

## **Emperor Dragonflies**

Dragonflies are amazing things, and just a tiny bit scary. For a start, they can be very large and in a country where most of our insects are small by world standards, this comes as a bit of a shock. In fact the largest dragonflies in the world are not much bigger than our Emperor dragonfly.

They are also one of the few insects with which you can have any kind of an interaction – some species will fly right up to you and give you a good stare before moving on having decided you are harmless. If they are perched they will swivel their huge compound eyes to look at you – quite unnerving!

But perhaps the most fascinating thing about dragonflies are their larvae. The eggs are laid during the summer and these hatch into 6 legged creatures which are really just little killing machines. They gradually grow, often by eating one another, and spend between 2 and 5 years at the bottom of a pond or stream. By this stage an Emperor larva is very large – about an inch and a half long – and if you are a small pond creature such as a tadpole they are your worst nightmare. Then one calm evening in late spring they climb up a plant stem, hang on tightly, their back then splits open and out crawls a very crumpled adult dragonfly. They pump up their body and wings and after several hours they are ready to fly away. Amazing. The larval cases (exuviae) which are left behind tell you what has crawled out of your pond – in our case we had about 8 Emperors which is a lot of fierce predators for a medium sized pond. But also very large numbers of Large Red and Azure Damselflies – so the little chaps manage to survive despite the predators. Just like Blue Tits and Sparrowhawks.

Incidentally, to recognise an Emperor dragonfly, look for a large green and blue insect with a slightly drooping body patrolling a pond or reservoir about 6 feet up. The patrolling males hardly ever seem to land but the females can be seen egg laying on water plants and waterside vegetation where the sound of her stiff wings hitting the plant leaves can often be the first sign that she is there.

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