

Dragonflies 101

Classification, and Dragonflies vs Damselflies:

Dragonflies and Damselflies are insects in the order Odonata. This order is split into two suborders: Anisoptera/dragonflies and Zygoptera/damselflies. Outside of this summary, this website deals exclusively with dragonflies. The differences between the two suborders are relatively simple. Dragonflies, when perched, hold their wings out like the wings of an airplane, while damselflies fold them up, behind their backs. In addition, the eyes of a dragonfly are so large that they usually touch each other along a seam on the top of their head, while damselfly eyes, while also large, never touch. They are instead situated on the sides of their elongated heads, much like a hammerhead shark. There are two families of dragonflies whose eyes don't quite touch (Petaltails and Clubtails), but their eyes are still huge and cover most of their head, rather than just being on the sides like a damselfly.

What is a Dragonfly?

- Class Insecta



- Order Odonata



- Suborder Anisoptera



Lastly, damselflies have very thin bodies (picture a neon toothpick), and almost always fly low. Dragonflies on the other hand have more robust bodies and, although they often perch low, even on the ground, they spend a great deal of time flying *high* over ponds, creeks and meadows. If it's flying fast and high over your head, it's not a damselfly. To better understand the difference between these two suborders, check out [Dragon or Damsel photo guide](#).



Why haven't I included damselflies in my surveys and research? Well, it took me ten years to gather enough photos, data and field experience to put this website together – if I'd tried to do damselflies as well.... we'd all still be waiting 😊 I'm afraid I don't have the time and expertise to add damselflies. And they're much harder to ID! It takes a better and more patient naturalist than I to become a Zygopteran expert. Great damselfly resources include [Damselflies of the Northeast](#) by Ed Lam, [Dragonflies and Damselflies of New Jersey](#) by Barlow, Golden & Bangma , [Dragonflies and Damselflies of Georgia and the Southeast](#) by Gif Beaton, and [Dragonflies of Damselflies of the East](#) by Dennis Paulson. They certainly are beautiful and beneficial insects, with much to teach us about habitat health and biodiversity, and I encourage anyone interested in Zygopterans to learn more about them.

It would be great if someone could make a *Damselflies of Northern VA* website! If so, I'd love to partner with them and include their link on this site.