

THE DRAGONFLIES OF TURVEY

As always "Turvey" here means the village itself and anywhere within a walking distance, which, technically speaking, could take us all the way to John O'Groats but for the sake of this article means largely the valley of the Great Ouse between Turvey and Felmersham. And "dragonflies" means damselflies too; all insects of the order Odonata, one of the most primitive orders of insects but correspondingly one of the most successful - there were dragonflies about when the first dinosaurs appeared some 245 million years ago.

My total for this area so far is 17 which is pretty well all that is to be expected apart from the odd vagrant and the Hairy Dragonfly recently established at Felmersham. Of this number 8 are damselflies which, as the name suggests, are the more delicate of the two sub-orders. The earliest to appear is usually the Large Red Damselfly, from early May onwards. Males are often seen resting on waterside vegetation or in tandem with the female laying her eggs. Soon afterwards the blues start appearing and these can be very confusing because they are difficult to separate out; a quick look at the abdominal segments one and two is a ready guide but not at all easy to achieve! Azure and Common Blue Damselflies are certainly present and one or the other, or both sometimes occur in great numbers - especially over and around the gravel pits of Harrold. Blue-tailed Damselflies are easier to sort out as they are otherwise largely black. They also seem to be more tolerant of polluted water than other species.

A beautiful near-relative is the Red-eyed Damselfly which occurs along the river, spending much time perched on lily-pads and other floating vegetation. As the name suggests the eyes have it (of the males only).

Another to be found by the river is the Banded Demoiselle; the males have obvious blue patches on their wings while the females have their entire wings suffused with green. Two less well known species complete this sub-order; the White-legged, which is generally paler than all the rest with white legs fringed with hairs; and the Emerald which, as its name suggests, can appear to be a startling metallic green when the sun shines on it.

Of the more robust "dragonflies" the first to appear is the splendidly named Broad-bodied Libellule or Chaser. The males have a broad pale-blue abdomen edged with yellow, and once they have found a female defend their territories vigorously against other males. We have them breeding in our ponds and it is fascinating to watch them "haul out" in late May and slowly expand their wings. Another Chaser which is similar is the four-spotted which occurs at Harrold a little later, along with the Black-tailed skimmer; the male of which is similar to the Broad-bodied male in colour but not shape. The Four-spotted has a darker narrower abdomen, though also edged with yellow, while the Black-tailed has clear wings in both male and female and also a narrow abdomen. All three species tend to fly rapidly and perch often.

By late June and early July the larger species are beginning to appear; we have had Southern Hawkers emerging from a tank in our greenhouse as early as 6th June, though they are usually later than this. These are splendid insects with a body length of seven centimetres and a wingspan of ten. They also often patrol a territory with great agility and can fly to great heights. The larger Brown Hawkers also occur now and are the more obvious because the wings are suffused with amber. Both of these species and the Migrant Hawker are to be found in and around the gardens and

copses of Turvey the latter sometimes in large numbers in the Autumn. The closely related Emperor Dragonfly is more likely to be found along or near the river. It too is very active. It has a largely blue body while the southern and Migrant Hawkers have a greater mix of colour on their abdomens. The trick is to spot whether the costa (the leading edge of the wing) is yellow or brown and whether the end segments have a solid or a divided blue or green band.

Lastly, and often to be found at the tail-end of

the season, are the two Darter dragonflies, the Common and the Ruddy. The former is to be found well into October and again often in large numbers, the latter is less frequent and seems to finish a little earlier.

So there we are: these insects can provide you with hours of interest, and a lot more could be said. Dig a pond and breed some and you may well also be aiding the spread of that wonderful falcon the Hobby -another dragonfly enthusiast.

Br. John

