

THE VILLAGE BIRDING LIFE

“A Summer Diversion: Dragonflies”

by FSV Audubon

Mid summer may not be the most interesting time to look for birds in the Village. Most of the migrating birds have passed through on their way North. Those migrators that nest here, such as, indigo buntings, summer tanagers and great-crested flycatchers have become familiar and readily identified by eye or call. The ruby-throated hummingbirds and recently fledged nuthatches and chickadees are best enjoyed from a porch rocker. Then, too, there are the inconveniences of going into the field with the chiggers, mosquitoes and stifling heat.

However, mid summer is a great time to observe one of Nature's most interesting creatures. If you golf, boat or walk the trails, especially Beaver Dam Trail, you undoubtedly have seen dragonflies. Last week, there were 100's of them in the sky above the green and pond at Granada # 4. It's probably a safe bet that every pond and lake in the Village has dragonflies at this time of the year.

Dragonflies are in the order of Odonata (Greek for “uneven wings”). There are more than 5500 species worldwide but only about a 100 have been identified in Arkansas. It's not clear how many species are common in the Village but a dozen might be a good guess. Dragonflies are characterized by large eyes, 2 pairs of transparent but sometimes patterned wings and an elongated body. Like all insects, they have six legs. Adult dragonflies always rest with their wings extended. The similar and closely related damselflies, in comparison, typically rest with their wings folded back. Some dragonfly species hunt while airborne; some hunt from a perch. Some species are similar to birds in that the males establish a territory and chase off other males. The males, which have the unique sexual ability of disposing of the sperm of an earlier successful male, will mate as often as possible.

Dragonflies begin and spend the vast majority of their lives as a nymph in ponds or lakes. The water bound dragonfly nymphs eat other insect larvae, small fish and tadpoles. When its time to emerge, the nymph crawls out onto a plant stem, stick or rock, sheds its nymphal skin and slowly unfurls its wings. The adults eat other insects, especially mosquitoes. Of course, dragonflies are eaten, too. Mississippi Kites, the light colored, hawk-like birds sometimes seen around the Village golf courses in the summer, are very good at hunting dragonflies.

Dragonflies are amazing creatures. Fossil records indicate that they have been around for close to 300 million years, one of Earth's first insects. They are among the fastest flying insects with speeds up to 35 m.p.h. They can hover and fly backwards or upside down. Their oversized eyes allow them to see ahead and behind them at the same time. Their vision and flying ability combine to make dragonflies the most efficient predators on Earth. Lions, grizzly bears or

sharks would do well to make a kill one out of three attempts. This pales compared to the dragonflies 95% kill rate. What's especially astounding about this is that dragonflies don't chase their prey down; they intercept it. This means that their minuscule brain is capable of calculating, for example, a mosquitoes speed, flight direction and distance from the dragonfly in a tiny fraction of a second. Not even the most sophisticated anti-aircraft missiles perform at this level.

As always HSVBIRDS.ORG has a lot of information about everything you'd like to know about birds and some of Nature's other wonders. You will see on the website that HSV Audubon has available a Village birding checklist. It lists the over 200 species of birds that might be seen in the Village, when they might be seen and how common they are. It's a great way to keep track of the birds at your feeder.

HSV Audubon meets the 2nd Friday of each month, except in July and August, at 10:00 at the Coronado Center. Guests are always welcome.

Photos by Vic Prislipsky