

Dragonflies in your garden



How to recognise them and how you can help recording for the new national dragonfly atlas

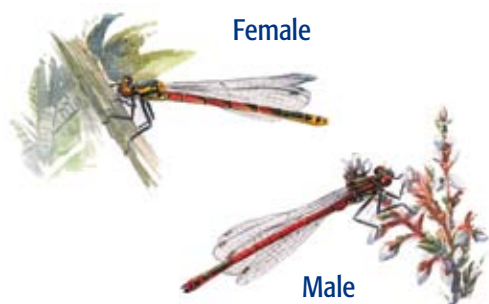
Dragonflies are the acrobats of the insect world and, with their stunning colours, are a true sign of summer in the garden. They are skilful hunters with multifaceted eyes; the powerful wings of the larger species enable them to fly at up to 36km/h. The species we see today are almost identical to their ancestors which flew over 300 million years ago. In this pullout guide we describe eight of the damselflies and dragonflies most likely to be seen in your garden plus a further four which are less commonly found. These beautiful beasts are threatened by habitat destruction and climate change which is why your garden pond is important and why the British Dragonfly Society has started recording for a new National Dragonfly Atlas.



Four-spotted Chaser *Libellula quadrimaculata* by Steve Round

Species likely to visit gardens: damselflies

Large Red Damselfly *Pyrrosoma nymphula*



Often the first damselfly to emerge with distinctive red eyes, the male is mainly red with black at the end of the abdomen. The female has more black on the lower segments of the abdomen.

Size: 35-36mm

Flying season: Mid Apr – late Aug/early Sep

Azure Damselfly *Coenagrion puella*



The male is blue with black rings and identifiable from the black u-shape on the second segment of the abdomen. There are black/green and black/blue females. Seen perching on vegetation around ponds.

Size: 33mm

Flying season: Mid May – late Aug/early Sep

Common Blue Damselfly *Enallagma cyathigerum*



The fast bright blue flying males are often numerous near ponds or slow flowing rivers but may be observed many metres away from water. Females are black with blue or dull green in colouration.

Size: 32mm

Flying season: Mid May – late Sep

Blue-tailed Damselfly *Ischnura elegans*

Male in threat position



Both males and females have a blue 'tail' which is the eighth segment of the abdomen, they may be seen on cooler days as they are not so affected by temperature. Often the first species to colonise new ponds.

Size: 31-32mm

Flying season: May – Sep

The life cycle of the dragonfly

As much as 95% of the life cycle of a dragonfly is spent under water. The females lay eggs in or near water which usually hatch after a few weeks whilst the eggs of some species lie dormant over winter.

The hatched larvae feed on live prey including small fish which may be larger than themselves. As the larvae grow they cast their skins up to 15 times. When the water warms up and the day length gets longer the fully grown larvae climb up marginal vegetation or out onto a bank and cast their skin to emerge as an adult.

The newly emerged dragonfly takes a while to pump fluid into the wings and abdomen. It can take several hours for the wings to harden before it can take its maiden flight, find a mate and start the cycle all over again.



Blue-tailed Damselfly *Ischnura elegans* by Dawn Balmer

Dragonfly or damselfly?

Dragonflies and damselflies belong to the insect order Odonata which means 'toothed jaws' and are often collectively referred to as 'Dragonflies' but there are actually two subgroups.

Damselflies are in the sub-order Zygoptera (meaning 'paired-wings'). All four wings are near enough equal in size and shape. They are usually small, weakly flying insects that stay close to the water margins or water surface. When at rest, most species hold their wings along the length of their abdomen. The eyes are always separated, never touching.

The true dragonflies are in the sub-order Anisoptera (meaning 'unequal-winged'). Their hind wings are usually shorter and broader than the forewings. They are usually large, strong flying insects which can often be found flying well away from water. When at rest, they hold their wings out from the body, often at right angles to it. The eyes are very large and usually touch, at least at a point.



Female Banded Demoiselle *Calopteryx splendens* by Dawn Balmer

Species likely to visit gardens: dragonflies

Southern Hawker *Aeshna cyanea*



Found in woodland and garden ponds; the males are blackish with bright green markings and blue stripes at the tip of the abdomen. Females are chocolate brown with green/yellow patterns. A large bold dragonfly.

Size: 70–73mm

Flying season: July – Oct

Emperor Dragonfly *Anax imperator*



Male

The largest of the UK dragonflies. Males have a bright blue abdomen while females have all green abdomens. Both sexes have a black central line. They will be seen near well-vegetated lakes, ponds and canals.

Size: 76–78mm

Flying season: Late May – early Sep

Broad-bodied Chaser *Libellula depressa*



Male

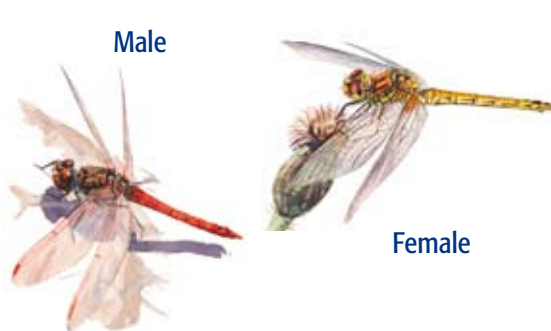
Female

Males have a powdery blue colouration with yellow side spots and aggressively defend their territories against rivals. The yellowish brown females are found away from water.

Size: 44–46mm

Flying season: May – end July

Common Darter *Sympetrum striolatum*



Male

Female

The male has an orange/red abdomen whilst the female is yellow or light brown with black darts. Both sexes have yellow legs and are found near most water bodies often perching on warm ground.

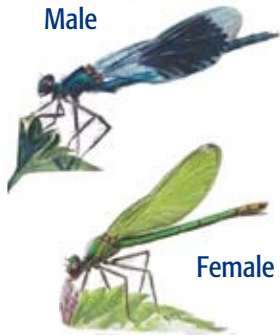
Size: 37–41mm

Flying season: Mid June – late Oct

Less common visitors

Banded Demoiselle
Calopteryx splendens

Male



Female

Size: 41–45mm
Season: Mid May – early Sep

Emerald Damselfly
Lestes sponsa



Size: 36–38mm
Season: Late June – early Sep

Brown Hawker
Aeshna grandis



Size: 73–74mm
Season: Late June – early Oct

Ruddy Darter
Sympetrum sanguineum



Size: 34mm
Season: Late June – early Oct

How you can help

The British Dragonfly Society

Founded in 1983 and celebrating its 25th anniversary this year the British Dragonfly Society (BDS) is a Registered Charity (number 800196). Its aim is to encourage and support the study and conservation of dragonflies in the UK and further afield.



Dragonflies under threat

Habitat destruction and the effects of climate change are threatening the survival of a third of Britain's dragonfly species. Changes in agriculture mean there are fewer ponds which were used to water livestock. These ponds were good habitat for dragonflies making the garden pond an extremely important place for the survival of some of our dragonfly species. Data collected by the BDS show 36% of the 39 dragonfly species are in decline. The BDS has launched a nationwide survey to find out exactly where our dragonflies are living and how well they are coping with the threats they face. The five-year dragonflies in Focus project includes the production of a new atlas which will give a snapshot of the current locations of Britain's dragonflies. It's not all doom and gloom as when the last atlas was published in 1996, the Small Red-eyed Damselfly had never been seen in the UK. It now has breeding colonies from Devon to Norfolk and has been seen as far north as Yorkshire. The new atlas will document how the distribution of species is expanding or contracting.

Online survey

The BDS also run a single species online survey, which is a great way for people to get started. The target species this year is the Blue-tailed Damselfly *Ischnura elegans*. It should be a common species and can live in a wide range of habitats, but records have shown a decline in recent years. This could be due to a range of factors, including habitat loss, or introduction of non-native fish to the larval home, for example. So, BDS need as many people as possible to report sightings, preferably with a photo attached, and basic information about what day they saw it, where they were, and approximately how many they saw. Their flight season began towards the end of May, the website with information on how to identify the Blue-tailed Damselfly is accessible via the BDS website at www.dragonflysoc.org.uk

Training courses

The BDS hold field meetings with experienced leaders all over the country, and other training events to introduce our favourite insects to the general public. In 2008 a wide range of BDS events are taking place around the country for BDS members and friends to attend.

Illustrations

The illustrations for this article are from '*A Guide to the Dragonflies of Great Britain*' by Dan Powell, Arlequin Press, 1999. Signed copies are available for £14 including p&p. Cheques to – Dan Powell, 4 Forth Close, Stubbington, Hants PO14 3SZ or dan.powell@care4free.net.