

Wild Wednesday 12 August 2020

Ode to a dragonfly! I'm not going to wax poetic here, but most folks don't know that "ode" can refer to a member of the order Odonata, the dragonflies and damselflies. Upon close inspection, these are among the most beautiful of insects, but that beauty is not appreciated by many other insects, for both in the aquatic larval stage and as flying adults, dragonflies are serious predators.

Dragonflies are incredible fliers, as all four wings can be moved independently. They can maneuver with astonishing agility and fly up to 30 mph, as fast as the flight of a small bird. We often see them deep in the Granite Dells, as they are great commuters from the wetlands where they typically breed.

Dragonflies have the keenest vision in the insect world, with each compound eye having up to 30,000 simple eyes, and their eyes are large enough for them to have nearly a 360-degree field of view. They are masters at detecting movement, and their color vision includes sensitivity to UV light. Though we find their patterns quite lovely, other dragonflies see an even richer color palette than we do.

August is the peak month for dragonfly diversity in the Southwest. Because of their amphibious lifestyles, this summer of drought has not been kind to them, though they will persevere and rebound in numbers in a wet summer. These photos were all taken in late day on the north shore of Willow Lake this summer as I waited for a friend to show up. I was glad he was late, as I got to experience the blazing brilliance of a Flame Skimmer and the stained-glass wings of a Widow Skimmer on a *Rhus*.

Odes deserve our close attention. Close-focusing binoculars are a great help, though most odes are large enough to be observed with the naked eye. With careful stalking (be sure to go in your stalking feet), you can get great photo images of these stunning insects. Enjoy these examples, but take my word and go check them out in the wild. They are ode that much!



