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There are over 5,000 species of dragonflies (and damselflies) living all across the globe, and they can be found on every continent except Antarctica. In North America alone, there are 462 species, while Canada supports 214 varieties of these fascinating insects. They belong to the scientific order classification called *odonata*, with fossils dating back over 250 million years, long before dinosaurs appeared.

Dragonflies come in many beautiful colors, some subtle, some bold, and also a diverse range of sizes. In fact, there is one South American species with a 7-inch wingspan. They are relatively heavy-bodied up front with what appears to be a long, slender “tail” behind – this is actually their abdomen. Unlike most other kinds of flying insects, dragonflies have *two pairs* of transparent wings with many intersecting veins, reminiscent of stained glass windows. While they don’t sting (and rarely bite people), all dragonflies are predatory. They eat pests like mosquitoes, gnats and flies. Characteristic of dragonflies is a large head with two, huge *compound eyes*, which are made up of thousands of tiny eyes. This allows them to see in all directions. The same motion-sensitive vision that contributes to their hunting prowess also helps them avoid being eaten by birds, fish, frogs and other dragonflies. Dragonflies can fly forward remarkably fast – about 100 body-lengths per second – and, like hummingbirds, they can hover in place and even fly backwards. Such mastery of flight enables them to overtake and grasp their prey, essentially trapping the victim in a “basket” formed with their spiny legs. It is then immobilized with a bite from an extendible jaw and often eaten while the dragonfly is still on the wing.

After mating, female dragonflies lay their eggs in or near the water. The eggs hatch into *nymphs* that look nothing like adult dragonflies. However, like their parents, they are voracious predators and devour mosquito larvae, tadpoles and small fish. Like something from an alien movie, nymphs have an extendable lower lip tipped with thorns. They thrust this deadly extension with lightning speed to seize prey. Dragonflies will spend most of their lives underwater as nymphs, where they will molt several times over the typical course of 1-2 years, but sometimes taking as many as 6 years, before emerging onto land. There, they will molt one last time into an adult with functioning wings. Unlike butterflies, their metamorphosis is a gradual process, with each successive molt bringing them a step closer to adulthood. Ironically, once mature and able to fly, they’ll only live for a month or so, procreating before they perish.

Here are a few more fun facts about dragonflies:

- Some prehistoric dragonfly relatives had a wingspan of 30 inches!
- Dragonflies warm themselves in the morning sun before taking off to spend the day on the wing.
- Male dragonflies are very territorial. They will chase off rivals and occasionally other insects.
- As they require clean, oxygenated water, the presence of certain species of dragonflies is used by experts as an indication of a quality ecosystem.
- In Japan, dragonflies symbolize happiness, courage and power. To some Native American tribes, they are signs of speed and purity – purity, because dragonflies “eat from the wind.”

If you have dragonflies hovering around you, don’t be scared, be grateful. Think of them as your personal body guards, actively picking off gnats and mosquitoes that would otherwise be biting you!

Margie is a self-proclaimed nature nerd with a passion for all things finned, furred and feathered...even the creepy-crawly-scaly kinds. She’s summered on Wolfe Lake since childhood and loves sharing what she learns about our wild things.