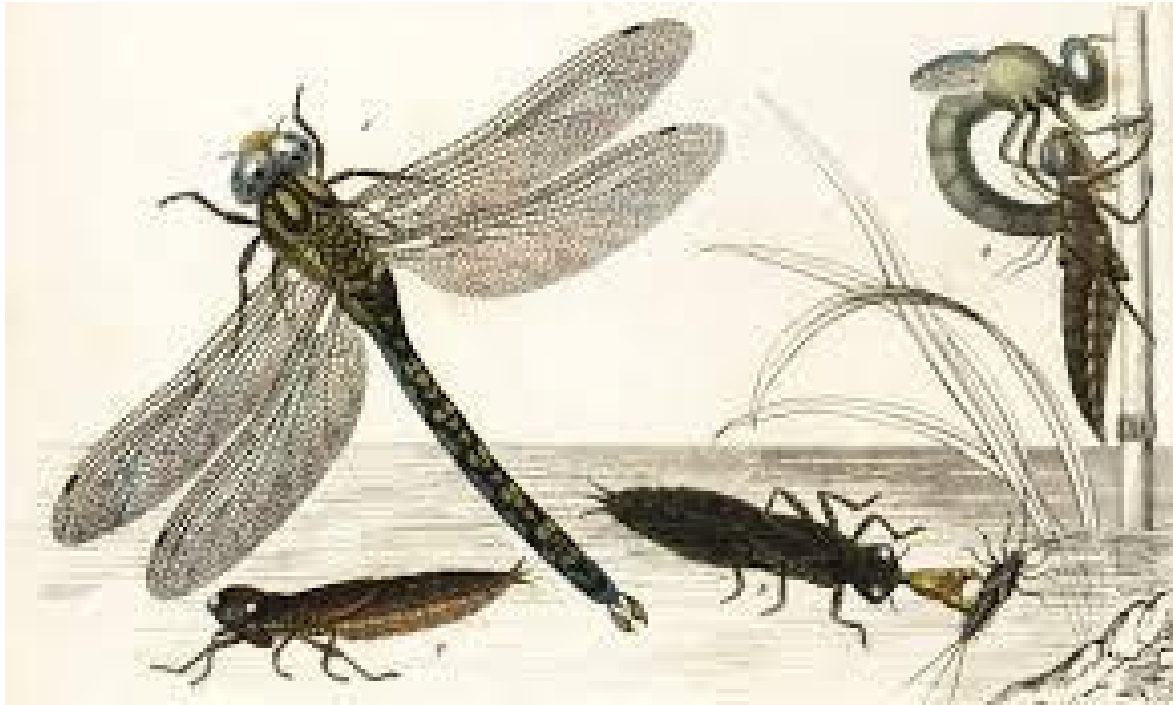


Dragonflies

By Beth Jappay



This is the fourth of a series of articles intended to discuss **how** to fish particular (primarily stillwater) patterns. This month I decided to use my research as a learning experience for a pattern category I don't have a lot of experience with—dragonflies. As with the prior articles, 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 to learn from as all have spent considerable time observing the behavior of aquatic insects.

Dragonflies, just like damselflies, belong to the Order Odonata, and the adults have primitive wings that won't lay flat. They are the longest-lived of the aquatic nymphs (1-5 years) and are therefore available year-round and an important food source for trout. The adults are amazing fliers and are considered one of the fastest flying insects, having been clocked at up to 25 mph. Dragonflies, like damsels, are predatory (really carnivores) as both aquatic nymphs and flying adults and this affects their behavior and therefore how they are imitated. The vast majority of species spend 2-4 weeks as a winged adult, and the rest of their 1-5 year-long life cycle as a nymph. It is the nymph that the fly fisherman is successful in imitating and what I will discuss in this article.

There are two major families of stillwater dragonflies, which is important to appreciate as each has a different size, shape and stalking behavior. A lake may be populated by both. Rick Hafele differentiates them as either sprawlers and climbers:

Sprawlers (Libellulidae)



These nymphs are kind of fat, a little bit rounded, and tend to hang out camouflaged in substrate or vegetation. They may even partially bury themselves in the lake bottom or allow themselves to become covered with algae. Since they take on the color of their surroundings they can vary in color from brown to olive to bright green. They run smaller than their cousins, but can achieve up to $\frac{3}{4}$ " in size. They are visual ambush hunters and wait for prey to come close and then seize it with their long lower lip. Because they spend much of their life immobile and camouflaged, they are (unless migrating) less often consumed by fish.

Libellulid adults tend to be smaller and have more brightly colored bodies or distinctive wings.



Climbers (Aeshnidae)



Also sometimes referred to as "crawlers" these nymphs are more streamlined and can grow to be up to 2" in size. They can take 2-5 years to fully mature. They take on the color of the lake substrate (usually its algae). They are aggressive and voracious predators, and stalk their prey (midge pupa, scuds, nymphs, and even small fish) stealthily like a cat will stalk a bird or squirrel. They are very active and can find themselves in the open or targeted by fish.

Both Climbers and Sprawlers have internal gills. By forcefully contracting their abdomen they can shoot water out of their rectal gill chamber and swim by jet propulsion. Here is a cool [YouTube video](#) that shows an Aeshnid nymph alternating between walking on the bottom of the lake and jetting along a few inches above it.



Philip Rowley has found that imitating this active dragonfly propulsion can be a powerful trigger for a trout to strike.

Here are the stomach contents of a single lake fish harvested in early spring.

The Hatch



Like damselflies, dragonflies will migrate to shore and crawl out in order to hatch into their winged adult form. They usually do so at night, and can do so in massive numbers. Look for shucks along the shoreline during late spring to mid summer. If present, cast out from shore in the early evening (or even better, the middle of the night if legal).

Patterns–Sprawler imitations

These are usually tied on a 2x nymph hook (like the Daiichi 1710) size #8 or #10. Fish with larger-sized patterns in the late spring/early summer prior to the hatch, and smaller sizes in the fall.



[Assam Dragon](#)



[Gomphus](#)
(floating)

Philip Rowley ties this pattern with spun deer hair, then keeps different colors of permanent markers with him to match the fly to the local vegetation



[Foam Sprawler](#)
(floating)

Patterns—Climber imitations

These are most often tied on a 3x hook (such as the Daiichi 1730 or 1760) size #4 - #6 (size #8 in the fall)



Rowley's Grizzly Dragon
(floating)



[Drag Queen](#)
(floating)



[Butler's Bug](#)
(floating)



Carey Special



[Guinea Dragon](#)

How to Fish

Fly fishermen will most often imitate the climber category of dragonfly nymphs. As seen in the above YouTube video, this nymph will alternate between walking on the bottom of the lake, and briefly jetting a few inches above the bottom. Since they are typically hunting for prey in shoal weed beds (anywhere from 5 to 25' depth), putting the fly at the right depth and then not hanging up in weeds can be challenging.

Full sink lines, floating flies

Target the sides of weed beds using full sinking lines—anywhere from clear intermediate (for shallow lakes) to a Type 5 or even 7 sink for deeper lakes. Give the fly line enough time to lie fully on the bottom of the lake before starting your retrieve. Change the length of the leader until you are satisfied with the depth of the fly (the shorter the leader, the closer the fly is to the bottom). For a more buoyant foam fly, a typical leader length could be 3-4', and for a less-buoyant deer hair fly, 6-7'. Use a non-slip loop knot to attach the fly. The best retrieve to imitate a climber nymph is a steady medium-slow hand twist (or a constant slow strip), with

occasional medium-fast 8-12" strips. Be prepared for a take that is anywhere from a vicious smash to just a sudden heaviness of the line. I prefer a strip set. For a sprawler imitation, use a shorter leader with a slower hand-twist retrieve and occasional one foot medium-slow strips

Full sink lines, unweighted flies

Also target the edges of weed beds, using the same lines, leaders, and knots. Use a count-down method to keep the fly as deep as possible without hanging up in the weeds too much. The retrieve is similar to floating flies.

Floating line, weighted fly

If you are fortunate enough to be sight fishing, this is the preferred method. Watch for a while to determine the travel lanes of the fish's patrol route. Using a long leader (13-16') and way in advance of the fish's arrival, cast so the fly lands a couple of feet on the other side of the travel lane/trench and allow the fly to sink to the bottom. Wait until the fish is 2-3' away from the fly, and then start a medium-fast strip. Be prepared for a vicious take.

Wow, I sure learned a lot while researching this article. For me the take home points are:

Dragonfly nymphs are a source of major calories for trout and are available year round

They can be a good search pattern any time of the year

In the late spring to mid summer, watch for shucks along the shore line

Keep a small sample of floating, unweighted, and weighted flies in my lake box.