

*This report put together by Jim Alder and published in the Whitwell Wood Natural History Group Newsletter to raise awareness of the Odonata found in Whitwell Wood in the summer of 2002.*

## **Whitwell Dragons**

To the best of my knowledge no one, with the exception of Roy Frost, has ever made a concerted effort to record the Dragon and Damselfly species in Whitwell Wood. So, armed with a copy of Brookes & Lewington (*the Dragonfly Book*), a butterfly net and some close focusing binoculars I decided that 2002 was the year to 'get into' Dragon and Damselflies (or Odonata for the posh folk!).

As most of you know, the wood has two ponds within its boundaries. The small Hide Pond and the larger pond in H Section (Dorothy's Pond as I call it). There are several others on the edge of the wood, as well as the Bondhay Dyke, the stream that skirts the north edge of the wood -all of which are good breeding areas for a variety of Dragonfly species.

Through my years of shadowing John and Fred around the wood I was already familiar with some of the more easily identifiable species such as Broad Bodied Chaser, Brown Hawker and the magnificent Emperor Dragonfly. Some of the Damsels however were a mystery to me and were just known as 'Blue Ones', 'Red Ones' and 'the Black Ones with a Blue Tip at the End'. Then there are the other less colourful damsels, which, as is always the case in nature, are the females and immature or 'teneral' males. I soon discovered the easy approach, as a beginner was to stick to identifying the mature males. The only downside to this method is that it doesn't necessarily prove that the species is breeding at the site as a rare find later in the summer demonstrates.

Despite the fact that (and this may just be my perception) the summer sun only seemed to shine during the week whilst I was stuck in my office with an endless succession of gloomy weekends. I managed to do some recording on most weekends and some evenings from the end of June through to late October.

In all thirteen species were recorded this year with Common Darters being by far the most numerous, especially around mid-September. These could be found throughout the wood on any of the main driveways receiving good amounts of sunlight. Of the Damsels, the Blue-tailed seem to do well, especially around Whites Pond. Dorothy's pond could be relied on for sightings of Southern Hawker, whilst the hide pond yielded no records all summer. I'm sure there will have been some as it certainly used to be a good pond for catching the larvae. The pond does need some work carrying out to allow more sunlight into the area around the pond. The need for this work has been taken into account in the new Woodland Management Plan.

Certainly one of the best finds was the three Emerald Damselflies on Whites pond. Though not uncommon in Derbyshire, they were a surprise find and had me chuffed to bits. Hopefully I will encounter more Emeralds on Whites pond as the three I saw included a female, so fingers crossed that they are breeding at the site.

The real showstopper was finding a male Black Darter sitting on some Sphagnum moss at the edge of Whites pond on 15<sup>th</sup> September. Though it had been a particularly foul morning with heavy rain, I had a feeling the day would turn up something special! Black darters are more usually associated with acidic bog pools

of the Peak District and there have been only 4 or 5 sightings of this species in NE Derbyshire over the last few years. It has to be assumed that this specimen was a vagrant that had somehow been blown in from its usual habitat.

I did say that thirteen species were recorded in all (listed below), which isn't quite true. I did capture two specimens of another Damselfly species during the early summer, which through my inexperience, I didn't realise would have been first for the county. Next year I will be camped out in the wood to try and catch this species again and this time ensure they are authenticated (oh the joy of learning through your mistakes!).

Another species that could also be added to the Whitwell list in future is the Banded Demoiselle. Although I did not see any this year, I have seen one some years ago along Bondhay Dyke. After speaking to Roy Frost about this, he confirmed that John Ellis also had a similar sighting some years ago, so it's definitely one to keep your eye out for next summer.

So in all, not a bad summer for my introduction to Dragons. Not only have we now got records for twelve breeding species (excluding Black Darter), it has also given me some new ideas for improvement to the existing ponds within the wood. Hopefully next summer there may be some new ponds created to improve the woodland habitat not only for Dragons, but other insects, birds and amphibians. And, I only got my feet wet once!

### **List of Species Identified**

#### **Zygoptera (Damselflies)**

Azure Damselfly, Blue-tailed Damselfly, Common Blue Damselfly, Emerald Damselfly, Large Red Damselfly

#### **Anisoptera (Dragonflies)**

Black Darter, Common Darter, Broad-bodied Chaser, Four-spotted Chaser, Brown Hawker, Emperor Dragonfly, Migrant Hawker, and Southern Hawker

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