

Dragons and Damsels

Watching Dragonflies and Damselflies

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With a quick whisper and blur of wings, he appeared before me as I sat by his favourite perch. Hovering fiery-red in the spring sun, he examined this giant newcomer to his territory. Then he settled on the twig, inches from my face, cocking his head this way and that, the huge spangled eyes alert to any movement. Suddenly, he was gone, only to return a moment later with a long-legged fly in his jaws. I was so close and the air so still that I could hear the fly's body crackling as it disappeared between the dragonfly's jaws.

Growing up in the Okanagan Valley, I often waded in ponds searching for turtles, salamanders and backswimmers. And I loved dragonflies, flashing in the sunlight. But I didn't really begin watching them closely until much later — that day at a coastal pond when that stunning red Cardinal Meadowhawk flew into my life.

A patient observer can easily watch these insects going about their lives. They are large and easy to find, if you know where to look. They live around most types of fresh water but ponds and marshes rich in aquatic vegetation support the most species. The adults are active by day and they love the sun. There are about 5,500 named species worldwide, but in BC we know of only 87 different kinds — a group small enough to get to know with just a bit of effort.

Dragonflies are astonishing animals. They have fascinated people all over the world and down through the ages with their bright colours and dashing flight. Insects are the most abundant organisms on earth and they are critical to the well-being of our environment. But most are small and difficult to see and there are so many different kinds that it's hard to get to know even a few groups of them very well, even for a biologist.



It's important to learn more about them — and dragonflies, with their large size and interesting behaviour, are an excellent group to start with. Meeting these colourful flyers up close helps us understand them and their prominence in freshwater ecosystems.

Cardinal Meadowhawk (*Sympetrum illotum*) male. A beautiful red dragonfly common around ponds, even in cities, on BC's south coast. Photo: RBCM. G. Doerksen