

November 2010: Meditations on Dragonflies

I know next to nothing about dragonflies, but several birder friends are also avid chasers of these colorful insects, and they've gotten me interested. (These same friends are also very good at identifying butterflies—I guess once you start paying attention to one set of flying things, you start noticing the others.) I like to watch dragonflies flit and dart through the air, wings shimmering, iridescent bodies glistening like jewels. But my real interest in them is not as a naturalist or observer, but as a poet. Check out these common names of some dragonflies and damselflies (collectively known as odonates or “odes”) found in Maine: ebony jewelwing, violet dancer, lilypad forktail, aurora damsel, sedge sprite, sweetflag spreadwing, spatterdock darner, unicorn clubtail, riffle snaketail, Stygian shadowdragon, ringed boghaunter, seaside dragonlet, cherry-faced meadowhawk, black saddlebags... They sound like creatures from a fantasy novel. Naming really doesn't get any better than that unless you're an elf.

Dragonflies didn't have standardized common names until 1996, when a proposed list was voted on at the annual meeting of the Dragonfly Society of the Americas. Most of these common names refer to what the dragonfly looks like and/or what its primary habitat is. Thus, the ringed boghaunter—incidentally, one of the rarer dragonfly species in the United States—sports brown rings on its black abdomen and likes to hang out in bogs. The Cyrano darner has a big, turquoise-colored “nose.” The arrowhead spiketail has yellow, arrowhead-shaped markings running down its dark abdomen, which ends, as expected, with a pointy tail. So while the names taken literally are actually quite pragmatic, you've got to hand it to those Dragonfly Society members for exercising some aesthetic license. They must've had a poet on that naming committee. The beaverpond baskettail could, after all, have just been called something like fringe-tailed pond fly.

I first got intrigued with dragonfly names when I found a calico pennant this summer. Tromping around a milkweed patch at my office looking for butterflies, I photographed a handsome red dragonfly that was later identified by a reliable source as a male *Celithemis elisa* or calico pennant. The calico pennant first emerges in late May – early June and I'm told is very common throughout the summer here along the Megunticook River. It's also easily recognizable, as its all-over red appearance is noticeable at a distance, especially when several of them proudly wave their red selves like little flags above the overgrown lawn. My quest for a list of other Maine dragonflies led me to the Maine Damselfly and Dragonfly Survey (MDDS), which offers lists of family and scientific names for each of the state's odonates, as well as common names, counties found in, flight periods, and photograph links for images of both genders for most species. (Check them out at mdds.umf.maine.edu/.) I also learned that Maine hosts 36% of the odonates found in the United States, due to the diverse habitats found in this generally wet state and the fact that we're geographically a border state, containing both southernmost and northernmost ranges for several species—just as is the case with many bird species found here.

Most odophiles prefer to use the scientific name when referring to a particular insect; even after 14 years, not everyone has the common names fixed in their head. Or maybe it's harder to be taken seriously when you call out, "There goes a lyre-tipped spreadwing!" One of my ode-loving birder friends has a habit of yelling out "A. j.!" as we're beating the bushes looking for sparrows and confusing fall warblers. When I first met him, I had no idea what this meant. I wondered if he had some sort of strange verbal tic, or if it was an abbreviation for curse words that I'd never heard before. It turns out that it stands for *Anax junius*, or the common green darner.

Once I knew what he was shouting about, I became even more confounded by how he could identify the exact species of that blur of wings zipping overhead. There are, after all, more than 60 species of dragonflies found in Knox County alone, according to the MDDS. Apparently the darner's relatively large size, green thorax, and blue abdomen give it away—in addition to it being a more commonly seen species. But identifying odes on the wing (oding) seems like nature observation at a completely different level of difficulty from birding—the subject is smaller, faster, and generally a lot more active. And the differences between some species, and the two genders within those species, can sometimes only be revealed by netting and close handling or dissection.

The darner gets its name, of course, from the fact that it's shaped like a darning needle—nothing negative intended, though some do refer to a dragonfly as a devil's darning needle. It fascinates me that the Norwegian word for dragonfly translates to "eye sticker." There must be some good folk stories behind that etymology. Perhaps the predatory nature of these often large insects has given it a mixed reputation. But given that its preferred food is mosquitoes, what's not to like? And this colorful and delicate insect's aesthetic appeal, which has long made it a popular subject of traditional Japanese and Native American art and poetry, has persisted for centuries; the dragonfly is currently a popular motif for jewelry, art, and even tattoos. Let's face it, if you can tell people you've got an Uhler's sundragon or a chalk-fronted corporal inked onto your shoulder, you've got a conversation starter prime for any party.

Not many dragonflies stick around these parts into November unless the weather is unseasonably warm without hard frosts. The aptly named autumn meadowhawk (whose red abdomen and warm brown thorax and head coordinate with the fall foliage) seems to linger latest. So I imagine that odophiles spend this time of year combing the lists of all those poetic dragonfly names, mulling them over (and memorizing the Latin names) as they dream of the reappearance of their ethereal quarry in the blue skies of spring. Or, as birders do, they plan trips to the South or the desert Southwest, where dragonflies can be seen into the winter months.

Fun fact: if you want to interest children in dragonflies and the cool, poetic names aren't enough to catch their attention, tell them the aquatic-living, sometimes cannibalistic dragonfly nymph can propel itself forward underwater by ejecting water from its anus.