

# Dragonflies of the Ottawa-Gatineau Region

Article and photos by Chris Traynor

## Species Profile 5

### The Calico Pennant (*Celithemis elisa*)

Family: Libellulidae



*A male Calico Pennant in the obelisk position.*

On a lovely summer's day in 2012, I was exploring the Purdon Fen with my partner, Marie. We had gone there for the annual display of the Showy Lady Slipper orchid. After viewing the orchids, we wandered around the other trails until we found ourselves on the small boardwalk that juts out into small Purdon Lake. While scanning over the reeds and cattails, I noticed a brightly coloured dragonfly only a few feet away from me. I was very surprised, as I had never seen such a dragonfly before. To this day I've never forgotten the moment.

## ID Hints

- A small, reddish dragonfly with a boldly marked abdomen.
  - In females, a yellow abdomen with large yellow dorsal markings.
  - In males, large red markings, somewhat heart shaped.
- Large spots on both wings
- Large patches on the hindwing

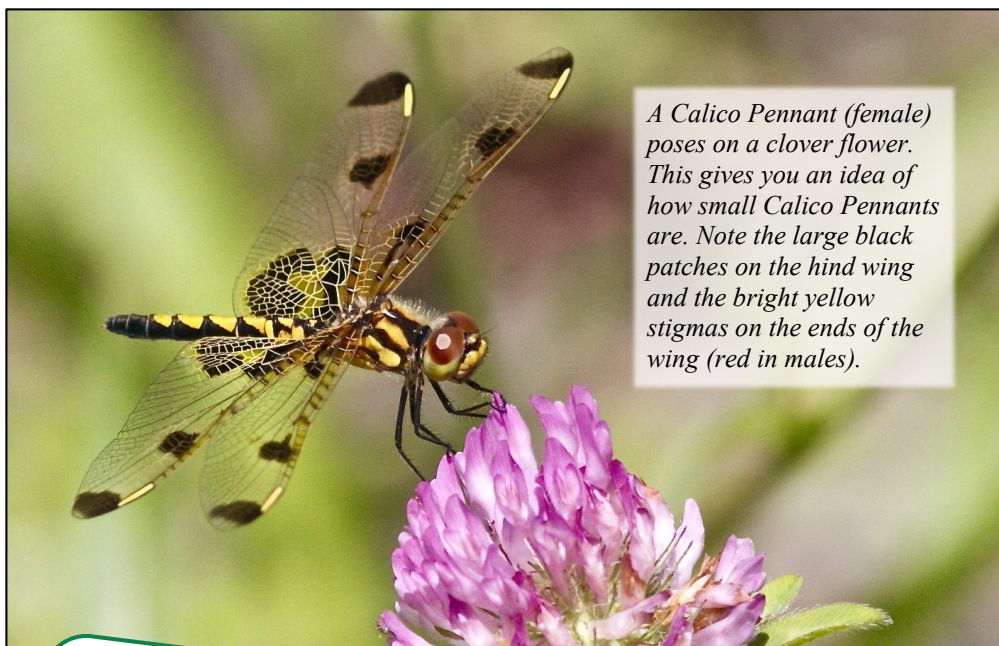
Like most people who spend time outdoors, I had seen my share of dragonflies over the years. Who hasn't had one land on their leg at a beach, or perch on the side of their house? However, in 2012, I'd really had only two templates for dragonflies: large ones and small ones. The small ones were all damselflies to me, and that is about as far as my interest took me at the time. As surprised as I was to see this bright marvel, I did have the presence of mind to take a few photos. Later, when I uploaded the photos to my computer, I found the contrasting reds and blacks of this dragonfly quite striking. Something clicked! This was my "spark" species. We often hear how a certain bird, often a chickadee alighting on a child's hand, will spark a lifelong interest in birds. This was such a moment for me.

After uploading the photo to my Facebook page, one of my friends, knowledgeable with odonates, identified it for me as a Calico Pennant.

*This is my first ever photograph of a dragonfly, taken on June 23, 2012.  
This bright fellow sent me on my journey of discovery.*



The Calico Pennant is a member of the skimmer family of dragonflies, the Libellulidae. This is the largest family of dragonflies in the world, and its members are amongst the most common and easily found of our dragonflies. Though Calico Pennants share with these other skimmers the habit of sitting at the tops of stems, twigs, reeds, etc., they can often be found doing so in strong winds, fluttering... like pennants. They are somewhat sensitive to approach and have a habit of holding their wings in such a fashion as to make photographing them somewhat difficult, but they are worth the effort. They are fine photographic subjects.



*A Calico Pennant (female) poses on a clover flower. This gives you an idea of how small Calico Pennants are. Note the large black patches on the hind wing and the bright yellow stigmas on the ends of the wing (red in males).*

### **When and Where to Look for Calico Pennants**

The Calico Pennant emerges in late May and early June here in the Ottawa-Gatineau area and is most easily found in late June. They do continue to fly in July and August. I had one a few years ago on the 20th of September, which seemed very late to me but, there is still much we don't know about the flight seasons of many of our odonates.

Though often present in good numbers when you find them, the Calico Pennant is by no means a common dragonfly in our region and can be a very tough find close to the city. The Bill Mason Outdoor Education Centre is probably the easiest place to see this species. They can also be found in the wetlands of the Marlborough Forest area and further afield at Burnt Lands Provincial Park. Calicos do not compete well with other dragonflies, so you are more likely to find them in places that do not have many larger dragonfly species present.



## Possible Confusable – The Halloween Pennant



← **Male  
Halloween  
Pennant.**

*Note the overall orangey tones and the wing bands that extend from the leading edge of the wing to the trailing edge.*

While there is no shortage of small, reddish dragonflies (small meadowhawks come to mind), there really is only one confusable in our region: the Halloween Pennant. Both species belong to the same genus, *Celithemis*, and both share the habit of sitting at the top of tall vegetation. When doing so they often hold their wings high up from the body. Most skimmers hold their wings flat.

The Halloween Pennant is the larger and more easily found of the two. They are reasonably common in wetlands along the Ottawa River and appear to be expanding into other locations in our region.

They do not have the large patches on their hind wings like Calicos do, and Halloween Pennants have banded rather than spotted wings. Halloween Pennants fly in a manner similar to butterflies, with a slowish, floppy style. Both species are very wind tolerant, more so than most other species of dragonfly. Halloween Pennants, in particular, seem very fond of a stiff breeze.

**Female  
Halloween  
Pennant. →**

*Note the yellow abdominal markings (red in males) and the raised wings.*

