

SPRING/SUMMER 2014

Outdoor Delaware



Delaware's Ten Most Wanted Dragons and Damsels

DO YOU SPEND A LOT OF TIME OUTDOORS around fresh water? Do you have a keen eye? If so, you may be able to help us locate some of the rarer dragonflies and damselflies of Delaware that we have been unable to find recently.

Dragonflies and damselflies, together called Odonates, are large, often colorful, carnivorous insects that appear frightening, but cannot harm people. They spend most of their relatively short adult lives near water where they lay their eggs. The eggs hatch and the larvae live underwater for the rest of the year. The larvae then climb out of the water, split their skin and the flying adult emerges. Some adult Odonates are abundant while others are rare, elusive or live in places humans avoid like swamps and salt marshes.

About 121 species of Odonates are known to inhabit Delaware. Several species are known from the Maryland Eastern Shore or southern New Jersey that have never been seen in Delaware. In the three years since publication of the book, *Natural History of Delmarva Dragonflies and Damselflies*, our efforts have added two species (Spatterdock Darner and the Little Blue Dragonlet) to the Delaware list for the first time.

Unfortunately there is no systematic monitoring of the state's dragonflies and damselflies, which is somewhat ironic because Delaware, while the second smallest state, has many and varied aquatic habitats that have never been explored. Additional species that may inhabit Delaware have gone undetected. Climate change, habitat destruction, or pollution may have extirpated species that were once resident. The following list represent 10 species that were known from Delaware but have not been seen recently, or that have never been found in Delaware but might be expected here.

Gray Petaltail

Never observed in Delaware, this is our Holy Grail of Odonates. This unmistakable, very large, gray-and-black dragonfly is a member of the most ancient Odonate family and its relatives flew with the dinosaurs. A forest species, they often perch on tree trunks. Males can be observed searching trunks looking for females. Breeding takes place at forest seeps. The nymphs live in these muddy seeps and are not truly aquatic. Gray Petaltails sometimes land on humans, possibly because of our resemblance to tree trunks! The flight period is June to July.



Great Spreadwing

"Great" may be too strong of a word, but this 2.5 inch insect is the largest species of damselfly in Eastern North America. It has blue eyes and a greenish-bronze thorax with two bright yellow diagonal stripes. Although this species can turn up just about anywhere, look for it in late summer and fall along small slow streams, marshy ponds, and vernal pools. It is much less common than it was a few decades ago and has not been seen in Delaware for many years.

Story and photos by

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Banded Pennant

Pennants are named because they tend to perch at the ends of tall grasses or small twigs and wave in the wind like flags. This conspicuous species is black with a bold black pattern on its wings. It is fairly common in the New Jersey Pine Barrens and occurs just across the Delaware border in Caroline County Maryland. It has not been found in Delaware since the 1974 but should be looked for during summer on small, sand-bottomed ponds in the southern part of the state.



Green-striped Darner

A large, strikingly-colored dragonfly, the Green-striped Darner, can be found flying tirelessly near slow-moving streams, marshy meadows or vernal pools. It is also found in feeding swarms over open fields. Although similar to the more common Shadow Darner, it has a distinctive shape to the bright green forward stripe on the thorax. It is very rare in Delaware and has been observed only twice over the last forty years, both times at Lum's Pond State Park. It is usually seen in fall and the flight period is July into October.



Scarlet Bluet

This striking small damselfly with an oxymoronic name has a range from Southern New Hampshire to southern New Jersey. Curiously, the Scarlet Bluet seems unable to cross the Delaware Bay for it has never been found on the Delmarva Peninsula. Scarlet Bluets frequent sandy-bottom ponds in the New Jersey Pine Barrens throughout the summer. Despite being brightly colored, they can be overlooked due to their small size.



White Corporal

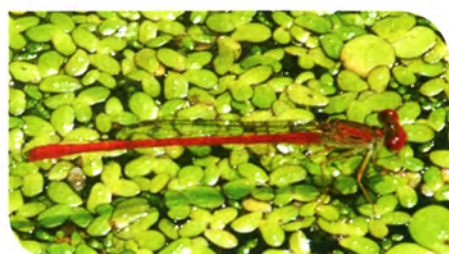
Don't confuse the White Corporal with the larger and often abundant Common Whitetail which has prominent black wing markings. White Corporals are common at many shallow, well-vegetated ponds in the New Jersey Pine Barrens, yet there are no reliable sightings of this species in Delaware. It typically perches on the ground, fallen tree trunks, or on spatterdock leaves in the sun.



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Umber Shadowdragon

Don't expect to see the Umber Shadowdragon unless you are streamside at twilight when it flies ghost-like low over the water. More likely you will encounter the remains of its larval skin clinging to bridge abutments as shown above. Delaware's only record comes from such an observation at the bridge at Collins Pond in Sussex County. Compared to day-flying dragonflies, adult Umber Shadowdragons have particularly large eyes for seeing in dim light and are brown lacking bright colors and striking patterns. Since it is so hard to observe, its distribution in Delaware is poorly known.



Arrowhead Spiketail

Named for its distinctive arrowhead-shaped yellow marking down the top of its abdomen, this large black and yellow dragonfly breeds in small woodland streams that often dry up in summer. It is usually seen May or June. Though never reported from Delaware, this photo was taken by Rick Chiecante in Caroline County, Maryland, less than a mile from the Delaware state line.

Duckweed Firetail

The aptly named Duckweed Firetail reaches its northern limit on the Delmarva Peninsula. It lives its entire life from egg to adult on duckweed mats. Delaware's only record of this species comes from a duckweed-covered abandoned sand pit near Sandtown in Kent County. It may have disappeared from this site, and perhaps from the state, and it would be great to find it at a new location. Given that it is bright red and perches on duckweed mats, it is unlikely to be confused with any other damselfly.

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Seepage Dancer

This beautiful blue and black damselfly inhabits a very specific, localized and threatened habitat, usually being found in bogs, seaside fens and seeps. It resembles the more common bluets but has a distinctive pattern of black rings on its blue body. It used to be found at several sites in Delaware, many of which no longer exist or have been drastically altered. Although common in bogs in the New Jersey Pine Barrens, it has not been seen in Delaware for many years and we fear it may be extirpated here. Its rediscovery would be great news.

