

Dragonhunter





Waiting for dinner to fly by



One of Northern Virginia's
most impressive insects.

Dragonhunter (*Hagenius brevistylus*) – 3.3", 73-90 mm

Flight Record:
(5/30-9/18)

Peaks
mid-June
thru early
August

*Fairly
Common*

Habitat:
Sunny
stream and
river edges

First Glance:
Very large,
heavy.
Straight,
deliberate
flights with
lots of
perching.
"J" shaped
abdomen
tip in flight.
Hunts along
stream
banks and
nearby
sunny
clearings.

Compare:
None



Massive
body with
a relatively
small head



Crouching pose – hind legs
grasp perch, front & middle
legs folded up & back



Last 1/4
of male
abdomen
hangs &
**curves
down,**
forming a
shallow "J"
- more
pronounced
in flight



eating a female Common Whitetail

Notes from the field - Dragonhunter:

The monster of the dragonfly world, this largest member of the clubtail family is one of the more commonly seen clubtails in Northern Virginia. They appear more tolerant of degraded suburban streams than any other clubtail, and I've found them in virtually every stream system in Northern Virginia. Despite their huge size, they do fine in small, perennial streams, as long as the stream has sunny sections, wooded buffers and nearby sunlit clearings. Rivers however are their favorite haunt and the Potomac is a great place to find them.

Dragonhunters love to perch, and spend more time on branches than in the air. Look for them by walking up and down sunny stream and river banks and checking any sunlit branch that hangs low over the water. When I've seen them fly, it's usually low, slow patrols over water, or along wood and meadow edges within a stone's throw from their stream or river territory.

This species specializes in hunting other dragonflies, hence their name - they'll even catch and eat fellow Dragonhunters! They're believed to be immune to the sting of bees and wasps, another favorite prey. They also have a taste for swallow-tail butterflies - I've often found discarded butterfly wings, along with those of unfortunate dragonflies, under a Dragonhunter's favorite tree perch.

Powerful legs
are a Dragon-
hunter's primary
hunting tool.



This male waits for
dinner on a September
evening along a small
forest stream.



Notes from the field, cont. – Dragonhunter:

The largest individual dragonfly I ever found was an enormous female Dragonhunter patrolling a meadow off the Potomac River. She was just over 3.5 inches – slightly larger than our other giants (Comet and Swamp Darners) and bigger than any Dragonhunter I'd seen. After a quick measurement (lower right), I set her on a tree branch to catch her breath. She sat for a moment and then took off like a 747, gliding over the meadow and up into the trees to continue terrorizing local insect life.

Their aquatic nymphs are huge, flat and unusual looking, even for a dragonfly. They live in sand, mud and leaves at the bottom of perennial streams and rivers, and may take several years to mature. This one was found in Goose Creek (Loudoun Co.).



Notice the uniquely cylindrical abdomen (and flanged club) of the female.





Wing injuries are common and don't seem to slow them down.

Mating Dragonhunters, in what's often called the "wheel position". Males hold on to the back of the female's head, while actual mating takes place as the female's abdomen tip connects to the male's thorax.

Mating is seldom witnessed in this species, as it usually occurs high in leafy canopies of riverside woodlands. This pair flew over a meadow I happen to be exploring. I was able to watch them land in a nearby Boxelder, a native maple. These trees often hold several perched dragonflies since they tend to grow along sunny waterways and wet meadows.

Boxelder, Sycamore and Paw Paw are all good trees to look for – if you're near groves of these species, you're probably in good dragonfly habitat. Look up and search the leaf tips for dragonflies - hunting, sunbathing and mating.

