

Worcestershire Dragonfly Round-up 2021

Mike Averill

1954 records received so far for 26 species from 126 recorders. (March 2022).

There is always a lot of speculation about the impact of climate change on insects and whatever the reason for the changing weather, there does seem to be a reaction in the world of dragonflies. In just the last three years in Worcestershire we have seen dramatic changes in some species and have concerns about some of the more common species.

The British Dragonfly Society (BDS) has just produced *The State of Dragonflies 2021* (Taylor, Smallshire & Parr 2021). The headlines from this report are that trend analyses carried out by the UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology for the BDS show that 19 of our resident and regular migrant species (41%) have significantly increased in occupancy since 1970, but that five (11%) of our resident and regular migrant species have shown significant declines overall.

In Worcestershire, one of those declining species, the Emerald Damselfly *Lestes sponsa*, has been recorded less in recent years, so it is one to watch out for especially as it is one of the more cryptic damselflies to find. Another species that is declining nationally, the Black Darter *Sympetrum danae*, is a circum-boreal species found all around the northern hemisphere and it is only patchy in occurrence in the UK so its decline is a bit worrying. It is normally rarely seen in Worcestershire and tends to pop up for a few years in certain locations which may be because we are to the leeward of Cleve Hill where it can be found regularly. Interestingly, a male was seen once this year near Crossway Green, where, luckily, Mike Southall knew it was a bit unusual when he saw it (01). The site is not classic Black Darter habitat so will probably have been just a one off.



01. Black Darter *Sympetrum danae*. Norchard. Mike Southall.

All of the common species were recorded regularly in 2021 with a couple of occasionally recorded species, the Common Hawker *Aeshna juncea* and Red-veined Darter *Sympetrum fonscolombii*, missing this time. Another occasional species, the Golden-ringed Dragonfly *Cordulegaster boltonii*, was found emerging from the River Severn at Bewdley which would normally not happen. It was probably flushed out of the Dowles Brook, where it is more likely to be found, in the storms. The White-legged Damselfly *Platynemis pennipes* is a fairly familiar sight in the county but there definitely seems to be a trend of finding them on fishing pools. It would be good to hear from anyone finding the species at pools that do not have any fish.

After last year's first appearance of the Scarce Blue-tailed Damselfly *Ischnura pumilio* (Warr 2020) several visits were made to Feckenham Wylde Moor. None were found but the site was a lot drier in the summer of 2021 than it was in 2020. Fortunately, to keep the species in our minds, one was seen briefly at Ryall Court gravel pit on 30th August by Andy Warr. It is a typical sort of location for this species, being recently worked gravel pits.

Club-tailed Dragonfly *Gomphus vulgatissimus* emergence rates from the River Severn at Bewdley this year were a little above average which is good to hear in these times of concern over the quality of our main rivers. There was a reminder that threats to dragonflies come in many forms when Andy Warr photographed an Emperor *Anax imperator* eating a Club-tail at Ripple (02).



02. Emperor *Anax imperator* eating a Club-tailed Dragonfly *Gomphus vulgatissimus* at Ripple 07.07.21. Andy Warr.

Following 2020's bumper year of Lesser Emperor *Anax parthenope* records, 2021 produced just six records and all were from Ripple gravel pits between 9th June and 23rd August. After males and females were seen ovipositing last year it was hoped that 2021 would produce some proof of breeding. We didn't quite get that but a very early appearance of one at Ripple on 9th June, before most other records around the country, suggests it was home bred.

What was interesting this year was the blue male that was spotted by Andy Warr. Initially looking like our regular Emperor close examination of photos showed it was a male Lesser Emperor with an all blue abdomen (03).



03. Lesser Emperor *Anax parthenope* blue male. Ripple Pits. Andy Warr.

Perhaps the most exciting news was proof of breeding for the Hairy Dragonfly *Brachytron pratense* at Ripple (04). This enigmatic species had only been known in Worcestershire from a few records in the late 1970s and one in 2011, but starting with last year it has been making regular appearances in the south of the county. From the 17th May to the 10th June 2021, it was seen six times at Ripple with pairing and the all-important finding of an exuvia, the proof of breeding. A pair in cop was also seen by Andy Warr in the southern-most ditch at Ripple, reminiscent of the sort of habitat this species enjoys in the Somerset levels. At Croome Park males were seen patrolling at the bottom end of the river and also at the lake this year.



04. Hairy Dragonfly *Brachytron pratense*. Ripple Pits. Andy Warr.

Croome Park has proven that it is a superb place for dragonflies and another species that has made its home there is the Scarce Chaser *Libellula fulva*. Although this is normally a river species, the so called river at Croome (it is totally a Capability Brown construction) is an ideal habitat and it was just a matter of time before proof of

breeding could be found. The wait ended on the 30th May when 15 exuviae were readily found (05) and several freshly emerged individuals were seen. This is an interesting species as the other place that it has been breeding for 10 years now is Hillditch Pool, Hartlebury. It has been fascinating to see how what is apparently a small colony (never more than 10 at any one time on the pool) can survive from year to year. It should be remembered that this colony is a long way from its stronghold along the River Avon.



05. Scarce Chaser *Libellula fulva* first exuvia found at Croome. Mike Averill.

With so much change going on our eyes will be focused in 2022 on looking for the second damselfly after the Small Red-eyed Damselfly *Erythromma viridulum*, to sweep across the country into Worcestershire: the Willow Emerald *Chalcolestes viridis*. Remember that you don't necessarily have to find adults as finding the distinctive egg-laying scars on willow branches hanging over water, can be done at any time.

References

Taylor P., Smallshire D. & Parr A. 2021. *State of Dragonflies 2021*. Presenting the trends of dragonflies and damselflies in Britain and Ireland over fifty years. Available at: <https://british-dragonflies.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/State-of-Dragonflies-2021-final-website.pdf> [Accessed 25.04.22].
Warr A. 2020. Scarce Blue-tailed Damselfly *Ischnura pumilio* first record for Worcestershire 22nd August 2020. *Worcestershire Record* 48:26-27.

Images

01. Black Darter *Sympetrum danae*. Norchard. Mike Southall.
02. Emperor *Anax imperator* eating a Club-tailed Dragonfly at Ripple. Andy Warr.
03. Lesser Emperor *Anax parthenope* blue male. Ripple Pits. Andy Warr.
04. Hairy Dragonfly *Brachytron pratense*. Ripple Pits. Andy Warr.
05. Scarce Chaser *Libellula fulva* first exuvia found at Croome. Mike Averill.