

Dragons and Damsels

What are they really?

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The insect order Odonata (Greek for *toothed jaws*) contains the insects known in English as dragonflies. Two main groups live in BC. True *dragonflies* have hindwings broader than the forewings. When perched they hold their wings out away from the body. *Damselflies* are slimmer, often smaller and usually fly more slowly than dragonflies. At rest they usually hold their equal-sized wings together above the body.

Dragonflies are some of the most ancient insects. They are far older than dinosaurs. Fossils of dragonfly ancestors are 300 to 350 million years old. Although they still have many primitive features, dragonflies are wonderfully adapted for their successful life as predators in the air. But, a dragonfly leads a double life – the immature stage, the larva, lives in water, camouflaged and mostly hidden. At this stage, before they can fly, its larva is an eager eater of small aquatic life. When it is time to mature, the larva emerges from the water and transforms into a flying adult.

For thousands of years, dragonflies have caused superstitious fear in many people, even though they do not sting or bite humans. Maybe their boldness takes us aback, or their speed startles us. If you’ve never seen one, their strange appearance up close may seem fearsome.

The English name *dragonfly* echoes the feelings these insects sometimes cause – they are the fanciful “devil’s darning needles” that sting venomously or sew up the lips. They are “snake doctors” with the power to bring dead snakes back to life. These legends and folktales are groundless – dragonflies are harmless to people.



Western Forktail (*Ischnura perparva*) male. A common damselfly across southern BC. Photo: RBCM, G. Doerksen