

WHAT is “Northern Virginia”, and WHY look here for dragonflies?

What: The term “Northern Virginia” means different things to different people. To me, it describes Loudoun, Prince William, Fairfax and Arlington counties, along with the cities they encompass, such as Alexandria, Falls Church, etc. Ordinarily, natural boundaries are the best way to group plants and animals, e.g. Plants of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed, or Mammals of the Rocky Mountains. However, for dragonflies, Northern Virginia as a defining area works quite well. Dragonflies, like most insects, are ruled in large part by temperature. Go west of Loudoun, north of Fairfax or south of Prince William and the average seasonal highs and lows alter just enough to support a slightly different community of dragonfly species.

In addition, I wanted to create a list of dragonflies that could be seen without driving more than an hour from your home base. Mine happens to be in Reston, but if you live anywhere in what I consider “N. VA” none of the 65 species on this site lives more than a 60 minute drive from your home – that’s pretty incredible. Assuming good weather, and tolerance of wet feet, thorns and insect bites, every species on this list could be tracked down by a dedicated dragonfly enthusiast without ever leaving Northern VA. A truly accomplished and tireless (re: obsessed) naturalist might even find them all in a single year... more than I’ve achieved, but maybe you’re up to the challenge?



Why: Part of what makes chasing dragonflies in Northern Virginia so much fun, is that this area has some of the highest levels of dragonfly diversity on the planet. Patuxent National Wildlife Refuge in southern MD may have more species of dragonflies and damselflies than anywhere in the US, and the stretch of riparian habitat that runs through Great Falls National Park is reputed to have one of the highest levels of plant and animal biodiversity within our national park system. And surprising as this may sound, Virginia holds more species of native plants than any other state in the US.

Despite all the development, Northern Virginia has an impressive amount of protected natural areas, and we’re blessed with a wide variety of aquatic habitats and open sunny areas. Ponds, marshlands, streams and rivers all exist in this suburban landscape. Most of our streams are at least partly degraded, and truly healthy marshes are few and far between. However, scattered protected oases of healthy habitat do exist for those willing to search. In addition to our many waterways, we also live at a north-south axis for many plants and animals; species from both New England and the south east can be found in N. VA, and this means *a lot* of dragonfly species. Lastly, we’re close to coastal, piedmont and mountain ecosystems, resulting in a biodiversity Mecca; a literal dragonfly Garden of Eden. Northern Virginia is one of the best places to be if your goal is to see over 20 dragonfly species in a single day. **North America has seven families of dragonflies – seeing members of six in one day, even all seven if you’re lucky, can be done without ever leaving the boundaries of this unique dragonfly hotspot.**