DRAGONFLY PHOTOGRAPHY HINTS

By Dick Kenyon ©

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Equipment: Camera/lens combination allowing 1/3 to 1/2 life size magnification will get full dragonfly images. Macro 1:1 lenses will allow really close-up images of heads/eyes and wings. Tripods and flash may be useful Searching for and observation of dragonflies/damselflies can be aided by use of a pair of close-focus binoculars.

1. For competitive images keep background uncluttered. Control of background is crucial. Try for a blue sky or water surface background when subject is perched on top of plant stems. Look for shadowed areas behind perching subjects so background is rendered black. Shoot at low apertures to put background elements out of focus. Try to balance depth of field on subject with amount of out of focus in the background.

2. Recognize that with single exposure, non-stacked images it is difficult to get an overall depth of field which renders all parts of the subject sharp. The best chance is when you shoot perpendicular to the wings and abdomen

3. For competitive shots try to compose so the subject is at an angle in the frame rather than straight up or straight across.

4. Use a tripod when possible. Try learning to use two legs of the tripod rather than three to allow movement of camera toward subject without having to pick up the tripod.

5. When stalking a dragonfly with a handheld camera stop short of the subject and then lean in with the camera to compose and focus. Presetting the approximate focus distance will help. Some dragonflies do not perch or land on surfaces for long before taking off again so you may have little time to fuss with zooming and focus.
Also avoid sideways motion on approaching the subject since dragonflies are more sensitive to lateral motion. Also avoid casting your shadow across the subject. Approaching a dragonfly close enough to obscure a third of its field of view causes it to sense you as a distant tree line reducing the threat of your movement.

6. At a pond's edge observe the actions of resident dragonflies. Some have favorite perches to which they frequently return. Setting up a tripod mounted camera and pre-focusing on the perch may enable some good shots. Another trick is to create a perch by jamming a slim branch into the edge of the pond where it is convenient for you to set up.

7. If you have access to a pond where dragonflies are present you may be able to pre-locate dormant subjects at night so you can easily find them early in the morning perhaps covered with dew. Visit the pond at 11 PM with a good flashlight and search the pond edge plants for subjects. When you find one, stuff a Kleenex in the foliage near the subject. In the morning you will be able to easily see the Kleenex and find the subject before it warms up and flies off.

8. Use of high speed synchronized flash equipped with a diffusion device, or a two flash set up can be effective. A single shoe mounted or in-camera flash directly illuminating the dragonfly is less effective, producing harsh shadows.

9. With the advent of digital photography it is now possible to use the "focus stacking" technique to achieve extended depth of field. The subject must be static. A series of images is made each with a slightly different focus plane. All images are then combined with software that selects only the sharp part of each image achieving an overall sharpness from furthest to nearest point of focus. This technique requires use of a tripod and is facilitated with the camera mounted on a focusing rail.

10. Buy one or two guidebooks on dragonflies/damselflies and study up on their life cycles, biology, habitats and identifying markings. Knowing your subject will improve your photography.

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PHOTOGRAPHIC COMPOSITIONS/CAMERA ANGLES FOR DRAGONFLIES

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1. PROFILE - Camera at same level as subject.

2. DOWNWARD ANGLE FROM REAR – Lens axis at about 30 to 45 degrees down from perpendicular to dragonfly abdomen/wings.

3. UPWARD ANGLE FROM BELOW PERCHING DRAGONFLY. Lens axis is 30 t0 45 degrees below horizontal.

4. FROM ABOVE. Lens axis is perpendicular to wings/abdomen.

5. VERTICALLY HANGING DRAGONFLY. Lens axis is perpendicular to wings/abdomen and horizontal to ground.

6. HEAD ON. Lens axis is at or near same level as perching subject. Wings may be folded forward or outstretched.

7. FROM REAR ALONG ABDOMEN. Lens axis is parallel to abdomen.

8. THREE-QUARTER VIEW FROM FRONT. Lens axis is at 30 to 45 degrees down.

9. DEW COVERED DRAGONFLY. An early morning shot, before subject is warmed up enough by sun to fly. Lens axis is perpendicular to wings.

10. DRAGONFLY WHEEL Male and female together with male grasping female by the head. This is a profile shot.

11. DRAGONFLY OVIPOSITING. This is an action shot with subject repeatedly dipping end of abdomen in water to deposit eggs.

12. DRAGONFLY EATING PREY. Another nature story if you are lucky enough to see it.

13. MACRO HEAD ON. Get in tight to fill frame with face and eyes.

14. MACRO HEAD AND THORAX. Lens axis is perpendicular to thorax from above.

15. MACRO OF WING AREA. Lens is perpendicular to wing.

16. EMERGING DRAGONFLY. Profile shot with subject recently emerged from naiad showing both dragonfly and naiad.

17. DRAGONFLY EXUVIAE ON STEM OR REED. Shoot directly at back or from side.

18. HOVERING DRAGONFLY. An action shot best in profile. Wings will be fuzzy. Try to freeze abdomen, thorax and head.

19. DRAGONFLY CAUGHT IN SPIDER WEB. This is a tough one to get. You have to be on the spot when it happens. If spider is resident it will very quickly attack the dragonfly and roll it up in silk.

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Recommended Books on Dragonflies and Damselflies

Stokes Beginner's Guide to Dragonflies, Blair Nikula, Jackie Sones, Lillian Stokes, Little Brown & Co., 2002

Dragonflies through Binoculars, Sidney Dunkle, Oxford University Press, 2000

A Field Guide to the Dragonflies and Damselflies of Massachusetts, Blair Nikula, Jennifer L. Loose, Matthew R. Burne, Mass Div. of Fisheries and Wildlife Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program, 2003

Damselflies of the Northeast, Ed Lam, Biodiversity Books, 2004