

Dragonflies

By Celeste Silling

Dragonflies, also known as Mosquitohawks, Snake Doctors, and Devil's Darning Needles, have long been a favorite of insect enthusiasts and novices alike. Their bright colors and long iridescent wings make them fun to watch as they fly around their habitats. There are about 3,000 different species of dragonflies worldwide and they all belong to the insect order Odonata. "Odonata," derived from the Greek "*odonto-*," meaning tooth, refers to the strong teeth found on the mandibles of most adult dragonflies.

Of those 3000 dragonfly species, about 142 occur in Texas. Another suborder of Odonata occurs here too, *Zygoptera*, the damselflies. Dragonflies and damselflies are similar, but dragonflies tend to be more robust and hold their wings out to each side when at rest, as opposed to a damselfly's folded wings.

Dragonflies are insatiable eaters, preying on almost anything that they can find. While flying, they'll catch and eat small prey such as mosquitos, gnats, and flies. They can also hunt larger prey like damselflies, butterflies, or even other dragonflies. For these larger prizes, they will catch their meal and take it to a perch to consume. Dragonflies are not only predators, but also prey. They are a favorite snack of fish, turtles, snakes, and many bird species, especially Purple Martins.

Adult dragonflies, like other insects, have three main body parts: the head, the thorax, and the abdomen. Dragonflies have enormous eyes, two pairs of long wings attached to their thorax, and a long abdomen divided into ten segments. But dragonfly youths look like an entirely different animal.

Most dragonfly species lay their eggs in water or on floating plant matter. The eggs hatch quickly, within a few days, and larvae emerge. The larvae, also known as nymphs, continue to live in the water. They tend to be brown or gray to blend in with their surroundings, have six legs, and almost resemble a grasshopper or an earwig. Their gills are located in their hind quarters. By breathing in and then forcefully expelling water out of their back end, they can move around their aquatic world. Quite the talent!

Over time, the larvae shed their exoskeletons multiple times as they grow larger and more developed. When it's time to reach their final adult form, the larvae emerge out of the water onto dry land. They shed their exoskeletons one last time, revealing wings and a longer, adult body. Over the next few hours, the wings and body harden until the dragonfly is ready to fly.

Adult dragonflies come in a variety of shapes and sizes, and it can be hard to identify them because they move so quickly. It doesn't help that many species are sexually dimorphic, meaning that the male and female look completely different. One of the most common and recognizable ones in our area is the Eastern Pondhawk. The males of the species are gray-blue, but the females are a bright emerald green, making them relatively easy to identify.

Next time you're out on a walk, keep an eye out for dragonflies. They're fun to watch and also a key part of the ecosystem!