

Collected Notes on the Dragonflies of the Island of Bute

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Introduction

Because of their colourful and often striking appearance, the dragonflies (order Odonata) are probably one of the most distinctive groups of creatures which inhabit the British countryside. Most naturalists recognise dragonflies readily enough but, unless specialists, may seldom know the precise identity of the various species.

As far as I am aware, the dragonfly population of the Island of Bute does not differ significantly from that found on the adjacent Clyde-Argyll mainland, but it is always worth while preparing separate lists of the fauna and flora found on any island, since just occasionally these may show surprising differences from the neighbouring mainland or other islands.

I have been interested in dragonflies all my life, and have always kept notes of any species which I saw on Bute. No separate account of the dragonflies has previously appeared in the Buteshire Society's *Transactions*, so I hope that these personal notes, collected casually over the past sixty years and fairly intensively during the past fifteen years, will be of interest to other naturalists and will fill a gap in our knowledge of Bute natural history.

Identification Method

Identification is fairly straightforward for the larger or more common species, but for the more unusual species the method I have used for some years is to catch and imprison the dragonfly for a short time in a clear plastic container with a lid. This makes close and detailed examination easily possible, and identification, when immediately compared to a suitable key, usually reliable. It also avoids any real harm to the dragonfly. Without this useful aid, I would certainly have been unable to identify some of the smaller or more unusual dragonflies, and therefore many records would probably have been missed.

Identification Keys

The identification book I originally used was Cynthia Longfield's pioneer work *The Dragonflies of the British Isles* (1937), which I purchased in a Rothesay book shop the year it was published, and still value. Within recent years, however, I have used C.O. Hammond's *The Dragonflies of Great Britain and Ireland* (1977, 1983) described by Cynthia Longfield herself as "the dragonfly book of the century". This has the advantage of simply magnificent colour plates and updated identification keys, which so far have enabled me to identify nearly all the dragonflies I have found on Bute.

Other Information on Distribution

The following notes on the distribution of dragonflies on the Island of Bute are entirely personal. Where it is useful, for easy reference I give the numbers of the relevant 10-km squares, and to my personal notes I have added what additional information is contained in the national 10-km square publication, the *Atlas of the Dragonflies of Britain and Ireland* (Merritt, Moore and Eversham,

1996), although without any knowledge as to the origin of the records. These instances are made clear in the text.

Needless to say, if any other naturalists know of any additional published or unpublished records I shall be most grateful to have these drawn to my attention.

English Names

The English names for most of the less common species are largely contrived and have recently undergone considerable revision. Cynthia Longfield's original English names have been modified by Hammond, and these modified names are used here. The British Dragonfly Society, however, has emphasized that only the Latin scientific names, known internationally, should be used for serious study.

In general, the English name dragonfly is used to mean all members of the order Odonata. 'Damselflies' are members of the suborder Zygoptera, which as adults are usually smaller, slender-bodied species, which hold their wings closed, or nearly closed, over the abdomen when at rest. The suborder Anisoptera, the 'true dragonflies', contains the larger, more robust and actively hawking species.

Systematic List

In the following Systematic List the arrangement and nomenclature follow Merritt, Moore and Eversham (1996). Where possible, for most species I have added the flight periods, i.e. the average dates when I have found adults to be on the wing on Bute. These dates may well differ from the average dates found in other parts of Scotland, and can, of course, be significantly altered by different weather patterns.

Suborder ZYGOPTERA

Family LESTIDAE

EMERALD DAMSELFLY *Lestes sponsa*

In my experience not really common, but over the past ten years I have at least six reliable records, all of single specimens from the south of the island in the vicinity of the Plan Loch (NS15); all July/August. This is a slender light metallic-green damselfly which usually perches with its wings half open, a position "intermediate between most damselflies and true dragonflies" (Merritt, Moore and Eversham, 1996).

Family COENAGRIONIDAE

LARGE RED DAMSELFLY *Pyrhosoma nymphula*

Possibly one of the commonest Odonata species on Bute, and reasonably well distributed throughout the island - ponds, bogs, moorland and also gardens; a fairly long flight period, from end of April until mid-September.

COMMON BLUE DAMSELFLY *Enallagma cyathigerum*

Fairly common and well distributed, sometimes in localised swarms around the edges of lochs; also occurs on some higher heather moors, including several records from north of Rhubodach (NS07). Flight period May to early September.

BLUE-TAILED DAMSELFLY *Ischnura elegans*

Reasonably well-known and fairly well distributed, with a good many records from places near the sea-shore and just about the only Odonata species found around polluted waters. Flight period May to September.

Suborder ANISOPTERA

Family AESHNIDAE

COMMON HAWKER *Aeshna juncea*

Many records over the years, usually of single specimens, and fairly widely distributed throughout the island - pools, bogs, heather moors and also edges of woodland; mainly July/August. In my experience, which is purely personal, this dragonfly is only really very active in fairly bright sunshine, and so may actually be more common than at first appears; in numbers it may possibly be nearly as common as the Golden-ringed Dragonfly.

Family CORDULEGASTRIDAE

GOLDEN-RINGED DRAGONFLY *Cordulegaster boltonii*

Well-known and widely distributed. Probably one of the commonest dragonflies on Bute and occurs in a wide variety of habitats, including bogs, lochs, heather moors, the edges of rivers, and gardens. Flight period mainly June to August.

Family LIBELLULIDAE

FOUR-SPOTTED CHASER *Libellula quadrimaculata*

Does occur, but I have only a handful of records over the past fifteen years; all single specimens, in June/July, from the south of the island at the Plan Loch (NS15) and near Loch Quien (NS05).

KEELED SKIMMER *Orthetrum coerulescens*

[One possible record, from boggy land near Straad (NS06) on 29th June 1996, but I was unable to catch the specimen for confirmation, and in view of the known patchy distribution of this species in the West of Scotland, I feel it cannot yet be admitted to the Bute list].

COMMON DARTER *Sympetrum striolatum*

Many records extending back over fifty years, and regularly recorded from the mid-1980s onwards, when I commenced really serious recording; around the shore-line of Plan Loch, Loch Quien and Loch Fad, edges of woodland, and heather moorland as far north as Rhubodach; all records in July/August/September.

I have classed all specimens as the Common Darter *Sympetrum striolatum*, although Hammond (1983) said Scottish records referred mainly to the closely-allied species the Highland Darter *S. nigrescens*. Merritt, Moore and Eversham (1996), however, said that the specific distinction between *S. striolatum* and *S. nigrescens* was still unresolved; on the slender evidence available to me I have not been able to make any comment on this distinction.

RED-VEINED DARTER *Sympetrum fonscolombii*

[Merritt, Moore and Eversham (1996) table this species for the 'Clyde Isles' before 1975, which may or may not refer to the Island of Bute, but give no further information in the text. Hammond's 1983 distribution map gives only one record for the West of Scotland, a pre-1961 record from Arran, which is probably the same record, but so far I have been unable to confirm this. I have no personal record from Bute].

BLACK DARTER *Sympetrum danae*

[Merritt, Moore and Eversham (1996) give a pre-1950 record for the 10-km square NS15, and a pre-1975 record for square NR97, both of which include parts of the Island of Bute. These records may therefore refer to Bute or to the adjacent Cowal district of Argyll or the Cumbrae islands. The same authors also include current records for the Island of Arran. It is therefore possible that this species may well occur on the Island of Bute, but as yet I have been unable to obtain any additional information and I have no personal record].

Summary

Possibly nine species of Odonata have been recorded for the Island of Bute, and all of these species I have personally seen. Two other species are doubtful, but may have occurred. In my experience the commonest are the Large Red Damselfly and the Golden-ringed Dragonfly, with the Common Blue Damselfly, Blue-tailed Damselfly, Common Hawker and Common Darter also well-known. The others are distinctly uncommon, and one is fairly fortunate to see them.

It is hoped that the publication of this short species list may encourage others to add to the known information about the distribution of dragonflies on Bute.

References

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