

Nature Notes 11: The Valkyries of Swannington

For the last few months the air above Swannington has been alive with winged angels of death. With a whir of shimmering wings they have swooped and pounced upon their hapless prey. They are agile, shining and elegant but be not deceived, they are the “*femmes fatales*” of the insect world, their beauty camouflages voracious predators. Their whirring wings may be reminiscent of the rotor blades of an apache gunship helicopter but they are far more deadly; for their size, they are as fast, accurate and fatal as a heat-seeking air-to-air missile.

I refer to dragonflies and damselflies, apex predators of the insect world and members of a very ancient lineage with fossil members dating back to the carboniferous era 300 million years ago. Their ancestors were one of the earliest groups of flying insects, some with wingspans of over 70 cm.



Male emperor dragonfly, largest of the “hawker” group: 78mm long, wingspan 106mm (Photo Nerja Rob)



A dragonfly nymph captures a stickleback (Photograph Blogspot.com)

They can forage miles away from where they emerged. In accordance with the saying “like parent, like child”, their aquatic nymphs were also fierce predators, carefully stalking their prey then, when within range, suddenly shooting out the front part of their head (appropriately named their “mask”) containing very large strong jaws to grasp prey as large as frog and toad tadpoles. Some species spend up to three years as aquatic nymphs before crawling up the vertical stem of an emergent plant into the sunshine to step out of their final nymphal skin as the perfectly formed adult imago, ready to switch from aquatic to flying prey for their short adult life.

David Weaver has recorded seventeen species of dragonflies and damselflies from Swannington Commons (For a full list please see

appendix at http://www.swannington-news.org/Nature_notes/NN11.pdf). This is many more species than would have been found in Swannington when Brian Duckers originally designated the commons as SSSIs in 1957, primarily on the basis of their plants. Then there were only two ponds: one on Alderford and one on Upgate, both of which have dried out completely since and were only resurrected by digging them out again with HiMac diggers.

The richness of our dragonfly and damselfly fauna and the abundance of the individual species, is due to the variety of shapes, depths and plants growing in a total of ten ponds dug with the help of Cawston Cubs, Taverham Scouts, UEA Conservation Corps, NWT, and Bernard Matthews PLC, when the company sunk an additional bore hole resulting in a lower water table across Alderford



A male banded demoiselle. Damselflies fold their wings vertically above their abdomens (Photograph Rowhouse.co.uk)

common so that all the ponds there had to be re-dug mechanically.

One species of dragonfly, the keeled skimmer, is not found in any of the larger ponds but only in a small “turf pond” dug at the edge of the fen about 15 years ago. This is very shallow and only about 10m² in area but these conditions appear to be just right for this species.

A magical moment for me occurred a few weeks ago while sitting in our garden: a ruby darter dragonfly alighted on my bare knee and after a few moments, lowered its wings indicating it had settled down comfortably to join me for a short rest.



Male ruddy darter. Dragonflies rest with their wings in a horizontally, (Photograph Dorsaldragonflies.org.uk)

Mark (September 2017)

Appendix 1 Dragonflies and Damselflies Recorded by David Weaver in Swannington

Southern Hawker

Brown Hawker

Migrant Hawker

Emperor

Hairy Dragonfly

Broad-bodied Chaser

Four-spotted Chaser

Keeled Skimmer*

Ruddy Darter

Common Darter

Banded Demoiselle

Emerald Damselfly

Azure Damselfly

Common Blue Damselfly

Large Red Damselfly

Blue-tailed damselfly