

Assassins in the Grass

Some Robberflies of British Columbia's Grasslands

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In the huge insect order Diptera (true flies), the robber fly family Asilidae contains over 6700 species worldwide. Although in North America, robber flies mainly live in the south and are especially diverse in dry environments, BC has its share of them. From seashores to grasslands, from forests to subalpine meadows, the province's many habitats support about 120 species, nearly 60 per cent of the Canadian total. About 40 species live in BC grasslands and more wander in from nearby woods. Sunny and open, grasslands are great places to watch insects. Robber flies are one of the most visible and fascinating groups of large invertebrates living in these beautiful habitats. Watch for them!

Robber flies are named for their hunting style — like muggers they attack unwary victims. The fly grabs its insect prey with bristly legs then kills it with an injection of poisonous saliva from its sharp beak, called a proboscis. The fluid dissolves muscles and organs and the fly sucks the prey dry just like you'd devour a milkshake. Several species of white-tailed *Efferia* buzz everywhere. A couple even land on my leg — not to worry — despite their ferocity to other insects, robber flies are harmless to humans, although you can get jabbed if you grab one. Robber flies develop in the soil or in rotting wood, where the larvae eat immature stages of other insects.

In the pines and firs just above the grasslands live several species of robber flies called *Laphria*. It takes practice to tell them from bumble bees, because many are big, fat, and densely clothed in various combinations of black, yellow and red hair.



Laphria posticata male. Photo: Deanna Dodgson



Efferia benedicti male. Photo: RBCM, R. Cannings