

Damsels at dawn.

by John Bulpitt FRPS

Dragonflies and damselflies are my favourite insects. There is something distinctly primeval about them. Fossil evidence shows that they were around 300 million years ago albeit about 5 times the size of the largest dragonfly living today. However, these beautiful creatures pose a special challenge for photographers. In flight they are technically the most difficult subject that I have tackled. Even at rest they are easily disturbed and the background is often unsuitable for good photography. However, photographing them at dawn gets around some of these problems and close-ups of them covered in dew can be very attractive.

In the UK the first species emerge at the end of April and the late-emerging varieties can still be on the wing at the end of October. However for dawn photography I find the period mid-May to mid-July the best. The weather is all important. Ideally you need a warm day followed by a clear night (so that the temperature drop is significant) and a still morning. I find the Met Office forecast on the

internet, which gives a forecast for each three hour period for the next 24 hours, very reliable, especially if you plug in the appropriate post code.

As for equipment, good waterproofs and a tripod with cable release are a must. I have Canon gear and use a 50D body for this type of work, because of the 1.6 crop factor. Normally I attach a macro lens though occasionally I switch to a 300 IS f4 usually with an extension tube to reduce the minimum focusing distance. Until last year I had a Tamron 90 macro but when this bit the dust I bought a Sigma 180, encouraged by an article in the Spring 2008 Iris "Size does matter" by Tony Wharton FRPS. If I want to get in really close, I couple my 1.4 converter to the Sigma by using an extension tube.

When you find a suitable subject at dawn it is easy to garden around the subject to eliminate background distractions. As insects are comatose at this time of the morning it is possible to move them, but



Newly emerged Common Darter



Immature Blue Damselfly



Azure Damselflies



Azure Damselfly

in practice one ends up shaking off a lot of dew. For this reason be careful about gardening and placing the tripod, particularly if you are as clumsy as me.

Even on a very still morning there is some periodic movement in the vegetation which is why you should use a cable release rather than rely on the 2 second timer. Shutter speeds can be very low at dawn. I work on aperture priority at between f8 and f16 depending on how close I want to get to the subject, and prefer to avoid anything higher than ISO 400. This can result in a shutter speed as slow as 0.5 seconds.

You need to work quickly at dawn. Within an hour or so the insects are drying out and the effect is lost. Of course one can get up early every morning but in the interests of marital harmony my excursions are limited to about once a fortnight. But of course there are plenty of other subjects to photograph after sunrise such as newly emerged dragons and damsels, and on my last trip mating Cinnabar moths which I had never seen before.



Immature Azure Damselfly on Water Peppermint



Red-eyed Damselfly