

BOREAL BITS

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DRAGONS THAT FLY

*'I was born to catch dragons in their dens,
And pick flowers,
To tell tales and laugh away the morning,
To drift and dream like a lazy stream,
And walk barefoot across sunshine days.'* James Kavanaugh

Anyone visiting or resident in the area knows that this is a good year for mosquitoes if we consider the mosquitoes view point. Add to that no-see-ums whose bite is as painful as that as a horsefly, along with blackflies and sometimes it's just not a safe place for soft-skinned humans to be. Nor it is safe or comfortable for furred residents. A deer and her fawn wandered into our yard and spent more time scratching and twitching than they did grazing. The fawn actually leaped into the air a few times in a desperate attempt to flee the misery that was being inflicted upon it by biting insects. We commiserated with the unfortunate little creature.

Those of us who enjoy getting outdoors in bug weather learn to put up with them; the alternative is to remain indoors and we are forced to do that more than enough during other seasons. The secret is DEET, the chemical that confuses biters so much

they don't really know how to handle the situation. I have tried other insect repellents but for my money and comfort, there's nothing like DEET. In fact a report in the New England Journal of Medicine concluded that, 'Currently available non-DEET repellents do not provide protection for durations similar to those of DEET-based repellents and cannot be relied on to provide prolonged protection in environments where mosquito-borne diseases are a substantial threat.'



Photo P. Burke

Those among us who abhor applying chemicals to our bodies, might consider some of nature's true alternatives: nighthawks, bats and dragonflies. It is the latter that have provided me with a personal bodyguard as I trooped through mosquito-infested forest paths. In fact, in one instance the dragonfly used my shoulder as a perch, ever on the watch for mosquitoes that I scared up along the trail. That particular insect stayed with me for ten minutes, zipping off now and again for a mosquito snack, but always returning to its shoulder perch.

Dragonflies are popular in our neck of the woods simply because they are confirmed insectivores. Using their legs like a basket they capture mosquitoes and black flies and munch on them while in flight. They will also take butterflies, moths, caterpillars, grasshoppers; in fact, no insect is safe. Another walk through a mosquito-infested section of bush took me to a lakeshore where a hoard of mosquitoes decided I was fair game. Some sought those few square centimetres of flesh not protected by insect repellent and the rest flew around me in a cloud. Then help arrived in the form of two dragonflies. One snatched a mosquito off my arm as I watched and the other buzzed the cloud. Most of the mosquitoes departed but my friendly escort remained with me for a few minutes longer.

During the second week in June I drove to a lake north of town with the intent of circumnavigating it for the first time in many years. As I parked the car and removed the canoe, I noticed a swarm of a few hundred dragonflies plying the air at treetop level. "Good," I thought. As with all my canoe trips, I stick as close to the shore as possible because this is where the action is. A rock emerging from the water was covered with forty dragonfly nymphs. Also on that rock were two dull, tan coloured dragonflies that had just completed their final molt. Their wings were still folded in little packages on their shoulders.



(P. Burke)

From then on I was attuned to the dragonfly molt and saw literally thousands of the ugly little nymphs pulling themselves onto dry land (or weeds, or grass, or trees) to effect the final molt. Once free of the water, they lock their feet on an object, then bend, twist and hunch over until the skin splits just behind their heads. The adult insects emerge after what must be a very exhausting struggle lasting a few minutes to ten or more. Then they sit, waiting until the sun and the wind dry their wings. Finally they fly off to join their comrades in the never-ending search for insects. The dragonfly nymph is a miracle worker because it can pack an adult insect into its wingless body. The adult emerges three times longer than the nymph and sports a beautiful set of wings.

These dragonflies began life a year ago when eggs were deposited on the surface of the water, or into slits cut into the stalks of aquatic weeds. After a few days a nymph hatches that is so voracious that it is nicknamed the tiger of the pond. The more it eats the more it grows, and the more it grows the more it molts. The larger it gets, the larger the prey it seeks. Tadpoles, fish fry and minnows often fall prey to this predator along with countless mosquito larvae and other aquatic insects. It overwinters in the pond litter and on a fine day in late spring, an alarm clock goes off telling the nymph it is time.

It was my fortune to arrive at this lake just as the alarm clock sounded.

