Dragonflies and Damselflies of the Small Isles

An identification guide

Dragonflies are among the most astonishingly colourful insects that exhibit amazing 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 Odonata, meaning tooth-jaw. They are one of the five orders that are often associated with bees, wasps, ants and flies. All Odonata are of the same ancestry and are thought to have evolved over 350 million years ago.

The majority of a dragonfly’s life is spent underwater as a larva. Some species can spend five years or more as an adult. In late spring or early summer, when the larva is fully grown, it crawls out of the water and seeks a suitable spot to attach itself to the side 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.

Emergence and Flight Periods

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 may hold her close to guarding the female to prevent other males from 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 daintier, smaller insects than dragonflies. They have large eyes that meet at the top of their heads. Dragonflies’ wings are held open at rest. Damselflies are delicate creatures, so avoid handling them when possible.

Watching dragonflies and damselflies

- Choose warm, sunny days with little or no wind
- Check the flight period table to see what species may be flying
- The best equipment is your own eyes – sit quietly and watch
- Close-focussing binoculars can be useful for identifying distant insects
- Damselflies are delicate creatures, so avoid handling them when possible
- 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

LARVAE

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

There are three main types of larvae:

HAWKERS

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

CHASERS, DARTERS AND EMERALS

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

DAMSELFIES

These are around 1cm 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, shifty manner.

DAMSELFIES

Culicicoida Cinneign

1 Beautiful Demoiselle

Öigheag Bhrèagha

Length: 45 – 69mm

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 close to water near the males displaying to females using a fast, flitting flight. Females only come to the water to mate or lay eggs and can be found at the edges of Bracken stands or woodland.

2 Emerald Damselfly

Craning aul na lóthacha

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, flutty 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.

3 Large Red Damselfly

Craning dhibhge

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.

4 Common Blue Damselfly

Craning aul na gCillsean

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 in yellow, pale green or brown forms.

5 Blue-tailed Damselfly

Craning aul na gCillsean

Length: 30 – 34mm

Range: Canna, Eigg, Muck and Rum

Rarity: Common

Habitat: Most wetlands

Seen: Early to September

Description: This damselfly is only 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.

DRAGONFLIES

Tarbh Rithrach

HAWKERS

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

6 Azure Hawker

Tarbh Rithrach 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: 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 “earwing-like”, caliper-shaped claspers at the end of their abdomens.

7 Common Hawker

Tarbh Rithrach nan Cillsean

Length: 65 – 80mm

Range: Canna, Eigg, Muck and Rum

Rarity: Common

Habitat: Most standing waters

Seen: July to October

Description: This large dragonfly 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.

8 Golden-ringed Dragonfly

Tarbh Rithrach Ordbhanach

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.

9 Northern Emerald

Seilge na Mhonáthach

Length: 45 – 51mm

Range: Rum and Muck

Rarity: Rare

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

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 “earwing-like”, caliper-shaped claspers at the end of their abdomens.

10 Four-spotted Chaser

Ruarp gheairh-bhallach

Length: 40 – 48mm

Range: Canna, Eigg, Muck and Rum

Rarity: Common

Habitat: Moorland bog, 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.

11 Keeled Skimmer

Uachdair Breach

Length: 38 – 46mm

Range: Rum and possibly Eigg

Rarity: Rare

Habitat: Rannals 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.

12 Common Darter

Gathair 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.

13 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: Early to July

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

Any record of a damselfly or dragonfly is useful, and you should record which species you saw, how many, 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@batty05@wanadoo.co.uk

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

www.dragonflysoc.org.uk

To see the distribution of dragonflies and damselflies in the Highlands, look at the National Biodiversity Network:

www.searchbnn.net

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Beautiful Demoiselle (M)
Emerald Damselfly (M)
Large Red Damselfly
Common Blue Damselfly (M)
Blue-tailed Damselfly (M)
Azure Hawker (M)
Common Hawker
Golden-ringed Dragonfly (F)
Northern Emerald (M)
Four-spotted Chaser (M)
Keeled Skimmer (M)
Common Darter (M)
Black Darter (F)
Black Darter (M)
Golden-ringed Dragonfly (F)
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Four-spotted Chaser (M)
Common Blue Damsel (M)
Emerald Damsel (M)
Beautiful Demoiselle (M)
Blue-tailed Damselfly (M)

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Pictures are larger than life-size and not to scale.