

Damselflies

By Beth Jappay

This is the third in a series of articles intended to discuss **how** to fish particular patterns, and I have decided that due to the time of year damselflies would be a good choice. Like last month I am drawing on information obtained from the Rick Hafele/Philip Rowley Entomology course I took in January, Hal Janssen's book "Stillwater Fly Fishing Secrets", as well as other internet sources. I feel these authors are particularly good choices, since all have spent considerable time observing the behavior of aquatic insects.



Both damsels and dragonflies belong to the order Odonata' Both have primitive wings that do not fold back completely. Like mayflies, the damselfly life cycle involves incomplete metamorphosis and the aquatic stage is a nymph (instead of larva/pupa stages). A damsel will spend several weeks as a winged and sexually mature adult, and the rest of its 1-2 year-long life cycle as a nymph. The fragile nymph spends most of its life hiding in the shoal vegetation, usually at 5-25' depth.



Both the nymphs and the adults are predatory and while the adult is typically brightly-colored, the nymphs usually take on the same color as the vegetation they crawl around on (anywhere from

a pale olive or yellow to dark brown).

The transition from nymph to adult usually occurs in late spring and early summer (often concurrent to Callibaetis hatching) and is referred to as a “migration”. In lakes and slowly-moving rivers the nymphs will rise from the weed beds at about a 20 degree angle until they are within 3’ of the surface and will then swim horizontally towards shoreline vegetation (such as long-stem bullrushes). These nymphs have long thin abdomens and three “tails” (which are actually gills) and they swim in an undulating motion, like tiny tadpoles ([here](#) is a video of a migrating nymph). A nymph will typically swim 2-3’, pause for a several second rest, and then swim another 2-3’.



There is a different species of damselflies (Argia) that lives in streams, particularly in eastern Oregon (and into Idaho, Montana and the Southwest). They live in the riffles of rivers and have a blockier shape. These instead crawl along the bottom to reach the shoreline for emergence.

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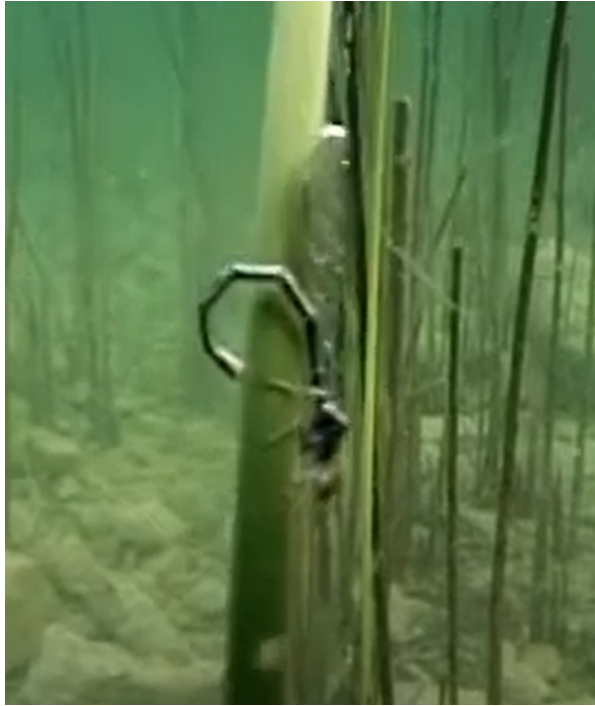
Once nymphs arrive at a rock or weed stalk they will crawl out of the water, split their carapace and crawl out, unrolling their wings.



They then have to wait until their unrolled wings dry, making them very vulnerable to predation by birds, or trout if a wind blows them onto the water. These (“teneral” stage) adults are usually pale green, so keep a few adults of that color in your box and watch for surface activity on a windy day.



Like mayflies, the winged adult is the sexually mature stage for this aquatic insect. Experienced lake fishermen are familiar with the sight of mating damsel adults. Males will often remain attached while the females are laying their eggs, and trout will often selectively target this winged duo configuration.



Damselflies deposit their eggs on lakeside vegetation, usually at the water's surface. However many species will better protect their eggs by depositing them below the surface and within the vegetation's stalk. In this case the female will crawl under the surface, breathing a pocket of air between her wings. She will walk down the stalk, slitting it in several places and depositing her eggs inside until she runs out of air. Then she will let go, floating back to the surface, helpless and obvious with her shimmering air cloak.

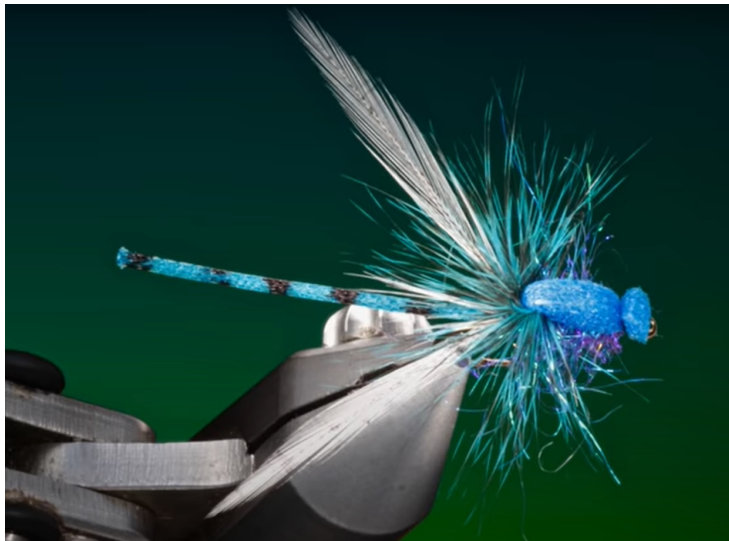


I highly recommend this short [Bugs of the Underworld](#) YouTube video I used for these cool screenshots.

How to fish damsel patterns:

1) Dry Fly Fishing

Damsel dry patterns should be fished along the edges of the lake, preferably next to vegetation and targeting working fish. They work better on windy days, and patterns that incorporate foam float better. If empty husks are present on the vegetation, consider using an olive (teneral) pattern.



[Braided Damsel](#)



[Amphibious Damsel](#)



Teneral Damsel

2) Damsel nymphs, floating line

The best time of the year to imitate a damsel emergence is in late spring and the best time of day is mid morning to mid afternoon. Damsel nymph patterns should be unweighted or lightly-weighted and fished as if they are swimming towards shore. If sight fishing, cast ahead of a working fish and allow the fly to settle on the bottom. Start the retrieve when the fish is 3-6' away using a medium-fast hand-twist retrieve. Otherwise set up your boat/pontoon on the shore side of a weed bed. After casting, wait until the pattern drops to a 2-3' depth, and then start a medium-fast hand-twist retrieve, pausing frequently. Be ready for the take to occur on the pause and set the hook if the line tightens. Use a strip-set hook set in this situation.

3) Damsel nymphs, Hover line

Hover lines are a good choice when imitating an emerging nymph traveling 2-3' under the surface of the water, especially on windy days. Use the same retrieve and set as above, at least initially.

4) Damsel nymphs, clear intermediate and medium sink lines

When not migrating towards shore, damsel nymphs will be found in weed beds. Use a clear intermediate line when targeting depths of 3-8', and a type 2 or 3 full sinking line for greater depths. Weighted patterns may be helpful. Wait for the appropriate count to start the above retrieve. Trolling around weed beds from a float tube or pontoon can also be effective.

Here are some recommended damsel nymph patterns. They should be thin/sparsely tied and should use materials that impart movement, such as marabou or ostrich.



[Rickard's Stillwater Nymph](#)



[Kaufmann's Marabou Damselfly](#)



[Extended Ostrich Herl Damsel](#)



A sparsely-tied wooly bugger can also be an effective damsel nymph pattern

5) Indicator fishing

Fishing a damsel pattern under an indicator is a great way to fish in shallow water or to keep the pattern tight against shoreline cattails.



Baby Damsel

This Brian Chan pattern is an easy tie and is a great choice in late summer/fall. It also imitates a micro leech and/or scud.



Balanced Damsel

6) Dry pattern, full sink line

Hal Janssen suggests trying this technique when flying damselfly nymphs are ovipositing. Cast near shoreline vegetation and allow the line to pull the dry fly under the water, keeping the line tight but not retrieving the fly. Use a pattern that does not incorporate foam.

Well, I learned a lot in researching this article, and can't wait to try out some new patterns and techniques.