

ODONATA REPORT

WOOLSTON EYES NATURE RESERVE 2009

After the really wet summers of 2007 and 2008, it was a relief to start this season, in April and May, with reasonably nice warm weather. Last year's rain (2008) meant that I was not able to get to some of the ponds, as the growth of vegetation had become almost impenetrable. Much of the early season was spent just trying to make the ponds accessible, a task that would have been impossible without the help of Roger Benbow, Les Jones and Mike Thompson.

June's weather was patchy but the 'Open Day; on the 28th dawned bright and warm and the dragonfly stand attracted much attention. Children were particularly attracted to (or repulsed by) the live larva collection. Larva of Emperor, Common Darter and several types of damselflies were displayed and I was surprised by how many people were amazed to learn that dragonflies spend most of their lives in this form underwater, before emerging into the beautiful creatures of the summer.

With some hot days in July I felt we were in for a better season. August and September were changeable but overall plenty of warm days meant a much better dragonfly year than the previous two.

Over the last two winters work had been done on No.1 Bed with eight new ponds created for newts which will be a benefit to dragonflies, especially the large pool next to the Viaduct. The old Viaduct Pools have also been greatly improved. With trees felled to let in more light the blanket weed had almost disappeared and there was plenty of water in the pools after all the rain. The balsam, which had taken advantage of the clearance, is a mixed blessing. It smothers out our natural flora and grassland but provides good perches for basking darters and hides tenerals while they mature.

INDIVIDUAL SPECIES REPORT

Large Red Damselfly

(Pyrrhosoma nymphula)

As usual, this was the first damselfly of the season to emerge, first seen on 2nd May. One of the relatively new ponds at the east end of No.1 Bed has lush reed growth all around and this seemed to be Large Red Damselfly heaven, By 25th May they were abundant here and also present by the west pond and on No.3 Bed into June, July and August, with the last one seen on 7th. Never before abundant, this damselfly has always been seen throughout the Reserve in small numbers but this year it was particularly plentiful on this new pond.

Blue-tailed Damselfly

(Ischnura elegans)

Seen emerging on 25th May, there were many around the west pond on No.1 Bed by 2nd June and they stayed numerous here into August. Both sexes were present, with females in several colour forms. The last one of the season was seen from the footbridge to No.3 Bed on 11th September.

Azure Damselfly

(Coenagrion puella)

First seen on the 25th May and noted throughout the Reserve in small numbers, with pairs in cop and females ovipositing. However, none were present by the end of July, when they seem to have been superseded by the Common Blue Damselfly.

Common Blue Damselfly

(Enallagma cyathigerum)

Noted on 25th May on No.1 Bed and under the footbridge to No.3 Bed on 2nd June. Abundant around the west pond through July and August with many females ovipositing, the male still attached to her, sticking up like little blue twigs all over the water surface. The females sometimes went completely under the surface to lay eggs in submerged vegetation.

Red-eyed Damselfly

(Erythromma najas)

An early sighting of a larva climbing from the water on 25th May started another good season for this species, first discovered at this location on the bunded river in 2006. At least twelve were under the footbridge to No.3 Bed on 2nd June, with a pair in cop and a female ovipositing. More were found near the bund and they have certainly claimed this area as their own. On the Open Day on 28th June I was able to show people these distinctive damselflies under the footbridge. It was more interesting to be able to show a live insect, as well as the larva collection, instead of just photographs on the stand. Seen throughout July and August in cool temperatures and late into the day, there were still five perched on algae on the 19th intermittently chasing each other around. They had all disappeared by the beginning of September.

The classic image of this species is of a male perched on a lily pad, but at Woolston, they have to utilise floating algae and bank side vegetation overhanging the water. Nevertheless, they seem to be doing very well despite the last two dreadful summers, perhaps because of the sheltered position of this location or maybe because they are larger and more robust than other damselflies.

Banded Demoiselle

(Calopteryx splendens)

Few reports this year from the Mersey; a male being seen by the Weir on two occasions and a loose male under the footbridge to No.3 Bed. This was disappointing after breeding activity had been observed in 2007 but I am sure they were successful on other parts of the river and will reappear given another warm season.

Emerald Damselfly

(Lestes sponsa)

After poor years in 2007 and 2008 it was a fantastic surprise to find this pretty little damselfly so numerous on the Viaduct Pools on 27th July – they seemed to be attached to every piece of upright vegetation in cop and ovipositing. Often difficult to locate, as they flutter amongst bank side vegetation not obviously flying above the pond, it was amazing, on 7th August, to find a male perched holding territory out in the open by a puddle on the track across No.1 Bed, very obligingly photogenic.

This was the most of this species that I have seen at Woolston Eyes, although nationally it is very common. Perhaps it took advantage of the lighter, more open conditions of the sheltered Viaduct Pools, where the sparse vegetation made it more visible than usual.

Four-spotted Chaser

(Libellula quadrimaculata)

This chaser has been common throughout the Reserve since recording began, so it was no surprise when, on 25th May, teneral flies flew up from the vegetation around the west pond on No.1 Bed. They were holding territory here and on some of the new ponds at the east end into June and July, the last being seen on 7th August.

Broad-bodied Chaser

(Libellula depressa)

On 2nd June single males were seen holding territory on two of the new ponds on No.1 Bed. This species likes to colonise new water bodies which have bare muddy edges with little vegetation. A female was seen to fly up from one of the ponds, raising hopes again that this will soon be a confirmed breeding species. On 1st July there was a male on three of the new ponds, but they had completely disappeared by the end of July

Black-tailed Skimmer

(Orthetrum cancellatum)

First recorded in 2006, as a new dragonfly to the Reserve, there were no further reports of this species until 2009. On 9th August a male was perched on damp mud on the track going around the large new pond near the Viaduct. Liking new ponds often with un-vegetated margins, it will make do with open ground, muddy tracks or stony paths, where it will rest between its fast skimming patrols of the water body. On 19th August, two males were present, holding territory around the pond. No females have yet been seen. These being much more elusive – only coming to the pond to oviposit, at which point they get grabbed by the male. This is a species which has spread dramatically northwards in recent years and I am sure that it is only a matter of time before it breeds on the Reserve.

Emperor Dragonfly

(Anax imperator)

A male was seen on 2nd June patrolling one of the new ponds on No.1 Bed. The only other report was of a single male (perhaps the same one) on the east pond of No.1 Bed on 1st July. This large, regal dragonfly was a dominant presence on the Reserve in 2005 and 2006 but last year there was only one sighting and only two this year. This is a little perplexing as this strong flyer has not been affected by the adverse weather in other locations nearby.

Southern Hawker

(Aeshna cyanea)

On 31st July, two exuvia were spotted in the vegetation at the side of the Viaduct Pools. Upon examination, these were found to be of Southern Hawker. This species has been seen ovipositing at this pool in the past, so it was good to prove that it still successfully breeds here.

Throughout August males were seen hunting and perching around the copse area on No.2 Bed and also on No.1 and 3 Beds and at the Viaduct Pools. Several were caught in ringer's nets and were successfully released. On 11th September a female was disturbed ovipositing at the edge of the Viaduct Pools, whilst a male was seen as late as 14th October by the footbridge to No.3 Bed. It seems to have been a good season for the Southern Hawker.

Migrant Hawker

(Aeshna mixta)

The first of this late flying hawker was seen on 7th August, when a male was hunting by the copse. During August and September small numbers were seen throughout the Reserve, with an immature

male flying along a track to No.1 Bed on 22nd August. This is not surprising as the Migrant Hawker is the latest of our hawkers to emerge. They can fly well into November in a mild year, so it was not unusual (on a warm 28th October) that a male was seen searching for females around the reeds of the west pond on No.1 Bed, whilst another was near the footbridge to No.3 Bed.

Even though well represented this year, they were nothing like as numerous as in 2006 and 2007 when they took over from Brown Hawker as the most numerous Aeshnid on the Reserve.

Common Hawker

(Aeshna juncea)

The only report this year, on 7th August, was of a male seen around the copse on No.2 Bed.

Brown Hawker

(Aeshna grandis)

25th July was quite late for the first report of Brown Hawker, around the river under No.3 Bed footbridge. However, by the end of July they were numerous all over the Reserve, with four females ovipositing at the same time on and around the Viaduct Pools. On 31st July, four exuvia were retrieved from the edge of the pool and I was delighted to find that they were Brown Hawkets. Although ovipositing has been observed on the Reserve many times, it is always nice to prove successful breeding.

On 9th August a cloud of small insects flying on No.1 Bed attracted at first one, then another until there were ten Brown Hawkets flying around together catching insects – a truly stunning sight, with their lovely amber wings shining in the sun. A visitor from Cornwall, who I was showing around the Reserve wanted particularly to see this species as, oddly, they do not occur in Cornwall, He was amazed at the golden lustre of the wings, so that a mere glimpse is sufficient for a positive identification.

This was a bumper year for Brown Hawker and has definitely re-established it as being the most numerous hawker on the Reserve, frequenting many ponds with any type of bank side vegetation. It was still abundant well into September.

Common Darter

(Sympetrum striolatum)

A teneral, discovered in grassland near the west pond, on No.1 Bed on 1st July was the first of the year. At first, only odd ones were seen here and there, making me fear that the adverse weather of the last two years had affected them badly. Therefore it was a pleasant surprise on 9th August, to find bright red males holding territory, one every couple of yards, all around the edge of the large new pond near the Viaduct. Pairs were in cop in the grassland and females were ovipositing on the pond. Once found, they were abundant throughout September and into October, when a few old grey females were trying to oviposit in the almost dried up west pond on the 17th. A few were still around on 28th October, perched, sunning themselves on an exceptionally warm day.

Ruddy Darter

(Sympetrum sanguineum)

First noted on 27th July, holding territory over one of the Viaduct Pools, this perfectly fresh bright red individual could have recently emerged from this traditional site on the Reserve. In August, two more teneral males were seen, one near a new pond at the east of No.1 Bed. On the 19th, a peculiar darter was sky-pointing its abdomen, even though it was not particularly hot weather. This reminded

me of the Yellow-winged Darter that I had found in 2006 and I was perplexed, for a while but photos proved it to be a female Ruddy Darter acting oddly. At the end of August, several more males were discovered in the reed bed and perched, holding territory, in a clearing in the reeds. This species seems to be increasing in numbers. The last one was seen on 11th September in its traditional site – the Viaduct Pools.

Black Darter

(Sympetrum danae)

Only one report was received this year, of a male on No.1 Bed on 17th August. This is a very rare dragonfly on the Reserve these days, although it has bred in the past.

In Summary:

Nothing new was discovered this year, but the success of the Red-eyed Damselfly and the re-appearance of recent additions such as the Black-tailed Skimmer and Broad-bodied Chaser were good, as were the sheer numbers of Brown Hawker and the increase of Emerald Damselfly and Ruddy Darter. You never know what might turn up in 2010; let us hope for a good, hot summer.

Trisha Thompson