

# Dragons and damsels

The emergence of dragonflies and damselflies is one of the highlights of spring, says **Robert Thompson**. Their iridescent colours make them an irresistible subject for the macro photographer

**M**ay is one of the most colourful and productive months in the macro photographer's calendar. Trees are in the process of leafing up and the ground flora is well advanced, producing wonderful spreads of colour among the fresh green foliage. It is also an important month for insects, especially dragonflies and damselflies, many of which begin their transformation from their aquatic life, (which can be anything from one to three years depending on species), to one as a terrestrial winged insect solely for the purpose of reproduction.

Dragonflies are extremely popular subjects with photographers. Their beauty and jewel-like iridescent colours, along with their benign nature, make them one of the most attractive insects alive today. However, this

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was not always the case. For centuries they were feared by people because of their ferocious appearance and inquisitive nature. Today, dragonflies are seen in a more positive light with names such as ‘hawkers’, ‘chasers’, ‘skimmers’ and ‘darters’ being a more accurate reflection of their true behaviour and charm.

**Large red damselfly**  
**Pyrrhosoma nymphula (larva)**  
The larval phase of this species is two years. Prior to emergence, it moves into the shallows and selects a suitable stem to complete its transformation. This usually takes place in early morning. The larvae are photogenic and you can see the red colour of the pending adult through the larval skin in this photo. The large feather-like structures at the end are called caudal lamellae, which the larva breathes through.

Mamiya 645 Pro TL, Sekor 120mm f/4 macro lens, Velvia, flash at f/16, controlled conditions, tripod



**Large red damselfly** *Pyrrhosoma nymphula* (male)  
This damselfly is the first to emerge in spring and frequently encountered throughout May. In my opinion, this is one of the most attractive damselflies in the British Isles. An early morning visit in drizzling rain to a local nature reserve produced this resting male along with several other damselflies that were perched among the foliage at the edge of a small bog pool  
Nikon D3X, 200mm f/4 Micro Nikkor, ISO 100, f/8, tripod





**Broad-bodied chaser *Libellula depressa* (male)** A medium-sized dragonfly that usually frequents sunny ponds and small lakes in southern England and Wales. It tends to perch for long periods of time on overcast days among the vegetation near the waters edge. A slow, careful approach is often the best tactic  
*Mamiya 645 Pro TL, Sekor 210mm f/4, extension tube, Velvia, tripod*







**Right: Hairy dragonfly *Brachytron pratense* (male)** This is one of the first hawkers to emerge in spring. This photo was a combination of luck and a diligent eye. I was in search of a cover shot for a new publication on dragonflies. I noticed this mature male perched on a small birch tree. The sun had just gone in and it had settled among the foliage. I waited for a few minutes and then slowly approached it using a 300mm lens, minimising my chances of spooking the insect, which was already at flight temperature. I managed a number of shots in both formats before the sun reappeared and it was off. For me this was the shot of the early morning session and the cover I was looking for!

*Nikon D800, Nikkor 300mm f/2.8, extension tube, ISO 100, fill-flash f/11, tripod*

### Physical differences

True dragonflies are large full-bodied insects, brightly coloured and fast fliers. When at rest their wings are held in a horizontal position or depressed forwards when active. The majority of smaller species congregate around breeding pools, especially during mid-morning, waiting for potential partners to visit. This is often the best place to start your observations and photography.

Damselflies are much smaller insects with long delicate bodies, which are easily damaged. They have less agility in the air than dragonflies, but are more numerous and easier to find in sheltered spots near the water's edge, where they rest among the lush vegetation. Most damselflies, with the exception of a few species, rest with their wings held together along their body, however, in optimum flying temperatures some individuals settle with their wings partially open.

Dragonflies in general are highly efficient predators with superb visual acuity, having 360° vision and an aerodynamic structure that is ideally suited for hunting and feeding on the wing. My own interest in dragonflies goes right back to my childhood days spent on a large parkland estate where I grew up. I have studied them scientifically here in Ireland and parts of Britain for over 20 years and written and published more on this group

**Left: Four-spotted chaser *Libellula quadrimaculata* (female)** I was searching the margins around a series of small bog pools when I spotted this freshly emerged female complete with exuvial case among the bogbean. The background was distracting and competing with the insect, so I used a long telephoto lens to keep the pool and distant vegetation well diffused. This meant positioning the camera down virtually to water level to keep it parallel with the subject and maximize the distance between subject and background.

*Nikon D800, Nikkor 300mm f/2.8, extension tube, ISO 100, fill-flash, f/11, tripod*



of insects than any other. I spent over six years rearing and photographing on medium format, the larval stages of every British species, which to my knowledge had not been done at that particular time.

At one point my studio had nine tanks, some with running water to simulate the natural conditions that the species would be accustomed to in the wild. Would I have the patience to do it now? Probably not! I don't get the chance see and photograph them as much as I did in the past, but I did spend a little time last year revisiting a number of old established sites to update some of my images for a new dragonfly guide, which has just been released.

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**Northern emerald *Somatochlora arctica* (male)** This is one of the rarest dragonflies in the British Isles and confined to northwest Scotland and Killarney National Park in southwest Ireland. It is important to vary your photographic style and not shoot every species in extreme close-up. Illustrating species in situ has many advantages in that it shows the insect in relation to its environment. Wideangle macro photography is very much in vogue at the moment and has many advantages if applied in the correct situation  
*Nikon D3X, Nikkor 24-70mm f/2.8, ISO 200, f/9, tripod*





## Time and location

I usually do most of my dragonfly photography early in the morning or in the evening. Dragonflies tend to be less active especially if the temperature is cooler. Exploring the margins of small lakes and other wetland habitats early in the morning is usually a good place to start. If conditions are mild and sunny it often triggers an emergence. Species such as the four-spotted chaser and the broad bodied chaser and many of the damselflies are relatively easy to find among the marginal vegetation.

When looking for suitable subjects to photograph, it is a good idea to target individuals that are isolated from the surrounding vegetation if possible. They will stand out more clearly and often produce straight, clean images that are more pictorial in their nature. This is especially important in strong sunlight, which can create multiple shadows amongst the vegetation, producing very contrasting backgrounds.

You can also encourage certain species such as the four-spotted chaser and many of the darters to perch in a predefined spot. Chasers are highly territorial and aggressively defend their patch, usually from a prominent position often returning to the same reed or stem. By observing the habits of your quarry you can place a couple of suitable props in the appropriate spot, pre-focus your lens and wait for your opportunity.

## Lens choices

This technique works well with longer telephotos such as a 300mm as it increases the working distance between the lens and subject. I have taken many successful images over the years using this technique. A 300mm in combination with an extension tube also comes in handy when approaching more timid species, or when they are a little more active. However, I prefer the 200mm Micro Nikkor for most of my dragonfly photography. Despite its age and weight – this is one incredibly sharp lens. It is, without doubt, a 'tripod lens' and not ideally suited for handholding. The narrow plane of focus helps to control distracting backgrounds by keeping them fairly well diffused.

Wideangle lenses are also useful for in situ shots – this approach is only really feasible, either very early in the morning when the temperature is generally below the threshold for flight, or when they are grounded due to

### Left: Four-spotted chaser *Libellula quadrimaculata* (male)

This is one of the most common chasers and ubiquitous throughout most of the British Isles. It is a very approachable insect and easily found among the vegetation, even on dull, overcast days such as the case here. In order to obtain a clean shot I used a wider aperture to keep the background well diffused and carefully eased a neighbouring flower just out of the frame to keep the composition simple.

Nikon D800, 200mm f/4 Micro Nikkor, ISO 100, f/8, tripod

## Useful links & publications

<http://www.british-dragonflies.org.uk>  
<http://www.habitas.org.uk/dragonflyireland>

*Wide-Angle Macro: The Essential Guide* by Paul Harcourt Davis & Clay Bolt. This is an excellent e-book, written by two highly experienced macro practitioners and worth investing in

<https://www.e-junkie.com/ecom/gb.php?c=cart&i=1169158&cl=231128&ejc=2>

*Field Guide to Dragonflies and Damselflies of Great Britain and Ireland*, by S. Brooks and R. Lewington, 2002 British Wildlife Publications  
<http://www.britishwildlife.com>

*Guide to the Dragonflies and Damselflies of Ireland*, by R. Thompson and B. Nelson, 2014

inclement weather. Many dragonflies (particularly darters and chasers) settle well into the ground vegetation when the weather is poor and can be difficult to spot.

## Adding flash

Fill-flash is useful on overcast days; it improves the contrast slightly and adds a little vibrancy to the image. I use aperture priority and a single flash mounted above the lens, which I can rotate in any direction. Shooting close-ups demands a precise disciplined technique, especially when using high resolution cameras. A sloppy approach will reveal any shortcomings in your technique and perhaps deprive you of that one exceptional shot.

Dragonflies are one of the most challenging insects to photograph. There will always be a high failure rate with these insects, but don't let this put you off. It takes time, patience and fieldcraft to produce consistently good results. Sitting peacefully at the edge of a small lake or pond will reveal many interesting characteristics about these fascinating insects and without doubt improve your chances of success. ○

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