

Hamilton Odonate Count III: Zebras and Spatterdocks

by Carl Rothfels

croaky call. Then they all flew to the roost together but one adult returned to take refuge under the eaves where it was dry.

We hadn't seen them for about two weeks when on July 25 we were awakened by a tapping on the window, and we awoke to see two round heads peering in at us. Again they congregated under the eaves but only four were present. The owlets had changed in appearance in that time as there was almost no down showing and the barring on the breast was more distinct. Their flight was much swifter and smoother. On this day they roosted in the clump maple in our yard which was much more open. The following day all four owls roosted under the eaves all day. We no longer see them regularly, but they are still in our neighbourhood. It has been a delightful experience to observe them so closely. 🐦

The 3rd Annual Hamilton Odonate Count took place under unsettled conditions and high winds on July 9, 2006. We had six teams in the field in the morning, and four in the afternoon, for a combined total of approximately 35 party-hours. As in past years, we used the 15-mile diameter circle, first developed for the Hamilton Butterfly Count, centred on the hamlet of Kirkwall in Flamborough.

My reports on the two previous Hamilton Odonate Counts were so glowing that I find myself in an awkward position: if I'm as enthusiastic about this count, I'm going to appear disingenuous. But there's no way around it. I was shocked by how well we did on the first count, shocked by how well we did on the second count, and I'm even more shocked by how well we did this year. At some point our luck will break (it'll have to break soon at this rate), but it held for this year.

My "dream goal" was to tally 60 species, which would have been the provincial record, well beyond our previous high of 52 species, and beating Algonquin's all-time record of 59. Who ever would have predicted that Hamilton could rival Algonquin, Ontario's ruling odonate hotspot? Yet despite high winds, mediocre weather, and a World Cup final that took away half the counters (what was that World Cup doing, scheduling its final game for the same day as the odonate count??), we not only reached the 60

species mark, but exceeded it: our final tally was a whopping 62 species identified, plus at least one additional species seen but not identified (not to be outdone, the Algonquin count also tallied 62 species this year, so we're tied for the record!).

Highlights:

Despite the record-low numbers of individual odonates seen (for which the wind was likely to blame) we added a shocking 12 new species to the count, bringing the cumulative species total for our count to 70.

Five of those species, while exciting, were expected on the count as some point:

- *Lestes congener* (Spotted Spreadwing) is a late summer species that is uncommon in our area. When it occurs, however, it can be locally abundant, as it was this year. Due presumably to our hot summer, scads of this small spreadwing had already emerged in some of the ponds in southern Wellington County.
- *Enallagma antennatum* (Rainbow Bluet) is also uncommon in our area. During explorations earlier in the summer I found a population on Aberfoyle Creek, so it was an easy addition to the count.
- *Enallagma cyathigerum/vernale* (Northern/Vernal Bluet) are virtually impossible to differentiate without a microscope. Both are most common early in the season, and are fairly widespread, but rarely occur in large populations.

- *Enallagma traviatum* (Slender Bluet) is an extremely rare species that was a huge surprise when I found it earlier in the year at the Puslinch Tract; this is the most northerly known record of this attractive little damselfly. Having found them earlier meant that I was less surprised to find them there again, but excited that they appear to have a population in the Puslinch Tract, rather than just a random waif.
- *Pantala hymenaea* (Spot-winged Glider) is an irruptive species, like its cousin the Wandering Glider. Some years they are around, some years they aren't. We got lucky this year with Richard Aaron's well-placed out-of-nowhere behind-the-head net swing during lunch. That Spot-winged Glider gets the prize for the most-photographed odonate of the count!

Then there were four species which had not been recorded for the area of the count circle before, and are regionally rare, so exciting (but not entirely shocking). On any other count, any of these four could have been the count highlight:

- *Argia tibialis* (Blue-tipped Dancer) is a southern species, for which I know of only one other HSA population, on the Welland River at the extreme southwestern corner of Hamilton. Gord Lewer and the Notleys found two of them on Spencer Creek at Hwy. 5.
- *Gomphus exilis* (Lancet Clubtail) is probably the most common clubtail in Ontario, but is the rarest member of its group (which includes the Ashy Clubtail and Dusky Clubtail) locally. Chris Earley saw two of them in the Shade's Mill Conservation Area, but didn't catch one, so then went through paroxysms of self-doubt as to his identification. I went back to

the site later in July and grabbed one to confirm the record (and to add a new species to my HSA ode list...)

- *Enallagma vesperum* (Vesper Bluet)—Jen Sylvester gets hardcore points for being the only counter who went back into the circle in the evening to try and find this regionally rare species, which flies only at dusk. Her efforts were rewarded with two of them on the east end of Valen's reservoir, for a second Hamilton record.
- *Leucorrhinia frigida* (Frosted Whiteface) was new for the Hamilton Study Area; we found it at two sites. This small whiteface has been recorded near the HSA prior to the count, but never within. It still hasn't been recorded for Hamilton or Halton Regions (count records were both from the south edge of Wellington).

Finally, there were three "mind-blowing" species, critters that I never would have expected on the count:

- Probably the most surprising was the *Stylurus scudderii* (Zebra Clubtail) that Glenn and Kim Barrett found emerging from its larval skin at Shade's Mill. They secured some excellent photos, but it flew off before the rest of their group could join them. So not only did they see the adult, but they confirmed breeding, too. This is a "northern" clubtail of cold-water streams, and is hard to find anywhere, let alone in the Hamilton area! With the exception of one record from Norfolk County, Shade's Mill is by far the southerly-most recent Ontario record (there are two historic records from northern Peel Region and one historic record from Toronto, according to the Ontario Odonata Atlas).
- Also a significant range extension (but to the north rather than to the south) was the population of *Argia*

translata (Dusky Dancer) from the quarry in the Fletcher Creek Ecological Preserve. Alina Barnett, one of the HNC's Junior Naturalists, nearly gave me a heart attack by bringing me the first one: "What species is this?" she said. Crazy. Nice spotting, Alina! The only other record out of extreme southwestern Ontario is a population on the Grand River near Caledonia.

- And the rarest species of the day was the *Aeshna mutata* (Spatterdock Darner) that Paul Philp and myself saw patrolling around a pond in southern Wellington County. There are only six locations in Ontario where this beautiful spring-flying darner has ever been seen (Oldham in press; pers. obs. 2006), and almost all of them are coastal marshes in Lake Erie (two on Pelee Island; one on Point Pelee; one at Long Point). There is, however, one historic record from Brant County, and a recent one from Puslinch Lake, so our record, while the northern- and eastern-most for Ontario, is not that far beyond the known range.

Discussion:

We got lucky on many other rare species, recording only single Elegant Spreadwings, Delta-spotted Spiketails, and Racquet-tailed Emeralds, for example, which is a testament to the importance of having as many groups in the field as possible. And not all species cooperated. Our biggest miss was Unicorn Clubtail, one of the Hamilton Study Area's specialties. We covered the appropriate habitats, so I'm not sure why this species eluded us. Also conspicuously absent were any of the later-flying darners (*Aeshna* sp.). Given the summer we've had, I was fully expecting to see several species of darner on this

count, but the only Aeshna seen (aside from the Spatterdock, which is an entirely different beastie) were too far away to identify.

In general, in fact, numbers of individual odonates were substantially down from earlier years, mostly due to the wind. In some cases, however, this was because we didn't manage to

cover all the key areas in the circle. In particular we didn't get to the Puslinch Bog (where we would have seen a good population of Common Spreadwings and some Hagen's Bluets, among other things), nor did we visit Shade's Mill reservoir in the late afternoon, when we could have seen hundreds of Orange Bluets, conditions permitting. Then main

exceptions to this downward trend in individual numbers were river species like Ebony Jewelwing and Stream Bluet, due most likely to the increased number of observers we had to hike down stretches of stream. Thanks again to all the participants who came out and made this count possible, and especially to our group leaders (in bold below), who are so vital to a count like this. Final thanks to Jerry Bloom for once again volunteering his backyard and a few refreshments for the count compilation. That's a great way to end a count!

Participants:

Richard Aaron, Alina Barnett, Glen Barnett, Glenn Barrett, Kim Barrett, Tracey Boyd, Dave Brewer, Bob Curry, Chris Earley, Susan Doka, Marion Fletcher, Dianne Green, Vinemt Healy, Gordon Lewer, Jennifer Lobo, Matt McCoy, Janet Nelson, Evan Notley, Louise Notley, Tim Pascoe, Paul Philp, Carl Rothfels, Eva Shorer, Joanne Staton, Jess Staton, Lisa Staton, Sarah Staton, Shawn Staton, Tom Staton, Jennifer Sylvester, Dalia Tunaitis, Brian Wylie.

References:

Oldham, M. In press. Spatterdock Darner (*Rhionaeshna mutata*) in Ontario. Ontario Odonata. Ontario Odonata Atlas. 2005. Natural Heritage Information Centre, Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources. <http://www.mnr.gov.on.ca/MNR/nhic/odonates/ohs.html> (updated 15-02-2005).



Above: Lilypad Clubtail
Below: Spotwinged Glider
Photos: Chris Earley

