

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

Volume II, Number 1 - May, 1995

Welcome!

This issue of Ode News concludes the first publishing year and represents the beginning of the second! Who ever would have thought we'd have a mailing list of over 50 people, from 10 different states? (Certainly not us!) Our thoughts at the beginning of 1994 were simply to continue documenting dragonflies and damselflies on Cape Cod, while perhaps generating some interest in other people to help with these efforts. Ode News seems to have done the trick, although we would appreciate feedback as to how to improve it! What else would you like to read about?

A recent article in the May/June issue of the Massachusetts Audubon Society's Sanctuary magazine generated quite a few requests from people across the state to be placed on the Ode News mailing list. We extend an "ode-iferous" welcome to all new readers! As you can see, this is an informal newsletter: a few pages of information about dragonflies and damselflies (formally known as odonates, but abbreviated by us as "odes") in southeastern Massachusetts. We are attempting to publish three or four times a year, but we can't say exactly when to expect the next issue (July if possible).

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First Sightings of 1995

A few months ago, several of us chose dates on which we thought the first 1995 dragonfly sighting in Massachusetts might occur. Blair Nikula came the closest with a prediction of 21 April.

The first dragon was seen on 20 April, cruising by Outermost Harbor Marina in Chatham. This bug was most likely a Common Green Darner (*Anax junius*).

The second ode sighting of the year came on 23 April. Surprisingly, it was a teneral damselfly, fluttering up from the surface of a vernal pool in Eastham! The specific identity was uncertain, but size and shape suggested a forktail (*Ischnura* sp.).

The 23rd also produced sightings of two Common Green Darners and one large unidentified dragon. The darners were spotted at Israel Pond in Hyannis, while the UFO (unidentified flying ode!) was observed at a vernal pool off Pleasant Bay Road in Harwich.

Two more Common Green Darners were encountered hawking insects in a clearing off North Pamet Road in Truro on April 27.

The 1995 ode season is upon us! Please help us create a more complete picture of the status and distribution of dragons and damsels in southeastern Massachusetts by letting us know when, where, and how many you see!

New England Dragonfly Project

Chris Leahy, director of Mass. Audubon's Center for Biological Conservation and longtime dragonfly guru, has proposed a "New England Dragonfly Project". Chris presented some thoughts on this ambitious proposal to a group of a dozen or so enthusiastic "odophiles" at a meeting in Concord in late January. The proposed goals of the project are:

To create a network of people and organizations with an active interest in dragonflies.

To create a central database for New England dragonfly records.

To increase our knowledge of New England dragonflies.

To promote the conservation of dragonflies throughout the region.

To make dragonflies a better recognized component of the New England biota through education of the public.

Some possible undertakings might include: a dragonfly atlas, an annotated checklist of New England dragonflies (in progress), a natural history and field guide to the dragonflies of New England (to be published in Mass. Audubon's CBC Natural History of New England series), establishment of a newsletter, and field trips and workshops (the first to be held this summer - see below). The idea has met with an enthusiastic response, and we hope to have more to report in the near future.

Dragonfly Field Trips

We are pleased to announce the first of what we hope will become regular dragonfly field trips in southern New England. All walks are weather dependent, therefore alternate weather dates have been scheduled as well. Contact the leader(s) for meeting places and times.

Southwestern Rhode Island: Sunday, June 11. Leader: Ginger Carpenter (401-331-7110 weekdays). This trip will focus on riverine species in the Pawcatuck/Wood river watershed. Weather date: Saturday, June 17.

Cape Cod: Saturday, June 24. Leaders: Blair Nikula & Jackie Sones (508-432-6348). This trip will feature the coastal plain ponds in the mid-Cape area. Weather date: Sunday, June 25.

Petersham (Rutland Brook & Tom' Swamp): Saturday, July 22. Leaders: Dick Walton (508-369-3729) & Dick Forster (617-235-2239). Focusing on riverine, swamp, and bog habitats. Weather date: Sunday, July 23.

Savoy State Forest & vicinity: Saturday, August 12. Leader: Chris Leahy (617-259-9506 weekdays).

Dragonfly Workshops

Jackie Sones will be teaching dragonfly workshops at the following three Mass. Audubon sanctuaries this summer. Contact the sanctuaries to register:

- * Ipswich River, Topsfield - July 1 from 1-4 p.m. (508) 887-9264
- * Stony Brook, Norfolk - July 8 from 1-4 p.m. (508) 528-3140
- * Wellfleet Bay, Wellfleet - July 15 from 9 a.m -12 p.m. (508) 349-2615

Cape Cod Natural History Hotline

A new tape-recorded hotline, sponsored by the Birdwatcher's General Store and the Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary, is now in operation. Reports of noteworthy birds, butterflies, and dragonflies are updated at least once a week. The phone number is 508-349-WING (9464).

Highlights: Late Fall, 1994

During November 1994, five species of dragonflies and damselflies were recorded on Cape Cod. Who knows whether this was due to an exceptionally warm fall season, or to the general hesitancy of the air over Cape Cod to cool down at that time of year. Perhaps more understanding will come with time.

DAMSELFLIES: Small numbers of **Spotted Spreadwings** (*Lestes congener*) were observed on the 5th and the 13th; some were captured and examined in the hand. A female *Lestes*, believed to be a **Slender Spreadwing** (*Lestes rectangularis*) was captured and photographed on the 5th.

DRAGONFLIES: One or two **Common Green Darners** (*Anax junius*) were seen on at least five dates, including the 22nd (and possibly the 26th). On two occasions a mature male was observed devouring a Yellow-legged Meadowfly. One **Ruby/Cherry-faced Meadowfly** (*Sympetrum rubicundulum/internum*) was captured on the 5th; separation of these two very similar species remains a problem for us. **Yellow-legged Meadowflies** (*Sympetrum vicinum*) were the most common and abundant dragon during November. They were seen on five different days, the latest being the 29th. Pairs were seen ovipositing on the 13th and at least forty individuals were observed on the 20th.

Most of the November sightings came from one vernal pool in Eastham. It was difficult to find an ode anywhere else! Other locations that provided sightings in November included Grassy Nook Pond in Brewster, South Monomoy Island, Rushy Marsh Pond in Cotuit, and Winstar Farm in Sandwich. We had high hopes of finding a December ode, but despite sunny, warm weather the first weekend in the month, we were unsuccessful.

In Focus: Rainpool Gliders (Genus *Pantala*)

by Richard Forster

Among the Anisoptera, or dragonflies, the family Libellulidae comprises some of our most common and easily observed dragonfly species. The most familiar members of the family are commonly referred to as skimmers (Genus *Libellula*), and include widespread and often abundant species that may be observed in flight or perched along the margins of virtually any pond during the summer months. The family also includes a group known as rainpool gliders (Genus *Pantala*). One of the main distinctions between gliders and skimmers is the shape of the hindwing. In gliders it is very broad at the base and gradually narrows at the distal end, thus appearing roughly triangular in shape. The body shape of the gliders is relatively distinctive also, tapering from a large head to the tip of the abdomen, giving it a teardrop-shaped appearance. They are medium-sized dragons, about two inches in length, that spend most of the daylight hours sailing or gliding over dry, open areas. Only rarely are they seen at ponds.

Two species of rainpool gliders occur on Cape Cod, and in Massachusetts in general: Wandering Glider (*Pantala flavescens*) and Spot-winged Glider (*Pantala hymenea*). They are virtually identical in size and shape, and the overall coloration is very similar. Fully mature Wandering Gliders have a yellowish (sometimes reddish) face, bright chestnut eyes, gray thorax, and yellowish-brown abdomen. Spot-winged Glider differs in that the abdomen is grayish-brown and mottled. As the name implies, there is a small dark brown spot at the base of the hindwing. However, this spot is difficult to see in flight, which is often the only way you will see a glider. Also, coloration of the abdomen of less fully matured Wandering Gliders appears to be variable, so only the brightest colored individuals may be identified with relative certainty based solely on abdominal color. With practice it becomes fairly easy to distinguish a glider from other dragonflies, but separation of the two gliders from each other seems to be much more problematic, at least at this stage of our exposure to the wonderful world of dragonflies.

The Wandering Glider, also known appropriately as Wandering Globetrotter, has the most extensive range of any dragonfly, being nearly cosmopolitan in distribution. They breed on every continent with the exception of Europe and Antarctica. They are mainly tropical or subtropical in distribution, but regularly occur in temperate regions. Wandering Gliders are both nomadic and migratory. Within most of their range they breed in temporary pools created by tropical downpours. The somewhat variable and unpredictable nature of such downpours determines their nomadic existence. They periodically undertake mass movements, appearing in impressive numbers. One such documented occurrence took place in Brazil in February 1970. The total number of individuals estimated during a nine day period was a staggering half million. They also have been recorded at sea, hundreds of miles from the nearest point of land.

The Spot-winged Glider is also a tropical or subtropical dragonfly, but is restricted to the Americas. Like its close relative it appears regularly in low temperate regions. Its distribution in Massachusetts seems very similar to the Wandering Glider's.

Rainpool gliders appear in Massachusetts in the latter part of June. They are widespread but generally uncommon. They are very noticeable in small numbers during August, and individuals found along the coast from late August to early October are presumed to be southbound migrants. Walker (*The Odonata of Canada and Alaska, 1975*) speculates that nymphs are unable to survive the winter in southern Canada. The assumption is that gliders appearing in June or later are migrants from more southerly areas. Their progeny are the ones we see moving south in the fall. It is likely that the same situation prevails in Massachusetts. An interesting note: There is some evidence that gliders are more prevalent here during exceptionally warm summers.

Gliders are most often encountered over open spaces such as fields or pastures, sometimes among swarms of Common Green Darners (*Anax junius*). They patrol regular beats, usually from about six to fifteen feet above the ground. Their flight is deceptive, periods of short gliding interspersed with a flurry of rapid wing beats and rapid changes in direction. They seem to sail lazily, barely within reach by net, but are maddeningly difficult to catch. The flight of Spot-winged Glider is described as more erratic with less hovering than Wandering Glider, with patrolling flights that are more extensive and more linear. Both species perch vertically at the tops of grasses and other vegetation. Look for them in early morning while walking through fields before the sun's rays have warmed the summer day. If you flush one, follow its flight for it

may soon come to rest. Carefully mark the location and approach cautiously. You may be able to become more intimate with these consummate fliers. They may also be flushed from perches during periods of strong winds.

In 1920, Wandering Glider was listed by Howe (Manual of Odonata of New England) as uncommon in Massachusetts. Today they are still considered uncommon. The first state record for Spot-winged Glider was an individual seen in Milton by H. White in August 1967. Since then, Spot-winged Gliders have proved to occur regularly in late summer and early fall. However, the status of both species remains incompletely known, in part due to their similarity to each other.

Be especially alert for these critters this summer and report your findings to Ode News. We welcome all sightings and any behavioral information you can glean. *Pantallas* are just two of many interesting dragonfly species, but their wide-ranging peregrinations instill fascination. Good Luck!

Photographing Odes

by *Blair Nikula*

In response to the overwhelming demand (well, a couple of people have expressed a mild curiosity), I am sharing some of my ideas on photographing dragonflies. Although I am far from an expert on the subject, I have spent many hours over the last few years pursuing these delightfully photogenic creatures, and may have a few helpful insights.

This article is presented in two parts. The first will cover equipment, the second field techniques. I have assumed that the reader has at least a basic understanding of photography. There are many good books on nature photography available, but two in particular I would recommend for those interested in insect photography are: *How to Photograph Insects & Spiders* by Larry West (1994, Stackpole Books) and *Johns Shaw's Closeups In Nature* by John Shaw (1987, Amphoto).

Most nature photography, and all of mine, is done with 35mm SLR equipment, with TTL (Through the Lens) metering capabilities; thus, all of my comments pertain to that format. Most of my gear is Canon, but the make is largely irrelevant. However, Canon's exceptional assortment of lenses make it a popular choice among nature photographers.

Today's do-it-all camera bodies have a bewildering array of features and functions, many of which I find of little or no use. A few basic functions, however, are very helpful. Auto film advance/rewind, which is standard in virtually all new cameras, is a great timesaver (and film burner!), and although certainly not essential, I would hate to be without it. Working at close range, the ability to preview the depth-of-field is also very helpful but, regrettably, few new cameras offer this feature.

Most new cameras and lenses have autofocus capabilities. While autofocus provides considerable advantages in many types of wildlife photography, and I use it extensively when photographing birds, it is virtually useless in close-up work. However, autofocus cameras typically have an in-focus indicator in the viewfinder which I find to be very helpful when manually focusing at any distance.

The most important piece of equipment is the lens. To effectively photograph small subjects such as insects, a lens must be able to produce a decent-sized image on the film, yet do so at a reasonable working distance from the subject. Although there are a number of high quality macro lenses on the market, most are in the 50mm - 105mm size range, which require the lens be within a few inches of the subject to provide a decent image size. A few damselflies may allow such a close approach, but rare is the dragonfly that is so cooperative!

Much more suitable are lenses in the short telephoto range of 200mm to 300mm, as they provide magnifications of 4 - 6 power. Zoom lenses of this size are particularly advantageous as they allow for precise framing of the image and variable magnifications. The most common zoom lenses of this size range from 70-210mm to 100-300mm. These, I believe, are the most suitable for use with odonates. I first started photographing dragons with a 90mm macro lens, then switched to a 70-210mm zoom, and for the last couple of years have used a 100-300mm Canon zoom almost exclusively. This lens has a minimum focusing distance of about 5 feet, which is very close for a lens of this size. Sigma has a new 70-300mm lens that focuses down to an amazing 3 feet! Jackie Sones used it on a recent excursion to Texas with excellent results. It is compact (for its focal length), seems to be of very good optical quality, and is moderately priced. Despite the close focusing abilities of these two lenses, they do not provide sufficient magnification for any but the very largest dragonflies. To get adequately sized images of most bugs, it's necessary to use one or more of the various accessories that are available to increase magnification. These include diopters, extension tubes, teleconverters, and bellows.

By far the simplest and easiest to use and the only that I have much experience with, are the screw-on closeup lenses, sometimes referred to as "diopters". These are nearly identical to filters in size and shape and, like filters, simply screw on to the end of the lens - sort of like attaching a magnifying glass to your lens. They are compact, lightweight, extremely easy to use, and - unlike all of the alternatives - do not cause a reduction in the amount of light reaching the film. Their only drawback is that they put another layer of glass between the subject and the film which inevitably leads to some degradation of the image quality. However, this can be minimized by using only high quality dual element (vs. single element) lenses. Dual element lenses have two pieces of glass sandwiched together which greatly improves the optical quality. They are made by Nikon, Canon, and Minolta among others. Their prices range from \$60 - \$100 apiece, but they are worth every penny! Most manufacturers offer at least two magnifications and two or more thread sizes. For example, Nikon makes four such lenses which they designate the 3T, 4T, 5T, and 6T. The first two have 52mm thread diameters, the latter two 62mm threads. The 3T and 5T are +1.5 diopters, while the stronger 4T and 6T are +3 diopters. (The larger the diopter rating, the greater the magnification; the amount of magnification achieved varies depending on the focal length of the lens.) The weaker +1.5 diopter provides sufficient magnification in most cases. I have used the 5T extensively with excellent results. I am unable to detect any differences in the quality between slides taken with or without this lens in place. When the 5T is attached to the

Canon 100-300mm lens, the minimum focusing distance is reduced from 5 feet to 26 inches, while with the 6T it is reduced to 20 inches. Although my 100-300mm lens has a 58mm filter thread size, I can easily attach the 5T (or 6T) by using a 58-62mm step-up ring. I highly recommend these dual element diopters for anyone seriously interested in any type of closeup photography.

I have minimal experience with teleconverters, and none with either extension tubes or bellows, so will refrain from commenting on these options to increase image size, except to point out that all result in a loss of light reaching the film, and that bellows are quite cumbersome, particularly when chasing highly mobile subjects.

One piece of equipment that will vastly increase the number of sharp, usable photos you obtain is a good, sturdy tripod. While it is possible to get good hand-held shots using flash, the slow shutter speeds necessary in natural light photography require very sturdy support. Additionally, when your subject is only a couple of feet or less away, the depth of field, even at small apertures, is extremely small - mere millimeters at best. The smallest movement of the camera (or subject) will result in an out-of-focus image, even when using flash. (You can not appreciate just how much movement there is in this world until you've attempted closeup photography!) Tripods are a frustrating burden in the field - no piece of equipment is more annoying or engenders more cursing! - but since I started using one consistently a couple of years ago, the quality of my insect flicks has improved noticeably. A good tripod significantly reduces the number of slides that end up in the trash can.

So far, I have little experience with flash, but expect to use it much more frequently in the future. Flash increases your photo opportunities by permitting picture-taking under low-light conditions. It can also, when used properly, improve the quality of pictures taken under even the best of natural lighting. Because dragonfly photography is done at fairly close range, a small, inexpensive flash unit will provide sufficient output for most work. When considering whether or not to become involved with flash photography, keep in mind that despite the fully automatic operation of today's flash units, the bottom line is that you are adding another layer of complexity to your photography, as well as increasing the load you must carry into the field!

In the next installment, I will discuss film and what I have learned about field techniques.

Ode News

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

If you have any questions, comments, or contributions, or wish to be placed on the mailing list



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