



KEEP YOUR EYES ON DRAGONFLIES

Darners and Others Garner New Attention

On warm, still spring mornings, just as migratory birds are returning, another natural drama unfolds at your local pond: Hundreds of dragonfly nymphs emerge from the water, splitting their larval skins and unfurling wondrously long bodies and wings before taking flight.

Dragonflies are a new passion for many wildlife watchers. Capitalizing on the popularity of the sleek four-winged insects, the New York Natural Heritage Program (a Nature Conservancy partnership with the state) is enlisting volunteers

to survey New York's estimated 200 dragon- and damselfly species. The three-year project will result in an atlas of their distribution; the goal is to conserve regions with rare species or high diversity. David VanLuven, of the New York program, says volunteers look for dragonflies around marshes, lakes and streams. When you start searching, he says, "it's like the blinders are taken off and you see this kaleidoscope of color flying around—vibrant purple, fluorescent green, screaming yellow."

Natural Heritage Programs in most states are conducting dragonfly surveys, and the Conservancy is helping fund a forthcoming field guide to New Jersey's dragonflies by aquatic biologist Allen Barlow. (Sussex County, New Jersey, boasts more species than any other U.S. county.) "People who spent a lot of time learning their birds and butterflies are looking for the next challenge," says Barlow. The acrobatic dragonfly fits that bill.

—Jennifer Uscher

DRAGONFLY-WATCHING: WHAT TO KNOW

- **LOOK FOR DRAGONFLIES** around fresh water in most parts of the country from April through November (or year-round in southern Florida and southern Texas).

- **WATCH FOR INTRIGUING BEHAVIORS.**

Dragonflies are aerial predators that feed on mosquitoes and often eat other dragonflies, including ones nearly their own size. Males guard their territories, patrolling ponds with dazzling loop de loops to drive off rivals. Green darners patrol at up to 30 mph.

- **BRING CLOSE-FOCUSING BINOCULARS** and a field guide.



North America has about 450 species of dragon- and damselflies. Damselflies (familiar bluet, lower left) tend to be smaller than dragonflies and to fold their wings when perched; most dragonflies hold their wings outstretched (top, adult and larval green darter; above, calico pennant).

VOLUNTEER INFORMATION AND MORE ABOUT THE NEW YORK SURVEY ARE AT NATURE.ORG/DRAGONFLY/