Autumn Meadowhawk
Autumn Meadowhawk (*Sympetrum vicinum*) – 1.3”, 26-35 mm

**Flight Record:**
(6/13-12/10)
Seen most Sept-Oct.

**Fairly Common**

**Habitat:**
Sunny, shallow, marshy water, including small pools.

**First Glance:**
Small, thin, orange to red. Tiny amber smudge at base of each wing. Flies low, perches often on flat surfaces & low plants.

**Compare:**
other Meadowhawks

**Females (and young males) have two-toned abdomen**

**Tan legs**

Several small black dots on the side, but no triangles or rings

Tip has two small black dots on top

**M**

**F**
Notes from the field – Autumn Meadowhawk:

Juvenile meadowhawks start as pale, golden yellow (lower photos). After a few days they darken to tan and red (top photo). Females retain this two-toned coloring through adulthood, while young males (like the three pictured here) will soon become all dark. Telling juveniles of different Sympetrum apart by their markings can be very difficult – best to add a combination of dates, habitat and probability. Autumn Meadowhawks are by far the most common and widespread, and probably what you’ll see most of the time, at least in N. Virginia.
Notes from the field – Autumn Meadowhawk: (previously Yellow-legged Meadowhawk)

Our most common meadowhawk, Autumns can actually be abundant at times. Hundreds of golden tenerals rise out of shallow wetlands in early summer, and bright red adults fill the same wetlands in fall. Large-scale emergences start at marshy pools in June, at which point juveniles take to the woods and grow up in sunny woodland clearings. They don’t seem to reappear at ponds and marshes until fall, often staying quite late into the season, hence their name.

This Sympetrum is more of a habitat generalist than its cousins: Ruby, Blue-faced and Band-winged Meadowhawks. Those three have very specific habitat needs, but Autumns are happy with most shallow, marshy wetlands. They can be found in flooded meadows, shallow vegetated ponds, sunny swamps and marshy bay edges.

Autumns also have the longest flight season of any meadowhawk (6 months), and the latest known date of any dragonfly in N. Va. (Dec. 10). I’ll never forget birding with my Dad along Quantico Creek one December, as part of Audubon’s winter waterfowl count, and noticing a small flash of red near the ground.

I was shocked to see a tiny male Autumn Meadowhawk perched, and perky, among the grass. On the water in front of us were winter ducks (scaup, widgeon, canvasback) and at my feet was an alert little dragonfly! It made the trip for me, and reminded me what a bright, cheerful, spunky presence this species brings to fall, or even winter, when most things in nature are winding down or moving on.

This late season presence provides an important strand in our wetland food web. Not only are all those aquatic larvae providing protein packets for fish, ducks and wading birds, but migrating songbirds passing through fall wetlands get dozens of bright red energy snacks.