

Wandering Glider



Wandering Glider (*Pantala flavescens*) – 1.9', 47-50 mm

Flight Record:

(5/02-11/02)

Peaks
August-Sept.

*Fairly
Common*

Habitat:

Shallow,
temporary
pools. Hunts
over
meadows,
marshlands,
athletic fields
& parking lots

First Glance:

Medium. Pale
orange to
yellow-gold.
Sexes similar.
Clear wings.
Blunt, stubby
body. Flies
almost
constantly,
and high.

Compare:

Spot-winged
Glider



Long,
broad
wings for
migratory
life-style

Andy Rabin

Stigmas
yellow
to red



Ken Larsen



Body
appears
pale yellow
in flight

Notes from the field – Wandering Glider:

No one describes this species better than Sidney W. Dunkle, in his classic field guide, *Dragonflies through Binoculars* (2000) – “The World’s most evolved dragonfly, it drifts with the wind as it feeds on aerial plankton until an air mass of different temperature produces the rain pools in which it breeds. Over the ocean they fly day and night for thousands of miles. In North America they straggle north to breed, and the offspring migrate south in the fall. They may feed in swarms, often on small insects stirred up by large animals, and may ‘mob’ or chase larger dragonflies attacking the swarm. It is the only dragonfly found around the world, breeding on every continent except Europe. On many oceanic islands, such as Easter Island, it is the only dragonfly.”

Wow, what a life! And how incredible that this globe-trotting albatross of an insect can be seen right here in Northern VA, cruising high over ball fields and parking lots. In fact, parking lots and traffic intersections are a common place to see them. They’re attracted to these places not only because they’re open and sunny, but also because cars stir up gnats, their prey. In addition, female gliders are attracted to the shiny, reflective surface of our cars. They sadly mistake paint and glass for shallow water, and often lay unfortunate eggs directly on car hoods and windshields. Unlike us, dragonflies see both polarized and ultraviolet light – perhaps this ability, coupled with the glider’s search-image for shallow pools, is what draws them to cars.



Several other shallow pool dragonfly species display this attraction to automobiles, although none of them quite as much as Wandering Gliders. Other species I’ve seen attracted to automobiles are Spot-winged Gliders, Black Saddlebags, Swamp Darners, Mocha Emeralds and Blue Dashers.

One rarely sees Wandering Gliders paying much attention to water, since these nomads don’t bother setting up real territories. Instead, they hunt endlessly over open areas, and that’s where you’re most likely to find them.

Notes from the field – Wandering Glider:

Very similar to Spot-winged Gliders, you can tell Wanderers apart by their much lighter, yellow to pale orange coloring. Spot-wings appear noticeably darker – either tan or reddish brown. Both gliders share that stubby, “bullet-shaped” body.

Usually found by looking up, the only time I’ve seen Wandering Gliders perched is in the evening, or on a cloudy day. The best Wandering Glider photo I’ve been able to capture is the one I used for this title page. It was just after 6PM on an August evening, and I’d spent the day being a bit of a wanderer myself, visiting several great dragonfly habitats in southern Fairfax. I ended up in the tall fields of Accotink Bay Wildlife Refuge, watching Mocha Emeralds and Twelve-spotted Skimmers catching their gnatty supper high above. I noticed a flash of orange-gold floating in and out of the tall grass and watched a beautiful Wandering Glider, as he carefully searched out a good spot to settle down for the night. He settled on a stout stem and sat still, while I took half a dozen shots in the evening light.

Search along sunny wood-edges and taller vegetation of large meadows on summer evenings, and *you* may get a rare and close-up look at this dragonfly gypsy. One of the few times this species isn’t in motion, as it takes a breather between globe-trotting flights.



Ken Larsen