



Dragonflies and Damselflies of the Small Isles.

An identification guide

Dragonflies are amazing, stunningly colourful insects that exhibit awesome aerial displays. This guide will help you identify the 12 species of dragonflies and damselflies that can be found on the Small Isles. You can get involved and record all the species you see and help put together a national atlas of dragonflies.

Dragonfly life-cycle

Dragonflies and damselflies belong to the order of insects called Odonata (meaning toothed jaw). There are over 5,500 species worldwide and around 52 found in Britain; 18 of these breed in the Highlands. Dragonflies were one of the first flying insects, and fossilized dragonflies have been found that are 350 million years old.

The majority of a dragonfly's life is spent underwater as a larva. Some species can spend five years or more as larvae. In late spring or early summer, when the larva is fully grown, it crawls out of the water and seeks a suitable spot close to the edge of the water to emerge. Once free of its larval skin, it emerges as a fully formed adult. The adult may only survive for 3-4 weeks, but this is long enough for breeding to take place and the next generation to begin.

During mating, the male and female form a wheel shape with the male holding onto the female's neck using his claspers. Egg-laying takes place after mating, and in most species the male will continue to hold onto the female's neck (known as being in tandem), or he will hover close to her, guarding the female to prevent other males mating with her. The female lays eggs directly into water, in mud or on vegetation, depending upon the species.

Dragonflies and Damselflies - what's the difference?

Damselflies are delicate insects - about the size of a matchstick - with a weak, fluttery flight. They have oblong heads with eyes at each end. When at rest, their wings are held closed over their abdomens. Dragonflies are fast, powerful fliers. They are bigger and chunkier insects than damselflies. They have large eyes that meet at the top of their heads. Dragonflies' wings are held open at rest.

LARVAE

You can identify dragonflies by examining their larvae. A basic guide is provided below. For more in-depth information, see the British Dragonfly Society website.

HAWKERS

These are about 4cm long when fully grown and torpedo shaped.

CHASERS, DARTERS AND EMERALDS

These are about 1 -2cm long with squat, rounded bodies

DAMSELFLIES

These are around 1 cm long. They are much less chunky than the dragonflies. The Emerald Damselfly larva (pictured) is the exception, being up to 3cm long, very slim with long tail fins and swimming in a sinuous, fishy manner.

DAMSELFLIES *Cuileagan Cruinneig*

Beautiful Demoiselle,

Oigheag Bhreagha

Length: 45 - 49mm

Range: Possibly on Rum Rarity: Not yet recorded on any of the islands Habitat: Only found in running water, burns and rivers with stony bottoms
Seen: Late May to late August Description: Females have metallic, bronze-green bodies with golden-brown tinged wings. Most activity takes place near water with the males displaying to females using a fast, fluttering flight. Females only come to the water to mate or lay eggs and can be found at the edges of Bracken stands or woodland.

Emerald Damselfly

Cruinneag Uaine

Length: 35 - 39mm Range: Canna, Eigg, Muck and Rum Rarity: Common Habitat: Well-vegetated standing water, ditches and loch margins

Seen: Late June to September

Description: A slender species with a weak, fluttery flight. Females are a duller green with pale brown abdomens. On dull days, they can be found resting on vegetation near water holding their wings half-open. This is the most common late summer damselfly.

Large Red Damselfly

Cruinneag Dhearg

Length: 33 - 36mm Range: Canna, Eigg, Muck and Rum

Rarity: Common Habitat: Standing or very slow-moving water

Seen: May to August

Description: A distinctive damselfly that is the first to be seen in late spring. Females are darker with black and yellow bands on their abdomens. Unusually for damselflies, the males are territorial, which keeps their numbers low at waterbodies.

Common Blue Damselfly

Cruinneag Chumanta

Length: 29-36mm Range: Eigg, Muck(?) and Rum

Rarity: Common

Habitat: Most wetlands, including very slow-moving water

Seen: June to mid-September Description: Males fly fast and low over the water, often in large numbers. Females are much drabber than males. They have more black and can come in yellow, pale green or brown forms.

Blue-tailed Damselfly

Cruinneag Ghrinn

Length: 30 - 34mm Range: Canna, Eigg, Muck and Rum

Rarity: Common Habitat: Most wetlands

Seen: May to early September Description: Commonly seen flying low among waterside vegetation but also far from water. Females usually have a dull brown band (segment 8) and brown/pale grey/pink thorax.

"Fir0002/Flagstaffotos"

DRAGONFLIES

Tarbh Nathrach

HAWKERS These are fast-flying insects, chasing after prey and seldom perching (apart from the Azure Hawker).

Azure Hawker

Tarbh Nathrach Liath

Length: 54 - 64mm

Range: Rum

Rarity: Rare

Habitat: Boggy moorland, open birch woodland and moss-rich bog pools

Seen: Late May to July

Description: This is a sun-loving hawker. It spends a lot of its time perched, basking on rocks or tree trunks. In cold weather the blue fades to grey, providing the perched insect with excellent camouflage. The males are seen flying low and fast over the edges of ponds. Females have two colour variations: either yellow/beige or blue. Unlike males, Azure Hawker females have no coloured stripes on top of their thorax.

Common Hawker

Tarbh Nathrach nan Cuilcean

Length: 65 - 80mm

Range: Canna, Eigg, Muck and Rum

Rarity: Common

Habitat: Most standing waters

Seen: July to October

Description: This large hawker is a fast, powerful flier and is difficult to approach. They almost never perch. Although colourful, males appear very dark in flight. Females can still be actively egg-laying on cold mornings at the end of the flight season.

GOLDEN-RINGED

These are represented by only one species in the UK. They behave exactly the same as Hawkers.

Golden-ringed Dragonfly

Tarbh Nathrach Orfhainneach

Length: 74-85mm

Range: Canna(?), Eigg and Rum

Rarity: Localised

Habitat: Burns, moorland and woodland rides

Seen: June to mid-September

Description: One of Britain's largest and most distinctive dragonflies, it is often readily approachable. Males have a pinched waist on their abdomens. Females have a pointed spine at the end of their abdomens for egg-laying.

EMERALDS

These are similar to Hawkers – they seldom perch

Northern Emerald

Smarag na Mointich

Length: 45-51 mm

Range: Rum and Muck

Rarity: Rare

Habitat: Sphagnum bog pools with scattered cotton grass among open woods or moors

Seen: Early June to August

Description: A dark green dragonfly only found in Scotland. It flies fast and straight at height, often feeding above the tree tops or bracken, and it is difficult to approach. When viewed from the side, it looks like a matchbox with a piece of string trailing behind it, due to its flattened abdomen. Males have distinctive "earwig-like", calliper-shaped claspers at the end of their abdomens.

CHASERS

As the name suggests, the males constantly patrol low over the water, at about knee-height, to find prey, chase off rivals and find females.

Four-spotted Chaser

Ruagalre Ceithir-bhallach

Length: 40 - 48mm

Range: Canna, Eigg, Muck and Rum

Rarity: Common

Habitat: Moorland bogs, ditches and ponds

Seen: May to August

Description: Males are extremely active, being aggressive and territorial. Both sexes have the same colouration. In fine weather, 30+ males can be seen at a single waterbody.

SKIMMERS

Their behaviour is very similar to darters, but they fly low over the ground or water in an erratic flight.

Keeled Skimmer

Uachdarair Direach

Length: 38-46mm

Range: Rum and possibly Eigg

Rarity: Rare

Habitat: Runnels and open bog pools

Seen: Late May to August

Description: Females have parallel-sided, golden-brown abdomens.

DARTERS

They dart from a perch to catch prey or chase after mates.

Common Darter

Gat hair Cumanta

Length: 35 - 44mm

Range: Canna, Eigg, Muck and Rum

Rarity: Common

Habitat: Ponds, lochs and very slow-moving burns

Seen: July to mid-September

Description: A small, restless dragonfly that regularly perches on bank-side vegetation, often returning to the same spot. The black legs have a distinctive yellow stripe.

Black Darter

Gathair Dubh

Length: 29-34mm

Range: Canna, Eigg, Muck and Rum

Rarity: Common

Habitat: Moorland pools and bogs with plenty of vegetation

Seen: Mid-July to September

Description: This small dragonfly has a short, erratic flight with frequent perching on vegetation near water.

Watching damselflies and dragonflies

Choose warm, sunny days with little or no wind

Check the flight period table to see what might be flying

The best equipment is your own eyes - sit quietly and wait

Close-focussing binoculars can be useful for identifying distant insects

Dragonflies are delicate creatures, so avoid handling them when possible

They do not sting or bite

Ponds can be dangerous - do not enter the water, your safety comes first

Watch out for deep water, steep banks and other hazards

Be aware of water-borne diseases and ticks

Make sure you wear appropriate footwear and clothing

Carry food, drink, a map and a compass (and know how to use them)

Take a notebook and pen to record any sightings of dragonflies and damselflies

Best places to see Dragonflies and Damselflies on ...

Canna: 7 Species Present

Any pools in the moorland on the island. Canna's one lochan is found on Sanday.

Eigg - 9 species present

The paths around the Blar Dubh bog and the Giant's Footstep lochan are excellent places.

Muck - 8 or 9 species present

The most accessible ponds are the two southwest of Druim Mor and another near the cottage at Blar Mor.

Rum - 12 species present

Any sheltered ponds or pools, especially those to the southwest of the island on the road to Harris. There are plenty of new sites to find, since Rum is so big that it has not yet been fully surveyed. If you do not know where any of these sites are, ask an islander as they will!

Get involved and help dragonflies

You can contribute to the National Dragonfly Atlas Project, which seeks to update the known distribution of British dragonfly and damselfly species. Recording is essential to help map these amazing insects and to help identify important areas for them. Volunteers are needed to record in one or more 10-km squares - there are many squares in the Highlands that have few or no records. You can help fill in these gaps.

Contact Jonathan Willet, Biodiversity Officer, Highland Council, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness, IV3 5NX, for more information about under-recorded areas in the Highlands. Email: jonathan.willet@highland.gov.uk Tel: 01463 702274

Any record of a damselfly or dragonfly is useful, and you should record which species you saw, how many, when and where you saw it and, if possible, a grid reference from an Ordnance Survey map. Records of egg-laying and mating are particularly important. Send all records to either Jonathan Willet or to the Scottish Dragonfly Recorder, Pat Batty: E-mail: pat@patbattyO.wanadoo.co.uk

For more information about dragonflies and information on local or national events, check out the British Dragonfly Society's website:

www.british-dragonflies.org.uk/

*To see the distribution of dragonflies and damselflies in the Highlands, look at the National Biodiversity Network: www.searchmbn.net
The information above was taken from the Dragon and Damselflies of the Small Isles leaflet, which was funded by Scottish Natural Heritage, British Dragonfly Society, Inverness Field Club and the Highland Biological Recording Group. Thanks to Kat Parkes, Pat Batty and Craig Macadam for their help in putting together this leaflet.*