

Dragonflies have been the subject of many tales and myths
By: Corine Burgess

Many tales and myths have been imparted over the years about dragonflies. In fact, these magnificent insects derived their name from the mythical dragon. Native Americans believed that the dragonfly was, in fact, a dragon that was tricked by a coyote to shape-shift into its present form of an insect. Once the dragon took the form of a dragonfly, it couldn't shift back. Then and now the dragonfly represents swiftness, illusion and change.

Dragonflies are of the order *Odonata*, and are not flies at all. Worldwide, there are about 5,000 species of *Odonata*, which also includes damselflies. In the United States alone, there are approximately 400 species.

Female dragonflies lay eggs in or near lakes, streams, ponds or other wetlands. The nymphs that hatch from the eggs feed and grow underwater. These nymphs are predators and eat tadpoles, snails and insects while in this stage. They have a special appendage on their head that they use as a spear to catch prey. They are predatory insects from birth. The gills of the nymphs are located inside the abdomen. The tiny creature will expand and contract its abdomen to move water over its gills and squeeze the water out rapidly for movement.

The majority of the dragonfly's life is spent in the larval stage in the water. It will molt many times during this time and development varies depending on altitude and latitude. This stage can be from one to six years. They are not born with wings but develop them throughout the metamorphosis process. Once the larva has completed its growth and development stage, it will leave its aquatic environment and start a brand new life as a dragonfly.

Once the dragonfly reaches adulthood, it only lives for a few weeks in which time it must mate and reproduce. Male dragonflies are very territorial. Usually when you see dragonflies chasing each other it is one male protecting his area from another. However, when you see two dragonflies flying while attached, you can be fairly certain they are mating.

Dragonflies are extremely swift in their flight, reaching speeds of up to 30 - 35 miles per hour. They flap their wings at about 30 beats per second compared to a bee's 300. Since they have two sets of wings, they can flap without being in unison as other types of insects do. Their back wings can be moving one way and the front another direction. The wings are mostly transparent and move very fast, so it often appears that they have more than two pairs. The front wings of the dragonfly are slightly longer than the rear wings. This helps with both speed and maneuverability. They are extremely strong fliers and can hover, fly backwards, sideways and even loop around.

Dragonflies have very large, compound eyes. They are multifaceted and they can see nearly 360 degrees around. It is said that dragonfly eyes contain up to 30,000 individual lenses. Human eyes only have one. Even though most of the insect's brain is devoted to sight, they don't see detail well but are attracted to movement. However, they do have a special area, directly in front of their compound eyes, that is flat and is concentrated with eye cells, which allows them to pinpoint insects as they fly.

Even though dragonflies have six legs, they cannot walk very well. They are built for flying and grab insects out of the air and eat them while in flight. They are carnivorous their entire lives and have a voracious appetite in every stage. Nymphs can actually propel through the water via an opening in their body that ejects water acting as a thrust mechanism. As adults, dragonflies can eat their own weight in insects in less than an hour. This ravenous appetite keeps mosquitoes, which are their main food source, and other insect pest populations in check.

Dragonfly trivia:

- Though many people fear them, dragonflies cause no harm to humans.
- Dragonflies will sometimes travel in swarms, which may be related to weather changes such as the passage of cold fronts.
- The largest dragonfly fossil had a wingspan of nearly three feet. That makes it the largest flying insect in known history.
- Today, the largest dragonfly is found in Costa Rica. It has a wingspan of 7 1/2 inches.
- Dragonflies have been seen as evil in many cultures. The nickname “devil’s darning needle” came from the myth that dragonflies would seek out bad children and sew their mouths shut while they slept.
- The nickname “snake doctor” came from the myth that dragonflies would follow snakes and either sew them together if they were injured, or bring them back to life.
- Dragonflies once served as an omen for fishermen. Wherever it hovered, there were plenty of fish to be caught, or if it hovered over the fisherman it was thought to bring good luck.
- The dragonfly has been seen in many pagan cultures as having magical attributes, and it has a similar meaning to the butterfly. Many believe that dragonflies can travel between dimensions, and are messengers of dreams and illusions.
- Historically, dragonfly symbolism was used in love spells and to bring good luck. Today, it is more commonly used to help one let go of the past, assist in transforming one’s life and understanding dreams.