



RAMBLES

STALKING DRAGONS

THE ALLURE OF ALASKA'S BEAUTIFUL "FLIES"
by Michael Engelhard

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MAKE ROOM, BIRDS —there's an attraction that newly lures naturalists. One of our planet's oldest flying life forms, these hyper-kinetic dynamos differ little from ancestors with two-foot wingspans cruising Carboniferous forests 300 million years ago.

Their order, Odonata, the "Toothed Ones," shreds prey often midair with serrated mandibles. A scientific report describes one specimen grappling a hummingbird. About 30 species patrol Alaska sloughs and pond shores, fast as galloping horses. Six bristly, pincer-tipped legs clamp around hundreds of insects per day, including fellow dragonflies. Males safeguard their turf and hunt or scan for mates airborne, tracing invisible grids on cellophane wings. Their sparkling flight mesmerizes. Beating four lacy airfoils independently, dragonflies

back-flip, dead-stop, turn on a dime, and accelerate like Porsches, tailgating or losing combative rivals. One pair of appendages can stroke up while the second strokes down, putting helicopters to shame. Centering dragons in your camera's viewfinder requires anti-aircraft gunnery skills. Members of their twin clan, the daintier, twiggy, much less aerobatic damselflies, hover inches above the water's surface and spend more time on lily

Above: A common green darner, a migrant that does not breed in Alaska.



helipads with their levitation devices folded up. Unusual for this tribe, inch-long sedge sprites weave through Arctic nights and through rain unperturbed.

Dragonfly watching gained popularity in the late 1980s, especially with birders, who until then thought of insects merely as bird food. There are similarities. Colorful (the

males), large (think midsize cigar), and conspicuous fliers, dragons, like raptors, are elegant predators, with a 95 percent success rate. Their habitat overlaps that of wetland birds. Some migrate seasonally on favorable spring and fall winds. Sneaking up, you can approach to within a few feet. Spooked, many will return to their perch after a short loop. Veteran dragon stalkers learn to predict the behavior of different species. Much knowledge about Odonates comes from amateurs, not trained scientists. Annual transects comparable to Christmas bird counts tally species new to a state, and citizen scientists contribute information about ranges and population sizes. Dragons of the non-fire-breathing kind outnumber

butterflies and ladybugs on fabrics and as ornaments. The Dragonfly Society of the Americas in 1978 assigned common names to species, which boosted the hobby, as did the development of close-focus binoculars. A field guide, *Dragonflies of Alaska*, has been published, as has a kids' primer; laypeople now distinguish taiga bluets, zigzag darners, northern spreadwings, and Hudsonian whitefaces. John Hudson and Robert Armstrong, two of the authors, have trained Arctic and Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge biologists, and those of Kanuti, which boasts 20 dragonfly species.

Above: Mating black meadowhawks resting in "wheel" position. **Below:** A male northern or boreal bluet resting.





Hudson and Armstrong shared a trick for crisp close-ups, a catch-and-release in which insects become photo trophies rather than fish bait: Carefully pinching the subjects' wings, place them in a plastic envelope inside a cooler with an ice pack, where they turn sluggish. Then put them in a desirable pose and location. Treated properly, they'll take off when they've rewarmed. You also may surprise them on chilly mornings when they look still more precious covered with dew, rhinestone brooches waiting for sunrise.

Fans have been organizing dragonfly walks, workshops, and festivals. The first annual Dragonfly Day at Creamer's

Left: A male four-spotted skimmer, Alaska's state insect.

Field, Fairbanks, in 2008 attracted 300 people girded with butterfly nets, collecting boxes, stealth, and curiosity. John Hudson, no relation to the eponymous whiteface, calls interior Alaska "the frontier of dragonfly research" and singles out Fairbanks for "great dragonflying," as rewarding and exciting as birding in Nome or Cordova.

Self-described "odo-nuts" keep dragonfly larvae, or nymphs, in fish tanks to witness their metamorphosis. They cherish these pets as parents do babies. Nymphs resemble roaches more than they do the lovely maidens of Greek myths. Fearsome eating machines equipped with aquatic jet propulsion and an extendable jaw-lip, they skulk in lakes that do not freeze solid, devouring

critters up to small fishes. After months or years in submersion, they scale a leaf blade or cattail stem to change into their aerial, not quite elfin, selves. The dragons' most noticeable and brilliant phase, their glory moment in the light, lasts only a month or two.

Their mating, too, seems violent: the male charges from above, seizing the female with abdominal forceps. The lovers continue to fly hitched together, old ball and chain. Four-spotted skimmers release the females but guard them jealously, hanging around until eggs have been laid. Males of other species don't linger that long.

Kids do love bugs—the grosser the better. In 1995, Alaska public school

students chose the four-spotted skimmer over the meek bumblebee and mourning cloak, crowning it the official state insect. As Anvik's no-nonsense juniors pointed out, "Dragonflies eat mosquitoes [another runner-up], one of the state's most annoying pests." And like birds, though not mosquitoes, the ephemeral gems widely delight us—Odonataphiles can chase azure darners in Prudhoe Bay, black meadowhawks in the Interior, or mountain emeralds in Southeast. ♠

Michael Engelhard fondly recalls sitting in a creek on a hot day in Utah's canyon country once. Bluets visited, perching on his bare knees as if on boulders.