

COMMON DRAGONFLIES

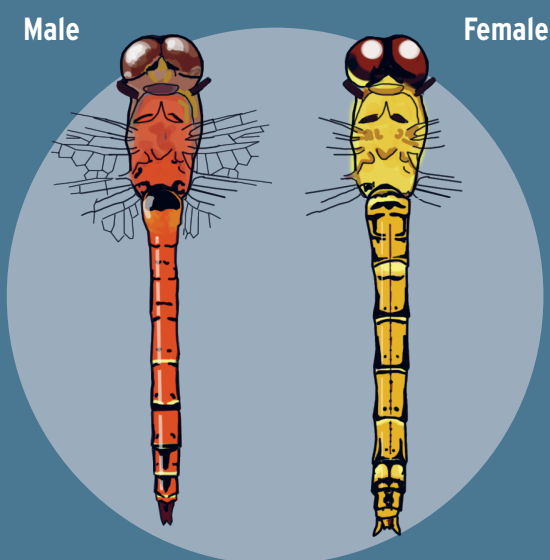
Identifying visiting dragonflies can be challenging, though their habit of perching on vegetation can provide you with an opportunity to secure a photograph that can then be identified 'at leisure' later. Although the Garden BirdWatch dragonfly list contains a good number of species, only a small number of these are regular garden visitors, with some of these happily breeding in garden ponds. Be aware that colouration often differs between males and females, and that the strength of colour will also vary with age/maturity. Here we cover five of the most common visitors. See *Bird Table 117* for common garden-visiting damselflies.

Vertical bars show the average total body length at life size.

COMMON DARTER

With its long flight season and wide distribution, this species is commonly encountered in gardens, where it will often perch with its wings forward and allowing close observation. Males have red-brown eyes and an orange-brown abdomen. Females are straw coloured. Both sexes show brown legs, sometimes with an indistinct thin yellow line running down them. The main confusion species, Ruddy Darter, has black legs and a 'pinched' abdomen.

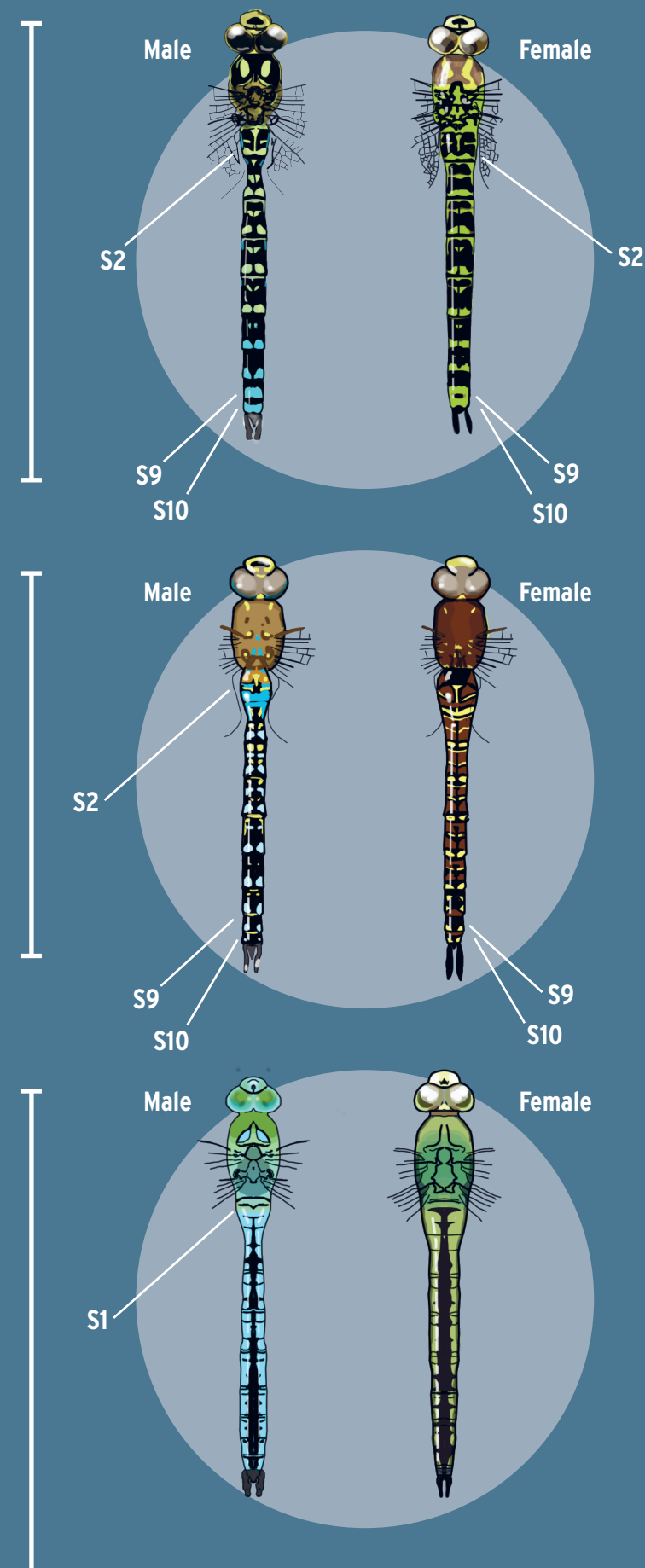
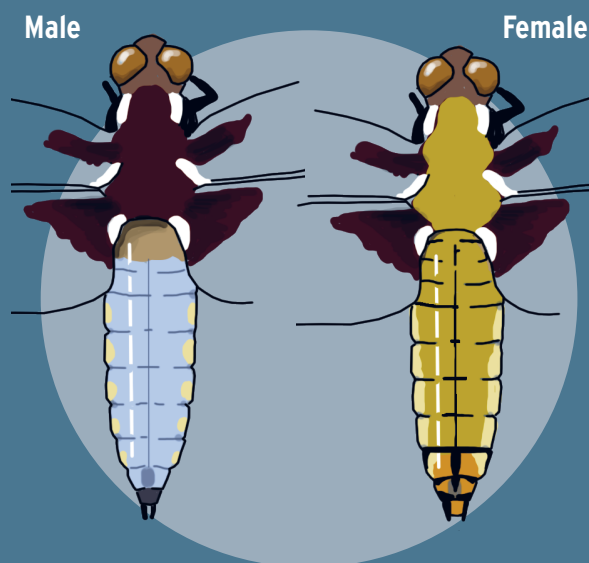
Flight period: May to the end of November. Most abundant across England and Wales, but recent range expansion has seen colonisation of upland sites and increasing occurrence across the whole of lowland Scotland. Widespread in Ireland.



BROAD-BODIED CHASER

Both sexes readily identified by the very broad and flat abdomen, also having brown eyes and a dark patch at the base of each wing. Male is powder-blue. Female is yellow-brown and has an even broader abdomen. Main confusion species is male Black-tailed Skimmer, but this has a slender abdomen and lacks the dark patches at the wing bases. Confusion species for female is Four-spotted Chaser (see Page 2), but again this has a slender abdomen.

Flight period: April to the end of August. Widespread across southern and central England and Wales, becoming rarer as you move north. A few recent records from southern Scotland but absent from Ireland.



SOUTHERN HAWKER

Both sexes identified by the coloured bands across segments S9 and S10; in other hawkers these are paired spots. Look for the narrow yellow triangle on S2 and very broad coloured stripes on the sides of the thorax. Migrant Hawker (below), the main confusion species, is smaller and less robust, being about 80% of the size of Southern Hawker. Inquisitive and will approach the observer. One of the first species to colonise new garden ponds. Note rare male colour form where all markings on abdomen are blue.

Flight period: June to end of October. Widespread across England and Wales, becoming scarcer in the north and Scotland. Very rare vagrant to Ireland.

MIGRANT HAWKER

Smaller and less robust than Southern Hawker. Similar to Common Hawker in colour and pattern, but latter is uncommon in gardens and has a more northerly distribution. The vein on the leading edge of the wing is brown (yellow in Common Hawker). Look for the paired spots on S9 and S10, the up-tilted abdomen (with drooping-end) in flight, and a small yellow triangle on S2.

Flight period: July to the end of October. Widespread across south-east England, becoming scarcer as you move north and west, though range increasing.

EMPEROR DRAGONFLY

Our largest dragonfly is brightly coloured and robust, and the only species matching this description likely to be on the wing before July. Male has an apple-green thorax and segment S1 of the abdomen, but is otherwise bright blue. Female is usually dull green, but may sometimes be blue. Males have blue-green eyes and clear wings, while females have green eyes and their wings darken with age. Will breed in larger garden ponds, including those that are newly established.

Flight period: May to September. Widespread in England and Wales, though favouring lower altitudes. Big increase in range, and now colonising southern Scotland and Ireland.