.P. Gibbs. 1954. "**The Odonata of Cape Cod, Massachusetts**." Journal of the New York Entomological Society, Volume 62: 167-184.

Needham, James G. and Minter S. Westfall, Jr. 1954. **The Dragonflies of North America**. University of California Press. "The" manual to North American dragonflies; technical descriptions but virtually no natural history. Still in print but expensive (\$90).

Walker, E.M. 1953. **The Odonata of Canada and Alaska, Volume I**, The Damselflies.

Walker, E.M. 1958. **The Odonata of Canada and Alaska, Volume II**, The Dragonflies in part.

Walker, Edmund M. and Philip S. Corbet. 1975. **The Odonata of Canada and Alaska, Volume III: The Anisoptera - Three Families**. University of Toronto Press. An out-of-print, three volume

set. Technical, but with very readable and informative sections on the natural history of each species. Good luck finding a copy!

Ode News

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Ode News is available at no charge (for now!) to anyone interested.

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