

Clubtail family - Gomphidae

First Glance:

Very large to tiny. Noticeably thin/pinched abdomen with widened “club” at tip. Clear wings, usually black and yellow body, smallish head with separated eyes. Usually around streams and rivers, likes to perch on sunny mid-stream rocks and low, stream-bank vegetation.

ID tips:

Flight – variable: can be very fast (*Stylurus* sp.) or rather slow (Dragonhunter).

Hunting – mostly gleaning perched insects from vegetation, often high in forest vegetation.

Perching – frequently: most prefer to either hang from vegetation or perch flat on sunny rocks, except for Dragonhunters, Unicorn Clubtails and Ringtails which often perch horizontally on vegetation like skimmers (see photos).

Body Type – smallish head with separated eyes, and thin abdomen with widened club-tip

Wings – long, thin and unpatterned

Oviposting – taps water with abdomen tip, often in a figure 8 pattern.

General Info:

Species in N. VA – 18 (15 on website)

Size Range – 1.4-3.5”

N. VA Flight Period – April-October

Habitat Types – Usually flowing water of large sunny streams and shallow rivers. However, two species (Lancet Clubtail, Unicorn Clubtail) can be found at small ponds and marshes. Dragonhunters prefer flowing water, but occasionally visit swamps and small, forest ponds.

Notes:

- Male clubtails on territory often put on an impressive display by raising their yellow and black spotted abdomen clubs high in the air while perched on sunny, mid-stream rocks.
- Tenacious predators, clubtails often catch and eat insects their size or larger.
- Our largest, most powerful dragonfly is the Dragonhunter, the largest member of the clubtail family. It hunts other dragonflies and is immune to bee and wasp stings.
- Several members of this family are habitat specialists that require healthy streams and rivers – you can use them as indicator species to measure the presence of clean, stable waterways.
- Some scientists believe the widened club that gives this family its name may be used to mimic scorpions, or even tree-snakes, in order to scare away predators. We know for sure it’s used in territorial displays, probably a more likely reason for the club.



Black-shouldered Spinyleg
(displaying male)

Clubtails:



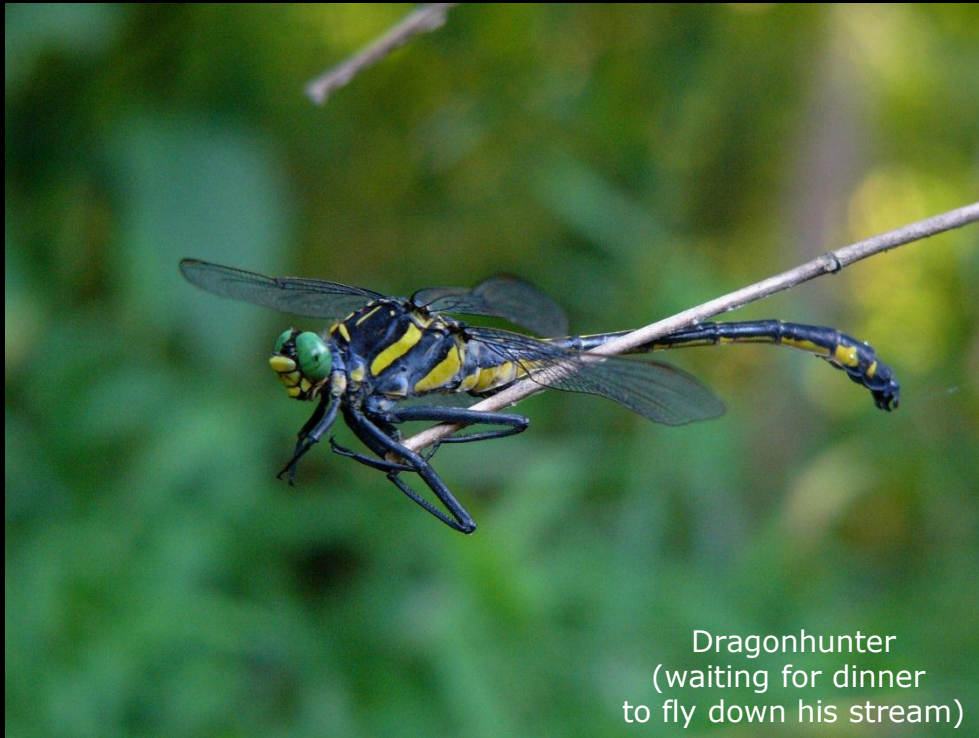
Cobra Clubtails
(recently-emerged young drying
their wings along the
Potomac River on a May morning)

Russet Clubtail

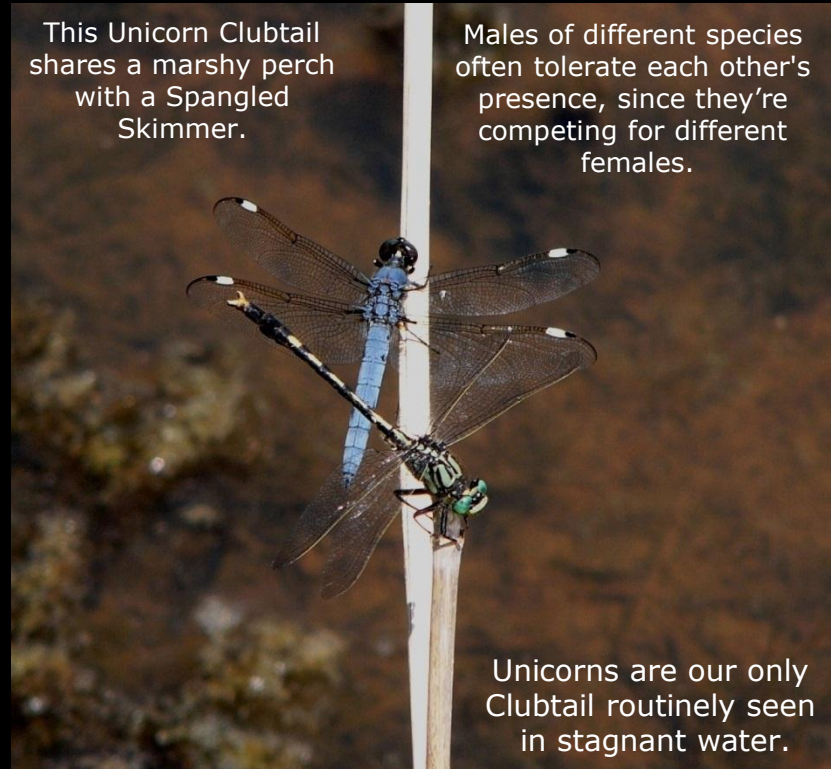


Least Clubtail





Dragonhunter
(waiting for dinner
to fly down his stream)



This Unicorn Clubtail
shares a marshy perch
with a Spangled
Skimmer.

Males of different species
often tolerate each other's
presence, since they're
competing for different
females.

Unicorns are our only
Clubtail routinely seen
in stagnant water.

Eastern
Ringtail



Unicorn
Clubtail



Black-shouldered Spineyleg



Dragonhunter

