

# Making Ripples: Dashing Dragonflies

by Amanda Bancroft

To come upon a beautiful mystery is to desire to solve it and retain romantic ignorance at the same time. Dragonflies are a bit like real dragons in that the myth is more fun than the truth – we can imagine anything about dragonflies as long as we haven't learned about them yet. Delightfully, the Blue Dasher dragonfly turns out to be dashing in both senses of the word!

Blue Dashers (*Pachydiplax longipennis*), also called Blue Pirates, are skimmers named for their long wings. They have four strong wings that enable them to dash about, and six legs. Dragonflies are extremely good fliers, as they must evade predators and catch prey simultaneously. They can fly forwards at speeds of up to 60 mph, making them the fastest insects on earth. These expert pilots may also fly backwards and hover, or change direction rapidly while they dart across a sea of grass or above the surface of a pond. To catch prey, they wait motionless on a perch until an insect comes into range, then dash out and ambush it. They hunt mosquitoes, something we can thank them for, as well as tadpoles and even small fish when they are in the nymph stage.

Dragonflies go through three stages in the life cycle: egg, nymph, and adult. You may have seen mating dragonflies form a heart-shaped circle once they join together. After mating, the female lays anywhere from 300 – 700 eggs in water, where they hatch into nymphs. The nymphs are fully aquatic with gills for breathing and locomotion. After many months to sometimes several years, they emerge from the water and molt into their adult forms. At full size, they're about an inch to an inch and a half long. Adults roost like chickens at night, usually in trees.

Males and females don't look the same, but if you see an adult male, it's probably going to be one of the most breathtaking creatures you can see in nature. His long abdomen is an unreal shade of sky blue with a black tip. We needn't fear that abdomen, however; there is no stinger, as dragonflies won't sting or harm us. The large, round aquamarine eyes are a color scarcely found in nature, except perhaps along some beaches. Viewed from the front, their face roughly resembles the old cartoon character Felix the Cat. As they age, males and females take on an appearance that's called chalky or "frosted."

It seems there will always be some things we don't know. For instance, science isn't really sure about the meaning behind the so-called "obelisk posture," in which the abdomen is raised upright vertically. Is this a threat display, or just a response to the heat? We'll know someday. For now, we can imagine!

Amanda Bancroft is a writer, artist, and naturalist living in an off-grid tiny house on Kessler Mountain. She and her husband Ryan blog about their adventures and offer tips to those wanting to make a difference at [www.RipplesBlog.org](http://www.RipplesBlog.org).