

Of damsels and dragons

No, not mythical tales, but damselflies and dragonflies. Andrew Walmsley talks to Doug Overton

As memories of the harsh 2009/10 winter recede, the impact on wildlife of that coldest of cold snaps continues to be seen. Small birds particularly suffered, including notable species such as the Dartford warbler and kingfisher.

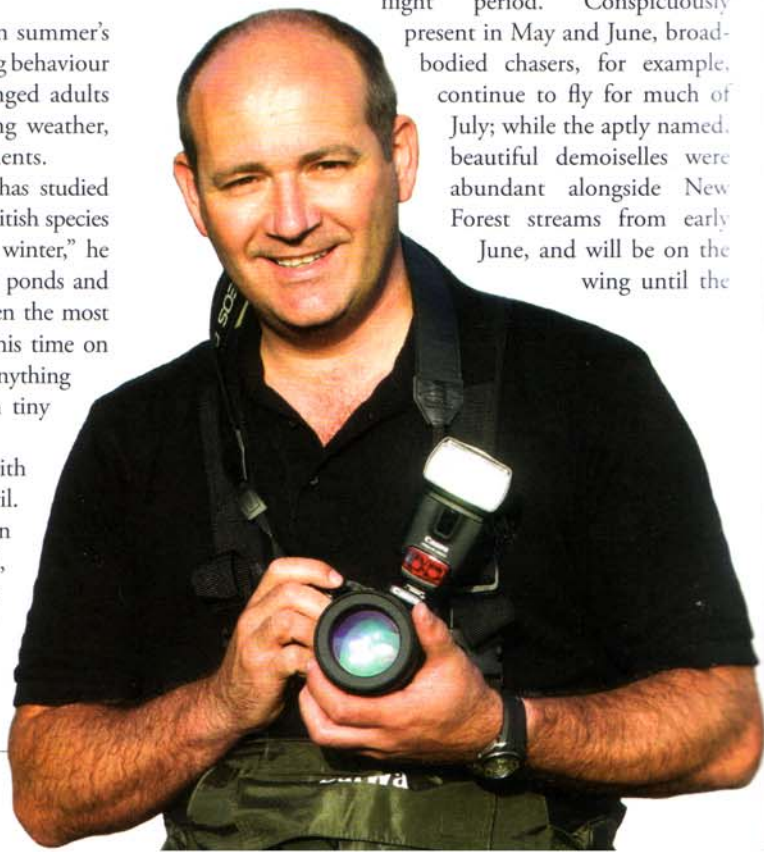
Not so dragonflies and damselflies, which, on summer's days delight with their dazzling colours, confiding behaviour and impressive aerial prowess. As delicate, winged adults they would be extremely susceptible to freezing weather, but in winter all enjoy protection from the elements.

Doug Overton lives in the New Forest and has studied dragonflies and damselflies for many years. "All British species are in their juvenile larval stage throughout the winter," he explained, "when as aquatic nymphs they live in ponds and streams, often within the silt and mud where even the most intense frosts have limited effect. They feed at this time on all manner of underwater creatures, just about anything that can be caught and devoured, ranging from tiny crustaceans to small fish and tadpoles."

Spring-time emergence was strong this year, with good numbers of large red damselflies out in April. Common around water, these creatures are often the first damselflies to be seen each year. 'Large', though, is a relative term, for they are only about 1 1/2in long with a wingspan of about 2in. The name does, however, serve to differentiate them from the even tinier, and nationally quite scarce,

small red damselflies that emerge later, and typically frequent heathland bogs such as those found in the New Forest.

Other species followed largely on cue, evolved to leave their watery homes during their own special, pre-ordained flight period. Conspicuously present in May and June, broad-bodied chasers, for example, continue to fly for much of July; while the aptly named, beautiful demoiselles were abundant alongside New Forest streams from early June, and will be on the wing until the



end of August. Meanwhile, southern hawkers - large, robust, strong flying insects - will almost certainly appear in their usual numbers from mid-July, and continue to be seen right the way through to the end of September.

“But dragonflies and damselflies are not immune to our changeable climate,” Doug said. “Breeding success can be affected by poor weather. They feed then upon small airborne insects, and tend to fly only on warm, bright days. At this time, there is a risk of starvation during prolonged periods of cloud, wind, rain and low temperature.”

Doug does not have to travel far from home to reach prime dragonfly and damselfly territory. “Twenty eight species – about 70 per cent of those found in Britain - occur in the New Forest. It has very mild weather and contains a wide variety of dragonfly and damselfly friendly habitats.

“Bogs, rivers, streams, ponds and lakes are present and there are heathland and woodland for the species that like to wander. Most will be on the wing in July and August, although some might begin to look a little tatty, and many will become increasingly scarce as the nights get cooler.”

Enthusiasts often have their own favourite species, insects that are the subject of particular affection. “I like golden-ringed dragonflies,” Doug confided. “Unmistakably large, vividly coloured, with striking yellow bands upon a black abdomen; these can be seen from June to August. Size, colour, an inquisitive nature and a habit of cruising low over rivers and streams also make them quite easy to observe.

“The hairy dragonfly also has special significance for me. They are scarce and difficult to photograph. Furthermore, as their flight period lasts only from mid-May to mid-June, they can be a real challenge to find. Identification is straight forward as modest size and early emergence helps to avoid confusion. And yes, they are hairy, or at least the thorax – the area just behind the head – is.”

Yet identification can perplex at times. Many of the smaller blue damselflies, for example, are remarkably similar, while some of the larger hawkers can cause equal confusion. Memory can also be notoriously unreliable when, back at home, referring to field guides, so copious notes taken with the insect in view will often be helpful, or better still, a photograph showing the object of uncertainty.

Obtaining good quality photographs is, however, rarely easy. “One of the biggest challenges when photographing such small subjects is working with a shallow depth of field,” said Doug, “that is, with only a very limited area in focus. Getting close can often pose problems, too. Some - four-spotted chasers, broad-bodied chasers and common darters are examples - can be approached fairly easily as they routinely return to a favourite perch to rest; but careful stalking is necessary with other, more timid species. Male emperor dragonflies, for instance, will take flight at the slightest disturbance in the surrounding area.

“Many are also extremely well camouflaged, and often the first that is seen of them is when they take to the air to get out of the way. In my experience most dragonfly



predators are airborne, so an approach close to the ground is likely to increase the chances of success.

For those who need help with identification, one of the best dragonfly and damselfly guides were written and illustrated by local wildlife artist, Dan Powell, while a number of really useful websites are also available. In May this year, Doug Overton published the increasingly popular *Dragonflies and Damselflies of the New Forest* - see www.newforestdragonflies.com - which is “dedicated to the enormously rewarding pastime of tracking, identifying and photographing these most beautiful of insects,” as Doug said.

The website contains lots of information about the species present in the New Forest, many of which also occur elsewhere in Hampshire. Excellent photographs – examples of Doug’s work have been used to illustrate this article - are provided, and there is an on-line forum for the exchange of news and views.

The site is certainly worth a look at if you have an interest in the natural world and particularly as a precursor to a summer walk in areas where dragonflies and damselflies are likely to be found. **H**

Opposite page: Doug Overton; Above top to bottom: A southern hawk; And a southern damselfly