

WOOLSTON EYES ODONATA 2006

This year was an exciting one on the Reserve for dragonfly watchers, with nineteen species recorded (four more than in 2005) and breeding activity observed for fourteen plus one suspected breeding. June and July were fine and the hot, still, sunny days were perfect for odonata.

My first visit on 10th June was to be the first of a few amazing days. From the bridge of No.3 bed I could see damselflies flying over the river. The usual Common Blue Damselfly (*Enallagma cyathigerum*), Blue-tailed Damselfly (*Ischnura elegans*) and Large Red Damselfly (*Pyrrhosoma nymphula*) were present, but there were some which seemed larger and more robust than these. On closer examination they had a distinctive dark upper thorax and large red eyes, identifying them as Red-eyed Damselflies (*Erythromma najas*). Six males were present with one mating with a female. This was a complete surprise, as these damselflies have not been seen on the Reserve since Scott Kennedy recorded them in 1998 on the Sandpit Pond. Up to this date there had only been two other sightings. Their appearance here was also surprising because it is not their usual habitat preference; they usually like large pools of open water with lily pads to land on. Here they were perching on the bank-side vegetation, branches hanging over the water. Later that day, two or more were also found on the Sandpit Pond in a more typical manner, perched on the lily pads.

The same day, on No.3 bed, I found that one of the small overgrown ponds had been dug out, and now had a muddy bank around it covering the vegetation. The muddy margins had attracted another dragonfly I had not seen on the Eyes before, and as far as I can ascertain has never been mentioned in any previous report. This was a male Broad-bodied Chaser (*Libellula depressa*), with its lovely broad, powder-blue abdomen. It was holding territory on this pond. The following day, 11th June, I returned to the same pond; it was still there and a second male arrived, they clashed in mid-air and the intruder was driven off. A female arrived at the pond, they flew off in tandem, mated briefly, then she oviposited into the pond with the male in attendance. Not only a new dragonfly for the Reserve, but breeding activity recorded also although I do not know how successful this will be. Later in the season the pond dried up and has inevitably become choked with vegetation again. Something to look out for, though, in 2007.

On 15th June one female Broad-bodied Chaser was again ovipositing on the No.3 bed pond and at least seven Red-eyed Damselflies were still present on the bunded river, mating and ovipositing. No.1 bed held the usual numerous Four-spotted Chasers (*Libellula quadrimaculata*), with Emperor Dragonflies (*Anax imperator*) and Azure Damselflies (*Coenagrion puella*) in reasonable numbers, but again, I was surprised to find another Broad-bodied Chaser. It was on one of the Viaduct Pools, which has reasonably bare banks, so there is hope, although no proof, that they may be breeding there also. The first Emerald Damselfly (*Lestes sponsa*) of the year was found here also.

This year dragonflies were again, like last year, patrolling every body of water on the Reserve, with females seen ovipositing on the west pool of No.1 bed and on the Sandpit Pond. Common Darters (*Sympetrum striolatum*) were, as usual, widespread

and abundant all through the season; in September more than fifty were ovipositing and very mature silvery adults were observed well into October.

On 25th July Brown Hawkers (*Aeshna grandis*) were abundant, and nine Ruddy Darters (*Sympetrum sanguineum*) were seen around the Viaduct Pools, with female Emerald Damselflies ovipositing here also. Les Jones spotted a small dark-coloured darter which turned out to be *Sympetrum danae* – Black Darter. These have been recorded on the Eyes before and used to be a regular breeder, but in recent years only odd wanderers had appeared towards the end of the season. On this early date it is possible that this pretty little darter had emerged from one of the ponds, but this adult male was the only one found, so not conclusive. The same day another strange-looking darter was found amongst the reeds next to the west pool on No.1 bed. It had an orange/red abdomen, black beneath with thin white stripes around. The thorax was brown with plainish yellow sides and there was a saffron colouration to veins at the base of the wings. The eyes were yellow and brown and the pterostigma was reddy-brown edged with a black line, and it perched in an unusual manner. I identified it as a Yellow-winged Darter (*Sympetrum flaveolum*), a rare visitor to this country from the Continent. The weather had been perfect for its arrival with warm southerly winds. In fact, a few had been seen at Strumpshaw Fen in Norfolk, but this turned out to be the first in Cheshire since 1999. It was seen again on 26th July when Brian Martin confirmed my sighting, but it had disappeared by the 28th.

There was to be another surprise on 28th July, however. A Black-tailed Skimmer (*Orthetrum cancellatum*) had taken up residence on the west pool, another new species for the Eyes. It was quite confiding, perching on a pipe which went into the water on the north edge. Unmistakable with its powder-blue abdomen (slimmer than Broad-bodied) tipped with black and edged with yellow spots on the sides, the wings were completely clear except for the dark pterostigma. This member of the Libellulidae family has been expanding northwards in recent years and has hit this area in force, having also been found in large numbers on the airport ponds at Mobberley, and Lindow Common, Wilmslow.

Also on 28th July, hundreds of teneral Common Darter were emerging from the west pool, many exuviae were found and on closer inspection a few Ruddy Darter exuviae were amongst them, so definitely proving breeding of this species. The pond was beginning to dry up by now in this unusually long hot spell of weather and I was able to walk out into the reeds, where two exuviae of the hawker family were found, although these were extremely small for Aeschnids. Closer examination and measurements proved them to be Migrant Hawkers (*Aeschna mixta*) and over the next few weeks six more were found, thus proving breeding of Migrant Hawker for the first time on the Reserve.

This was the end of the hot dry spell and the weather broke with torrential rain on 1st August, but the teneral Migrant Hawkers must have survived because by 7th August they were abundant on all parts of the Reserve. A favourite spot was a sheltered clearing to the north of the footbridge on No.3 bed where they gathered to rest, feed and mate, and on one visit I counted eight. Two pairs were also found mating in the reeds around the Sandpit Pond.

On 7th August three pairs of Red-eyed Damselflies were ovipositing near the bund on No.3 bed. One pair had the female under the water, but the male was pulled under as well. I thought that they had drowned when suddenly she came up and popped out of the water, flying away, but I do not think he managed to get out – such is the nature of life and love! This is not an uncommon activity. Last year I observed a female Emerald Damselfly submerge completely to lay her eggs on an underwater stem with the male attached to her to pull her out, but it was the first time I have seen the male go under as well.

During August, Emerald Damselflies were abundant, with thirty or forty seen on one day. Southern Hawker (*Aeschna cyanea*) proved rare this year, however, with only one seen at the Viaduct Pools and Common Hawker (*Aeschna juncea*) was seen only once. Migrant Hawker has definitely taken over as being the most common of the *aeschna* species on the Eyes.

I have focussed this year mostly on the new and unusual, but there were all the usual damselflies and dragonflies in evidence, and although Banded Demoiselle (*Calopteryx splendens*) did not put in an appearance actually on the Reserve, I am told that they are abundant on the river to the north-east and are more than likely breeding there. So, something to explore in 2007, and what could be next? Lesser Emperor maybe, or Hairy Dragonfly, which needs unpolluted water courses and has been extending its range in Britain in recent years. Who knows?

Trisha Thompson

Glossary

Exuvia	an empty larval case
Pterostigma	the dark segment on the leading edge of the wings
Teneral	a newly-emerged dragonfly not yet sexually mature