

The Dragonflies of Santa Barbara County

Presented by Hugh Ranson -- hranson@goleta.k12.ca.us Feel free to email me with your dragonfly questions and/or photographs. Video—courtesy of Andy Holt

Resources

Binoculars: The trouble with most binoculars is that, even if they have close focusing abilities, you invariably have much eye strain because of the parallax effect. Pentax makes a terrific, innovative binocular that focuses down to 18 inches and can be purchased for around \$100—a great bargain. It's the Pentax Papilio, and I would recommend the 6.5X21 version (also comes in an 8X).

Camera: An SLR with a prime lens is ideal but expensive. Most of my pictures were taken with a point and shoot superzoom, the Canon SX50. It has a 50X zoom and can autofocus down to 5 feet or so in full zoom setting. It's light, very portable, and gets decent results.

Hand lens: a 10X lens used for flowers works great for dragons, too. Some species (bluets!) need in-hand examination with a hand lens to pinpoint identification. Looking through the wrong end of your binoculars works almost as well.

Net: Any butterfly net works fine

Books: *Dragonflies and Damselflies of California* by Tim Manolis
Dragonflies and Damselflies of the West by Dennis Paulson
Kathy Biggs has several excellent books for sale at her website (see below).

Websites: <http://bigsnest.members.sonic.net/Pond/dragons/> This outstanding website, created by Kathy Biggs, has an abundance of resources, including multiple photographs of all the dragonflies of California.

Social groups – If you do Facebook, there is a supportive site where you can get help with ID and share your sightings. It's called Western Odonata. I'm always asking questions on there.

Where to Look: Any place with freshwater. Decent places along the coast include Lake Los Carneros in Goleta, Rattlesnake Canyon (when the creek is flowing), and the mouth of Carpinteria Creek. Seaside Plant Nursery in Carpinteria has a small lily pond that has turned up some very interesting species. The Santa Ynez River, especially beyond the first creek crossing on Paradise Road, can be excellent. At nearby Upper Oso there is a perennial stream that is terrific for such local species as Lavender Dancer and Great and California Spreadwing. The Sedgwick Reserve pond is very good.

When: I've seen dragonflies in every month, but April through October seems prime. The middle of a warm, sunny day will have most activity as dragonflies need warmth to take to the wing.

Glossary

Abdomen The hindmost body division, typically long and thin and having 10 segments.

Cercus One of a pair of upper abdominal appendages. The plural is *cerci*.

Exuvia the shed exoskeleton of a larval odonate.

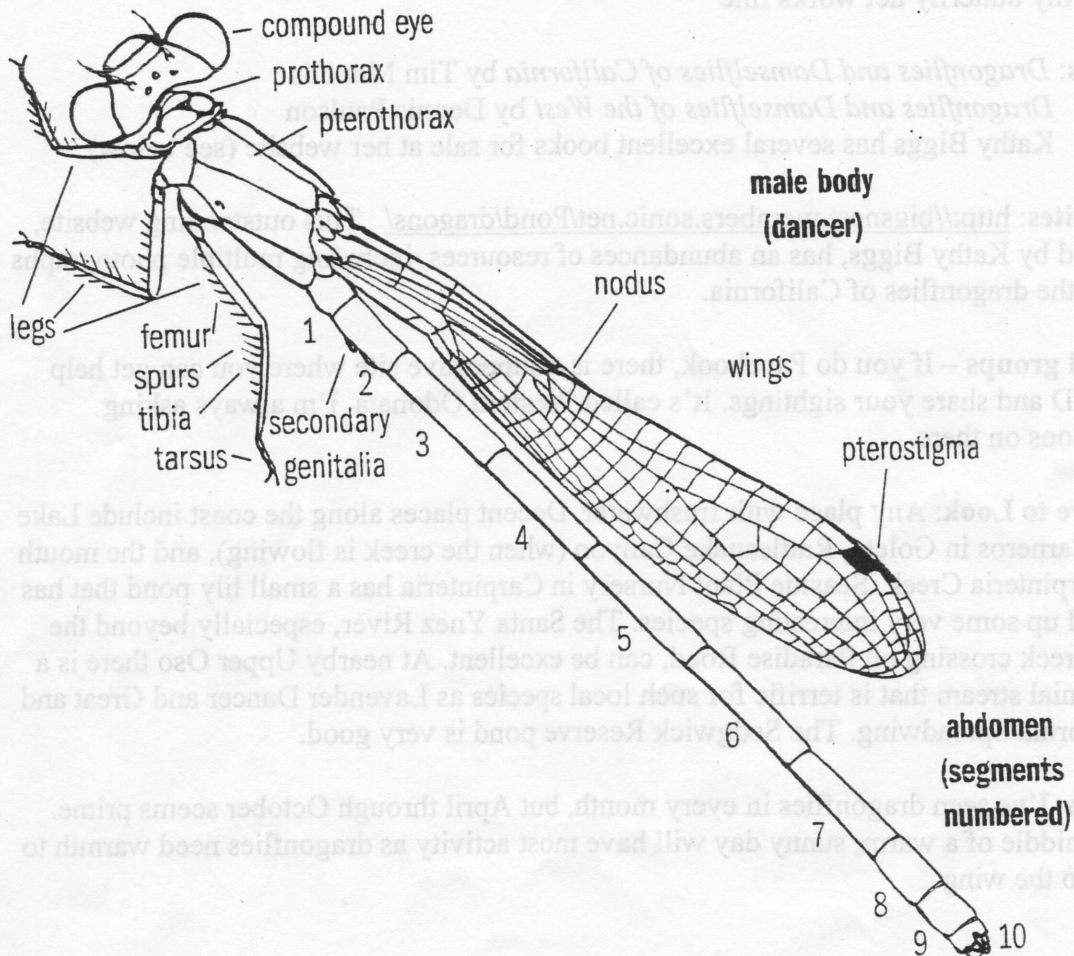
Instar The larval stage between molts.

Paraproct The lower pair of abdominal appendages projecting from the tip of the abdomen in male damselflies, used with the cerci to grasp the female.

Pterostigma Colored wing cell near the tip of the wing along the leading edge. Helpful in identification.

Teneral The adult form within a few hours of emergence, still soft bodied and relatively colorless.

Wheel position The males terminal appendages attach to the female's head, and the tip of her abdomen attaches to his secondary genitalia, forming a closed circle, or wheel.

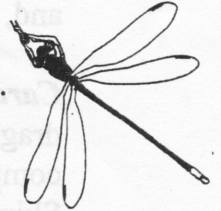


A Very General Key to Local Odonata

Damselflies (Zygoptera)

All are very small, save for the spreadwings. They are listed here from largest to smallest.

Spreadwings. Large, relatively drab. Hang from vegetation with wings spread. They are late flyers, most common in late fall. 3 species: Great and California (found along streams), and Spotted (at ponds).



Dancers Noticeably bigger than bluets (though still small!), they hold their wings above the abdomen. Males mostly blue of the two common species. Common species: Vivid and California Dancers. More localized species: Sooty, Aztec, and Lavender Dancers.



Bluets The empidonax of the dragonfly world! Males are blue and black. Wings (usually) held next to the abdomen. There are four species found in the county, all of which occur at the Sedgwick pond. When looking at the middle abdominal segments, two are mostly blue (Familiar and Northern) and two mostly black (Arroyo and Tule). Usually need to be in hand or use sharp photographs to identify. Examine the male sexual parts.



Forktails These are tiny, even smaller than bluets. Males have the abdomen mostly dark with blue at the tip. There are two common species, the Pacific and Black-fronted Forktails. Pacific are very fancy, with four blue dots atop the thorax. The Western Forktail is quite local in SBA but is common at Sedgwick in the summer months.

Desert Firetail Tiny and red. Common at Sedgwick.

Dragonflies (Anisoptera)

Darners Colorful, large dragons that rarely seem to rest! There are two common species, the Blue-eyed and Common Green. The former is mostly blue and brown in a mosaic pattern—the species in this genus, *Aeshna*, are known as mosaic darners. The latter is built like a bus, and has a green head and a blue body. Three more localized darners are the Giant, California, and Walker's.

Clubtails Named for the swollen area at the tip of the abdomen. There are two, the Serpent Ringtail and Gray Sanddragon, both fearsome-looking. They can be found in late summer along the Paradise Road area of the Santa Ynez River (and

similar inland habitats) where they bask on rocks next to or in water. The Ringtail is much prized by those from out of the area as it has a limited distribution in CA.

Spiketails and Cruisers Pacific Spiketail is a gorgeous black and yellow striped dragon of canyon streams. They are formidable, and can even take yellowjackets. The recently discovered (in our area) Western River Cruiser is similar but drabber and, as its name suggests, cruises up and down rivers.

Cardinal Meadowhawk vs Flame Skimmer I lumped these two very different dragons together because they are the most common largish bright red ones. In comparison, the meadowhawk is quite small and is a brilliant red. The Flame Skimmer is much larger, is more orange, and has an orange wash to the basal half of the wing. Both spend much time perching.

Red Rock Skimmer Another large red dragon but a duller red than the two above. Perches on streamside boulders. It has black markings on the abdominal segments.

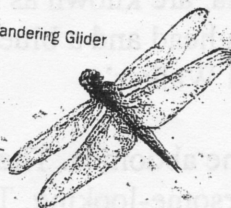
Variegated Meadowhawk A common migratory meadowhawk which varies quite a bit in coloration. One key feature is the row of pale "portholes" along the side of the abdomen.

Blue Dasher vs Western Pondhawk The males are very similar in size, shape, and coloration. They males of both are small and blue. The dasher has a white face while the pondhawk has a green face. The females are very different: the dasher is orangey brown, while the pondhawk is bright green. Dashers tend to perch up in vegetation, whilst pondhawks rest on the ground or in very low vegetation.

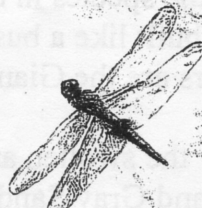
Saddlebags These are named for the patches of color on the base of the wing that resemble saddlebags. These are readily apparent in flight and at rest. We have the Red Saddlebags and the Black Saddlebags in our area. They can be numerous on ponds but are sometimes seen far from water. The Red Saddlebags has even been seen on tiny, waterless Santa Barbara Island.

Gliders We have two species, and they are almost always on the wing. They are migratory. They have quite short abdomens and broad hind wings. If you see a large swarm of dragonflies far away from water, they are likely this species.

Wandering Glider



Spot-winged Glider



flight profile