

**The difficulty of identifying some damselfly species.
The Variable Damselfly *Coenagrion pulchellum***

Mike Averill

Very similar to, but much scarcer than the Azure Damselfly *Coenagrion puella*, the Variable Damselfly *Coenagrion pulchellum* (01) favours well vegetated, often alkaline standing waters but the problem with identification is that the markings can be very variable making it tricky. We have had a number of records promoted as the first for the species in Worcestershire, prior to 2020, but they have all been females which are even more difficult to identify than males.

Therefore, it was interesting to see that a possible record of a male had occurred at Honeybourne this year (2020) and that a photo had been taken. (02).

The photo looked convincing enough so a visit was made to the site on 02 June 2020 in order to try to find a specimen for a closer look and also to assess the habitat where the photo was taken. As it happened, on the visit nothing was found that looked like a Variable Damselfly around what was a fairly ordinary garden pond. In addition local searches couldn't identify another source for this rather specialised damselfly and the closest recent record for the species was as far away as Abingdon in Oxfordshire. This leaves us with trying to deal with the photo which incidentally was entirely legitimate: taking a closer look at that, we must consider five identification features for males (table 1 & image 03).



01. Variable Damselfly, Somerset. Mike Averill.



02. Suspected Variable Damselfly, Honeybourne. Elizabeth Rose.

The most reliable feature for splitting Azure and Variable Damselfly males is the shape of the pronotum. This is the plate on the top of the pro-thorax which is very lobed on the rear edge in the Variable whilst being gently curved in the Azure. Any other identification feature should be regarded as additional to that but not used in isolation. So the markings on the abdominal segments two and nine and the various thoracic marks should all be regarded as secondary to the shape of the pronotum. Taking the photo from Honeybourne in isolation with no additional local evidence, it would appear to be an Azure Damselfly with aberrant marks on segment two and nine. No other feature fits the criteria so it only satisfies two of the five features and these are not enough, even though the mark on the

second segment does look like a wine glass. The pronotum on this individual, is the shape you would expect in an Azure Damselfly, so as it was seen amongst a colony of Azure Damselflies, unfortunately it was declined as a Variable.

So we wait to find that elusive Variable Damselfly. If you think you have, make sure you get a decent shot of that pronotum first of all.

	Azure Damselfly	Variable Damselfly	Confidence
Pronotum (rear edge)	Gently curved	Tri lobed	Good
Second Segment	U shape	U shaped on stalk like wineglass	Quite Good
Proportion of blue in segment 9	More than 50%	Less than 30%	Varies a lot in Variable
Blue bar between eyes	None	Often present	Quite Good
Blue panel on top of the thorax	Parallel sided and unbroken	Very often totally absent	Quite Good

Table 1. Identification features of the Variable damselfly.



03. Variable Damselfly identification features. Mike Averill.

Images

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- 02. Suspected Variable Damselfly, Honeybourne. Elizabeth Rose.
- 03. Variable Damselfly identification features. Mike Averill.