



Dragonflies

by Carol Ellis

A Dragonfly has many lensed eyes and a nearly 360-degree field of view.

A golden glint catches my eye. Atop a purple bloom, a Dragonfly sits with tightly clenched legs, its small body changing direction like a pennant in the wind. How beautiful... a God-given work of art.

My butterfly garden has produced many moments of joy in its first year. Designed with pollinators in mind, it has hosted many things with wings. From the buzzing bees to migrating birds splashing in the fountain; from hungry caterpillars to butterflies sipping sweet nectar, their larvae munching on the milkweed where chrysalis will soon hang.

The purple firespike was planted for the hummingbirds, a species which still



Looking closely, I marvel at this tiny creature, a living piece of art.

remains elusive from my vision and that of my camera. The good news is the Dragonfly took advantage of the firespike's spindle-like bloom to rest. The creature let me take multiple photos with my camera lens just inches away from its tiny form. What a fearless critter! Is that why they call it the Dragonfly?

The name Dragonfly is from the Old English word dragoun, referring to a mythical serpent or sea monster; and the word fleoge referring to flying insects. By putting the two words together you get dragounfleoge, meaning dragon-like flying insect. There is nothing to fear about these "dragons." They don't bite because they don't have teeth. They do have a serrated mandible which comes in handy for holding and crushing prey.

The Halloween Pennant Dragonfly (*Celithemis eponina*) featured in my photos is named for its orange-colored wings, with dark brown bands. It is found in the Eastern U.S., especially near fresh water ponds, and is seen perching on tall grasses, reeds and cattails. The males are

often spotted in groups of 10-15 and are in search of a female. The males are more vibrantly colored, and have a red face while the females have a yellowish face, and heart-like markings on their abdomen.

They appear in the Keys usually in late Spring/early Summer, about the same time as the mosquitos arrive and the snowbirds depart. Dragonflies are known as "Mosquito Hawks." They are excellent flyers, which is a good thing, because they only eat while in flight. Dragonflies catch their prey by grabbing it with their feet or mandibles.

Getting a picture of a Dragonfly catching a mosquito in flight would definitely be a prize winning photo! The behavior is not rare... It's estimated adult Dragonflies consume 30 - 100 mosquitos per day, and if they can't fly they will starve.

There are three stages in the life-cycle of the Dragonfly: egg, larva (also known as nymph) and adult. The female Dragonfly deposits eggs in a pond and a tadpole-like prolarva emerges from the egg. This stage lasts up to a year in warmer climates, and here the larvae hunt for mosquito larvae and more.



This photo appears to show the adult dragonfly chewing foliage, but that is not the case. Dragonflies are meat eaters... consuming exclusively flying insects, especially mosquitos, flies and gnats.

Dragonflies... CONTINUED - Photos by Carol Ellis except as noted.



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So how did they find my garden in the Upper Keys which is surrounded by coastal marshes and mangrove swamps? Dragonflies can do well in small freshwater ponds like mine, which never runs dry, is free from chlorine and chemicals; my pond even has a red mangrove living in it which was planted from seed. The leaf debris at the bottom of the pond creates a natural habitat and circulation keeps it clear. I often see tadpoles, and the birds are regular visitors. Perhaps I have a Dragonfly habitat?

An outdoor pond has some benefits: my orchids like the transpiration of the circulating water, the birds have a place to drink, especially migrating birds who stop there. Am I on their map? My pool lady saw my waterfall and asked if I'd like it cleaned of algae. No, I replied, it is for the birds. If you have a pond, don't keep it too clean, for you may disturb the areas where critters lay their eggs. Also chlorine is not good for our critters to drink. There is nothing wrong with a little "green." Avoid

pesticides near the water. That goes for ponds and also our nearshore waters.

Dragonflies have the potential to control mosquitos, and indirectly the diseases they carry.

So think twice when you get that notice from the Florida Keys Mosquito Control District (FKMCD). These agencies commonly use the organophosphate insecticides malathion and naled and the synthetic pyrethroid insecticides prallethrin, etofenprox, pyrethrins, permethrin, resmethrin and sumithrin for adult mosquito control.

There is collateral damage from broad application of these compounds.



Dragonfly eggs laid in quiet ponds hatch as nymphs possessing a voracious appetite. They begin controlling the mosquito population by eating mosquito larvae, plus fish and tadpoles. They remain in this stage for just weeks, months, or up to 1-3 years. After 5-14 molts, the nymph climbs out of the pond, molds a final time, and an intact dragonfly emerges from its cracked exoskeleton. Photo credit: University of Florida



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Currently a Master Gardener volunteer, Carol has a degree in Journalism from the University of Florida and is the resident photographer /artist at Ocean Reef Club.



Per the FKMCD announcement: "Weather permitting"... we will nuke all flying insects in your area:... or as they state it, "there will be a fog truck in your area."

The salt marsh mosquito is an annoyance, but does not endanger us with disease. Would it be better to monitor and eliminate areas of standing water where "bad" mosquitos breed?

Would it be better to burn a mosquito coil or apply spray to our clothing to keep areas mosquito free?

It's not a perfect world, so lets make "more better" choices.



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