

Dragons and Damsels



Adult dragonfly (above), aquatic nymph (below).

Adult damselflies (above), aquatic nymph (below).



Over 100 species of dragonflies and damselflies call the Waterloo Recreation Area home. All begin their lives as aquatic nymphs (larvae), inhabiting area lakes and streams, where they are an important part of the food chain. Most species spend two to three years as nymphs before becoming adults. The adults live from a few weeks to a few months, feeding, mating, and laying eggs in the water before succumbing to predators or cold weather.

Dragons and damsels both belong to the order Odonata, but have distinct differences. Dragonflies are strongly built, rapid fliers that hold their wings flat when perched. Damselflies are more slightly build, weak fliers. Most hold their wings over their

backs when perched. As adults, both are predators of other insects. The dragonflies are also called mosquito hawks as they will gorge on mosquitos when they are abundant. A single dragonfly can eat its own weight in insects in 30 minutes.

As nymphs, dragon and damselflies eat mosquito larvae, other aquatic insects, worms and even an occasional tadpole or small fish.

Once they reach full size, they crawl out of the water onto emerging vegetation, molt (shed their exoskeletons) and emerge as flying adults. Their empty exoskeletons can be found clinging to emerging plants and objects along lake shores in May and June.