

tips & quips
about our
environment
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inhabitants

NATURE'S *reflections*

FLORIDA'S DRAGONFLIES

Colorful, with exceptionally charismatic behaviors

The Golden-winged Skimmer (*Libellula auripennis*) is one of many dragonflies with brightly colored bodies one to four inches long. The wings often have bands or spots. In some species males and females are different colors. Males may not attain full color until a few days after emergence. The male adult is reddish-orange overall except the thorax which is orangey-brown. The wings are more reddish from anterior to posterior on both wings and the coastal vein is orangey-red. The order *Odonata* includes both dragonflies and damselflies. They are found on every continent except Antarctica. Six families of dragonflies are found in Florida comprising 150 colorful species. Here, they have captured the interest of both the amateur and professional nature enthusiast.

Dragonflies are large predatory insects, many of which specialize in killing mosquitoes and are sometimes called mosquito hawks. They have large eyes that take up nearly the entire head surface. They also have a very robust body structure to support a massive musculature that propels the large broad wings of dragonflies. The legs are attached to the thorax just behind the head, which makes walking all but impossible. However, this greatly facilitates their ability to grasp and hold prey while tearing into it with sharp mouth parts. Dragonflies are unmatched as fliers with a very agile, deliberate flight. Their four powerful wings move independently, allowing for both forward and backward flight. When at rest, the wings are held open and flat by dragonflies—damselflies sit with wings together over the abdomen. All are seen along the edge of any body of water, such as rivers, lakes and ponds, often sitting in sunspots or patrolling the waters' edge. Some species travel to open fields far away from water to search for prey, to breed, or when migrating. Males are often territorial.

Odonate eggs have a varied oval shape, like tiny grains of rice. Clutch sizes can be as large as 1500, with some females depositing several thousand eggs in a lifetime. Eggs usually hatch in seven to eight days. The life-cycle from egg to death of adult is six months to six or seven years.

Immature odonates, called naiads, are voracious predators feeding on everything from mosquito larvae to small invertebrates. Naiads will molt nine to seventeen times before becoming adults. Species in tropical locations may undergo multiple generations per year depending on the availability of habitat. ☞ 8012373001

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