



Seasonal Viewing Tips for N. VA. Dragonflies

Early and Late Dates – Pushing the Envelope: March 14 – December 10

Dragonflies have been seen in Northern VA from the second week in March to the second week in December. That leaves only two months out of the year when this area is without adult dragonflies - during that time these insects survive as either eggs or aquatic larvae. The combination of climate change and increased dragonfly watching may result in that time-frame of mid-March to mid-December getting stretched at both ends. It would not surprise me if at some point in the near future adult dragonflies survive in our area into early January, and appear again in the first days of March. February may be the only month adults are unable to conquer in our area. Keep your eyes open for Common Green Darners and Meadowhawks past that December 10th date, and Common Green Darners again to beat the March 14 early date. And don't underestimate the super adaptable Common Whitetail – they may also push the boundaries of both late and early sightings in our area.

Signs of Spring: April 7 – May 14

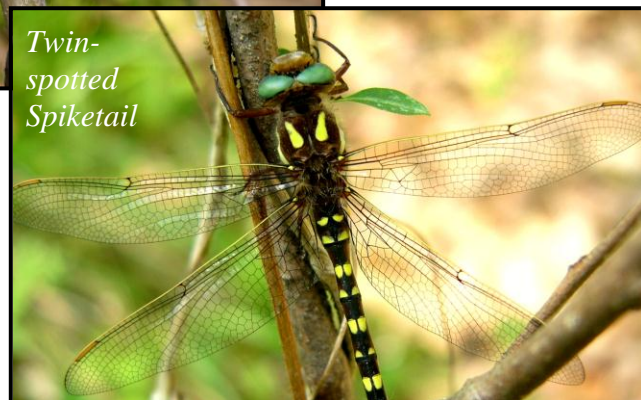
Although Common Green Darners have been seen as early as March 14th, it's really the second week of April before you can count on seeing the first batch of early species with any regularity. This includes the Blue Corporal, Stream Cruiser, Harlequin Darner, Springtime Darner, Ashy Clubtail, Twin-spotted Spiketail, Uhler's Sundragon, Common Baskettail and the seemingly ever-present Common Whitetail and Common Green Darner. These are the true "early risers" of Northern VA. For about 4 weeks these 11 species are the only dragonflies out and about. **For me, it is the most thrilling time of the year for dragon-searching and truly an exciting sign of early spring.** Most of these early spring species are ephemeral in nature with very brief flight periods - like woodland spring wildflowers they will be gone by early June. In addition, all but the last three species are habitat specialists that often require quite a search and when found are indicators of a healthy ecosystem – two aspects that make their discovery that much more rewarding and exciting.



*Uhler's
Sundragon*



*Springtime
Darner*



*Twin-
spotted
Spiketail*

**Signs of
Spring**

Species Diversity High-point: **May 15 – July 15**

The before-mentioned early spring dragon searching can be difficult due to the few-and-far-between nature of these species. However, this also makes ID slightly easier than usual since there are very few species to choose from. By the second week of May this all changes as late spring and summer species start to emerge, while early spring species linger on, creating quite a mix of species. The dragonfly diversity high-point for the year in Northern VA, and truly one of the most exciting times to be running after these insects, takes place from about mid-May through early July. **This eight to nine week period, especially June, is when you're most likely to see species from six, possibly even all seven dragonfly families in one day, sometimes even at one site** – a difficult feat that takes the right combination of weather, knowledge of local habitats, search-time and of course luck... but it can be done.

Colorful Displays of Late Summer and Early Fall: **July 16 – September 07**

By the second or third week of July, species diversity slows down a bit and the world of Northern VA dragonflies shifts towards skimmers, striped emeralds and a few darner species. However, it's still an excellent time to be chasing dragonflies. In fact, some of the best odonata-themed field trips and dragonfly sightings I've had have occurred in late-summer and early fall. This is a time when ponds and marshes are the place to be so one can witness the colorful, active and showy lives of the skimmer family. **For group field trips, beginners and families with young children, this is perhaps the best time to embark on dragonfly expeditions.** This is because the skimmer species out at this time of year are easier to see and find, more colorful, and over-all put on a more watcher-friendly display than many of the more reclusive stream, swamp and river species found in spring and early summer.

Colorful Summer
*Twelve-spotted
Skimmer*



Swarming Migrants, Shadow Darners and Meadowhawks: September 08 – October 21

As soon as we have a few nights where the thermometer drops into the low 50s, usually sometime in mid or late September, dragonfly numbers take a noticeable dive. By the 3rd week in September both species diversity and individual numbers become noticeably less and there are at this point only about a dozen species that you can find on a regular basis into the month of October. However, this is a special time to be watching dragonflies for the three reasons listed in this section's title.

Impressive swarms of migrant Common Green Darners can be seen throughout the month of September – at some sites in Northern VA I've seen as many as 100 individuals flying over large meadows and marshes, the two habitats where these fall migrants seem to congregate. In addition, September and October are the months of Shadow Darners, my favorite dragonfly and one of only ½ a dozen species that actually prefer shade to sun. Lastly, this is the time of the Autumn and Blue-faced Meadowhawks, two of the most tame and brightly-colored dragonflies in Northern VA.

Cooling Temps and Dropping Numbers: October 22 – November 28

The second dive in dragonfly numbers takes place in mid-October, after a few days with temps staying in the 50s and nights dropping into the low 40s. After that happens there are only 4 species that survive in large numbers into a Northern VA November: Shadow Darner, Common Green Darner, Autumn Meadowhawk, Blue-faced Meadowhawk. A few other species (Common Whitetail, Eastern Pondhawk, Black Saddlebag, Wandering Glider, Fawn Darner and Fine-lined Emerald) may put out a few stragglers into October, but those first four species are the true late-fall survivors. By Thanksgiving, it's only the two meadowhawks and the Common Green Darner that still appear on warm, sunny days. In December, only meadowhawks remain and they'll be gone by the third week.

Waiting for Spring: December 11 – March 13

To my knowledge, no adult dragonfly has been seen in Northern VA during this time-frame. Travel to Richmond or DelMarVA and these dates can be stretched by a week or more on either end. Go as far as the Dismal Swamp in the south-eastern tip of our state and you'll find dragonflies on the wing even longer. By the time you get down to South Carolina, certainly Georgia and Florida, you can find adult dragonflies on the wing all year long. In our area, dragonflies survive winter as either eggs or aquatic larvae, dormant in the mud or creeping slowly along pond and river bottoms under the ice.

Dragon-watching Calendar at a Glance:

- Northern VA Dragonfly Season – mid-March thru mid-December
- Ephemeral Early Spring Species – 2nd week of April through late May
- Diversity High-point – 2nd week of May through early July
- Summer & early Fall Skimmer display – mid-July through mid-September
- Fall Species and Migrants – mid-September through mid-October
- Cool Season Dragonfly Survivors – late-October through early-December
- Currently no Recorded Sightings of Adult dragonflies – mid-December through early-March. **Keep your eyes open for new early/late dates.**

Autumn Meadowhawks

