

Eastern Amberwing



Eastern Amberwing (*Perithemis tenera*) – 0.9", 20-25 mm

Flight

Record:

(5/26-10/26)

Seen most
July-Sept.

Common to
Abundant

Habitat:

Sunny, still
waters.

Tolerant of
degraded
waters.

First

Glance:

Tiny, rusty
orange. Flies
& hovers
low, close to
water
surface.

Perches
often on low
vegetation
along shore,
also far from
water in
meadows,
often on tall
wildflowers.

Compare:

None



Males have
red stigmas
and amber-
shaded wings

Both sexes
have **wasp-like**
abdominal
markings

Females have
rusty-brown
wing patches
and often
hunt **far** from
water



Notes from the field – Eastern Amberwing:

The smallest dragonfly in Northern Virginia, and second smallest in the U.S. (only Elfin Skimmers are smaller), Amberwings are fascinating little insects. No bigger than a horsefly or paperwasp, nature still found a way to pack a lot into this tiny package.

Amberwings are reported to have the most intricate courtship of any dragonfly. After the male selects several possible egg-laying sites for a mate, he flies off to find a female and leads her back to his potential nursery. To attract her, he sways back and forth, and hovers with his abdomen raised. Mating only occurs if the female approves – making this one of the few dragonflies where females choose the males.

In addition, Amberwings may be our only dragonfly that actively mimics a wasp. The markings and shape of their abdomens resemble a small wasp, but they take it several steps further. When threatened, they rhythmically move their wings up and down while pulsing their abdomens. All to imitate a wasp, we think, so as to scare off potential predators that believe they're about to be stung. I've seen this behavior several times from perched Amberwings as a reaction to my presence.



In late summer, males can be seen along the shores of lakes, ponds, marshes and slow sections of rivers, bays and canals. But females are often found *far* from water, in meadows among summer wildflowers, as in the above photo. They're probably hunting even smaller visitors to these summer blooms like midges, flower flies and tiny bees. They also share their colorful perches with hornets and other wasps. Perhaps, this is how their mimicry behavior evolved, and may explain why females appear to practice it more than males.