

Dazzling dragonflies of the Laguna

By Kathy Biggs

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Dragonflies have existed for over 200 million years. They were here before the dinosaurs and are among the most ancient creatures still populating Earth. There are over 5,400 species of dragonflies worldwide, including the smaller, daintier, damselflies. One hundred eight species have been identified in California with more being found each year. So far approximately 45 species have been recorded in Sonoma County.

The Laguna is home to at least 18 species of dragonflies. Some are big and boldly colored like the male flame skimmer. Their 2 1/2-inch long orange-red body and inner wings stand out clearly against the greens of the plants they perch upon. Others are small and easily over-looked, such as the tiny female Western fork-tail, which is less than one-inch long with dull coloring. It can disappear even as you watch it.

Dragonflies inhabit the Laguna wetlands at all times of day, every day of the year. However we are usually only aware of them during the summer months when they have emerged from the waters as flying insects. Even then we only see them during daylight hours when they foraging for food and looking for mates. They have been recorded as flying in the Laguna area from February to October. The rest of the time they are underwater nymphs or eggs.

Dragonflies have some of the most interesting life cycles and behaviors of all creatures. They start life as a tiny egg. Some dragonfly eggs are scattered freely over the ponds and creeks, while others are inserted into floating or overhanging vegetation.

Some of the eggs will hatch within weeks, while others will over winter before hatching. The eggs hatch into nymphs, which go through about a dozen molts before crawling out onto a stem or log to emerge.

After anything from a month or two to a few years of growing and molting, the nymph crawls out of the water. Its skin cracks and the adult dragonfly slowly emerges from the old shell, at first hanging down from it limply.

After its legs harden, it pulls itself upright, then pumps liquids into its crumpled wings much the same as a butterfly does. Slowly the wings begin to expand and harden. After an hour or more the new adult dragonfly flies off.

The adult dragonflies only live for several weeks. During this time they feed on mosquitoes, gnats and other small insects, mature sexually and mate. Then the females lay their eggs and depart. The eggs and nymph that hatch from them are left on their own to hatch and develop.

Dragonflies are best viewed on a calm, sunny day in summer or early fall. When it is windy or cool they tend to hide away and wait for improved weather. The best opportunities to view them will usually be near a pond, stream or river where they will be not only feeding but also busily searching for mates, so the Laguna is perfect. They can also be found miles away from the water while searching for food and some even migrate. In the fall you can occasionally find hundreds of migrants stopped over for a rest.

Kathy Biggs' enthusiasm for dragonflies is infectious. Her fascination began when she and her husband dug out their swimming pool and replaced it with a garden pond. The dragonflies came in and she was enraptured, keen to learn more about these intriguing creatures. She quickly realized there was little information available about the dragonflies of California. She has now become an expert, photographing, speaking, leading dragonfly walks. She is the author of three books on the dragonflies of California.

Kathy Biggs will give an illustrated presentation called "The Dazzling Dragonflies of the Laguna" on Monday, November 6 at 7 p.m. at the Cotati Community Center. For more information on Kathy Biggs' books and other information on dragonflies see <http://www.sonic.net/dragonfly>.

-Jenny Blaker, Cotati Creek Critters Outreach Coordinator

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