



Damselflies and Dragonflies

Damselflies and dragonflies both belong to the order of insects called Odonata, from the Greek for 'toothed jaw'. They both have a hinged, extendable lower lip, which shoots out to impale their prey with the pincers at the tip, making them highly efficient predators.

Damsels and dragons are different suborders, not male and female of the same insect, as commonly thought. Damsels are smaller than dragons, and most appear earlier than the dragons, from April.

Damsels hold their wings held close to their body as they perch, whilst dragons hold them out to the side. Damsels have two distinct, large eyes, positioned at each end of their oblong head. Each eye has up to 30,000 individual light sensitive cells, which gives them good vision. This image is a close up of the eye of the widespread Azure Damsel - not to mention the fantastically hairy face!

We have 52 species of *Odonata* in the UK, and fossils of dragonflies have been found in carboniferous rocks that are 350 million years old! This is the time of year to see the adults flying near freshwater, and my twin brother and I used to go off for the day, aged 6 or 7, to a big local park and lake, with empty match boxes and little nets to try to bring some home..... we only ever caught one, and it flew off as soon as we opened the box.

Damsels lay individual, cigar-shaped eggs into the stems of aquatic plants, which helps to protect them from predators. They spend most of their life as carnivorous, developing nymphs in water, only living up to a month as a flying adult, with the sole intention of mating.

But if you sit quietly by fresh water in July, you may be rewarded with the marvellous sight of a damsel or dragon, briefly on the wing as an adult, looking for a mate. A true sign of summer.

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