

Dragonflies
Suborder Anisoptera

Club-tailed Dragonflies,
Family Gomphidae

A distinctive small group, unique within European dragonflies in that they have widely separated eyes. Five species occur in the area.



eyes of a typical Gomphid dragonfly

Club-tailed Dragonfly

Gomphus vulgatissimus

A medium-sized dragonfly, abdomen length about 35mm. Both sexes are boldly black and yellow, but the male has a distinctly clubbed tail and more black coloration. Legs entirely black.

Habitat Breeds in large slow-flowing rivers, or occasionally still water, and rarely moves far from these habitats.

Status and distribution Uncommon in the UK, where it is found from the Midlands southwards; widespread on the Continent.

Season 5–6 in UK, 4–8 elsewhere.

Similar species

* *G. pulchellus* is a more slender species, more yellow in colour, with black and yellow legs. Very local in N Europe, from Germany southwards. Common in SW Europe.

* *G. flavipes* resembles Club-tailed in colouring, but has black and yellow legs. An eastern species, occurring very sparingly

from Holland eastwards. Most frequent in E Europe.

* *Onychogomphus forcipatus*

A boldly marked black and yellow insect, with an abdomen length of about 36mm, tipped with distinctive large, inwardly curved, yellowish claspers on the male. Characteristically seen resting on gravel or sand by rivers.

Habitat Around rivers or canals, usually where there are bare banks.

Status and distribution Frequent from central France southwards and in S Scandinavia, very local elsewhere.

Season 6–9.

Similar species

* *Ophiogomphus cecilia* is rather similar, but has a green ground colour rather than yellow; the male lacks the strong pincers, and the female has 2 small 'horns' on the head. An eastern species, local from Germany and Denmark eastwards.

Hairy Hawker

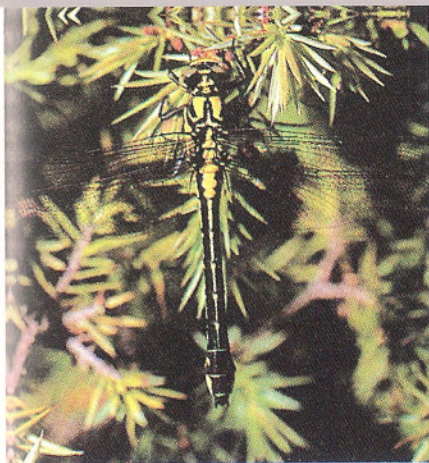
Brachytron pratense

A medium-large species, with an abdomen length of about 45mm. Males are predominantly black, with paired blue spots on almost all abdomen segments, and yellow thoracic stripes. Females are browner, lacking the stripes, and are conspicuously hairy.

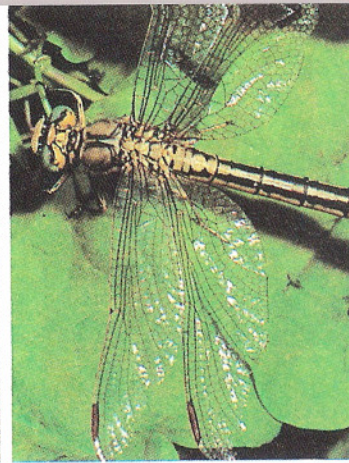
Habitat Associated with slow-moving or still water, such as ditches, canals, ponds and lakes.

Status and distribution Local in S England and Eire, widespread on the Continent. Particularly associated with coastal 'levels' in the UK.

Season 5–7. One of the earliest dragonflies to appear.



Club-tailed Dragonfly, female



Gomphus pulchellus, male



Onychogomphus forcipatus, male

Hairy Hawke



Emperor Dragonfly

Anax imperator

The Emperor is a very large dragonfly, with an abdomen length of up to 61mm. The male is predominantly bright blue, with a green thorax and segment 1 of the abdomen, and a black line along the whole abdomen. Females are duller, with similar markings but a greenish ground colour. The males hunt more frequently over water than the hawkers.

Habitat A species of still water, occurring in a wide variety of sites including new water-bodies.

Status and distribution A common species throughout the S of the area, becoming rare or absent from central England and Holland northwards.

Season 5–9.

Similar species

* *A. parthenope* is similar in shape and size, but has a brown thorax, is blue on the first few abdominal segments, and is then pale greenish-blue on the rest of the abdomen. A southern species that only just reaches into central Europe where it is uncommon.

Downy Emerald

Cordulia aenea

A medium to small dragonfly, with an abdomen length of about 35mm. In both sexes, the thorax is bronze-green and very downy, while the abdomen is metallic dark green. The eyes are green, and the wings are clear except for an amber patch at the base.

Habitat Still waters of various types, especially if slightly acid and partially wooded. They disperse into woodland, but do not usually travel far.

Status and distribution Very local in Britain, mainly southern, but with outposts

in N England, Scotland and Eire; widespread and quite common on the Continent.

Season 5–8.

Similar species

* **Orange-spotted Emerald** *Oxygastra curtisii* is similar in shape and size, but distinguished by the band of single orange spots down the abdomen. A southern species, reasonably common in France, but very rare elsewhere. Extinct in the UK since 1951.

Brilliant Emerald

Somatochlora metallica

Similar in size to Downy Emerald. Both male and female have brilliant emerald-green thorax and abdomen, though the thorax is covered with yellowish down. Distinguishable from Downy Emerald by the more brilliant metallic coloration, and the longer male appendages; Downy Emerald has no yellow on its face.

Habitat Very similar to those of the Downy Emerald.

Status and distribution Rare in the UK, where it is confined (curiously) to SE England and N Scotland; frequent and widespread on the Continent.

Season 6–9.

Similar species

Northern Emerald *S. arctica* is very similar, differing in the curved calliper-like male appendages, the slightly darker colour, and the orange-yellow spots on the sides of segment 3 of the female's abdomen. Very local in boggy places, N Scotland, and scattered through central and N Europe.

* *S. flavomaculata* is very similar structurally to the Brilliant Emerald, but has much more yellow on the top of the abdomen, and yellow all down the sides. It is widespread on the Continent, though absent from large areas.



Emperor Dragonfly, newly emerged



Orange-spotted Emerald, female



Downy Emerald

Brilliant Emerald, male

Somatochlora flavomaculata, male



Golden-ringed Dragonfly

Cordulegaster boltonii

A very large and conspicuous dragonfly; the female has an abdomen up to 65mm long (slightly shorter in the male). Distinctively patterned, primarily blackish-green, with yellow thoracic stripes and yellow rings down the whole abdomen. Eyes green in both sexes. The female has a prominent ovipositor which she uses to stab into the substrate of the river bottom.

Habitat Usually breeds in faster-flowing, well-oxygenated streams and rivers, though adults travel widely.

Status and distribution Widespread, though most frequent in upland areas; a northern and western species in Britain.

Season 5–9.

Similar species

* *C. bidentata* is extremely similar, but is less strongly marked with yellow, has a black (not yellow) occipital triangle (between the eyes), and the female has a wholly black ovipositor. An uncommon species, in hilly areas from Belgium southwards, although it is probably under-recorded.

Broad-bodied Chaser

Libellula depressa

A short, broad dragonfly, with an abdomen length of about 25mm. Male has a brown thorax with 2 yellowish stripes, and a blue abdomen which has yellow lateral spots for most of the insect's life. Female is very broad, with a brown, yellow-edged abdomen. All 4 wings have triangular dark patches at the base. Newly emerged males look very like females, but are slightly less broad-bodied.

Habitat Occurs around a very wide variety of still and slow-flowing waters, including small ponds. Also wanders widely and can be found almost anywhere.

Status and distribution A common species throughout.

Season 5–8. One of the earliest dragonflies to appear.

Scarce Chaser

Libellula fulva

This species is similar in size to the Broad-bodied Chaser but is more slender. The male has a brown unstriped hairy thorax; the abdomen is pale blue, except for dark colour on segments 1–2 and a diamond-shaped patch towards the tip. Only the hindwings have a dark patch; compare the Broad-bodied Chaser, where all 4 wings have dark patches.

Habitat Breeds in many types of still and slow-moving waters.

Status and distribution Very local in S England, but widespread and quite common on the Continent.

Season 5–8.

4-spotted Chaser

Libellula quadrimaculata

Abdomen length about 30mm. A distinctive species: both sexes are similar, brown in colour overall, but with black on the tapering abdomen from segment 7 onwards. The wings each have a spot on the centre of the leading edge, in addition to the dark pterostigmata, and the triangular patch at the base of the hindwings.

Habitat Most frequently found around still, acid waters, although it is not confined to them.

Status and distribution Widespread and common throughout in suitable habitats, sometimes becoming very abundant. Large numbers may occasionally migrate, although this has become less frequent in recent decades due to the destruction of suitable habitat.

Season 5–8.



Golden-ringed Dragonfly, male



Broad-bodied Chaser, male



Broad-bodied Chaser, female



Scarce Chaser, male



4-spotted Chaser

Black-tailed Skimmer

Orthetrum cancellatum

A small dragonfly, with abdomen 30–35mm long. Male has a brown thorax, and a blue abdomen, except for the tip which has black suffusing up as far as the seventh segment. Females are overall dull brown, with paired dark curved markings on each abdominal segment.

Habitat Most frequently seen around still water-bodies of varying acidity, especially those with a hard bottom. Adults travel widely and quickly find new habitats, such as flooded gravel pits.

Status and distribution Virtually confined to S England within the UK; widespread on the Continent north to S Scandinavia.

Season 5–9.

Similar species

* *O. albistylum* is similar in general appearance, but the black tip to the abdomen is much more clearly defined, as though the tip of the tail had been dipped in ink, and the anal appendages are white. A southern species, reaching as far as central France and S Germany.

Keeled Skimmer

Orthetrum coerulescens

Abdomen length 27–30mm. A rather small species, with the abdomen wholly pale blue in males. The thorax in both sexes is brown, with 2 creamy-yellow stripes, and the female's abdomen is golden-brown. Typically, the wings are held forward and downwards at rest.

Habitat Most frequently a bog species in Britain, though more catholic on the

Continent. Adults tend to remain close to the larval habitat.

Status and distribution A local species in the UK, where it is strongly south-western; common on the Continent from N France southwards, scattered and rare further N.

Season 5–9.

Similar species

* *O. brunneum* is similar, but slightly larger, and males are wholly pale blue. A southern species, common from central France southwards, rare and local further north.

* *Crocothemis erythraea*

A small dragonfly, abdomen length up to 29mm, though often less. Males are, however, strikingly conspicuous by their 'nail-varnish' red colouring throughout. Females are dull brown. Both sexes have long, narrow brown pterostigmas, outlined with black nerves.

Habitat Most frequent around still or very slow-flowing waters of about neutral pH, though the adults are highly mobile in warm conditions.

Status and distribution A southern species, common from central France southwards, rare and scattered further N. There is an old record for the Channel Islands.

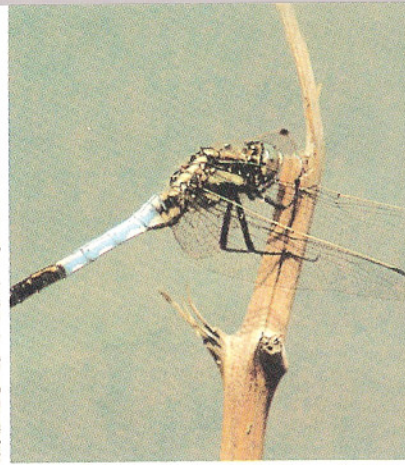
Season 5–10.

Similar species

This dragonfly can be separated from the similar red *Sympetrum* species by the broader, shorter abdomen, lacking any 'waist', and the redder thorax. The pterostigmas described above are a helpful distinguishing feature.



Black-tailed Skimmer, male



Orthetrum albistylum, male



Keeled Skimmer, male



Keeled Skimmer, nymph



Orthetrum brunneum, male



Crocothemis erythraea, male