

# Dragonflies of the Ottawa-Gatineau Region

Article and photos by Chris Traynor

## Species Profile 6

### The Common Green Darner (*Anax junius*)

Family: Aeshnidae



*Adult male Common Green Darner.*

On a warm spring day, when the last of the winter's ice is still clinging to the shores of our local wetlands, you may notice a large dragonfly over the water. It may seem too early in the year for dragonflies, but the Common Green Darner, despite the name, is no ordinary dragonfly and is probably the most studied of all odonate species in North America.



*Common Green Darners in a mating wheel amongst the Viper's Bugloss. Note the bright blue abdomen of the male.*

*Anax junius* is a striking dragonfly. The female sports a bright green thorax (both the male and female thorax are unmarked) and a pinkish red abdomen. As colourful as she is, the adult male is even more brightly coloured. He has a bright green thorax and a bright blue abdomen. A single specimen can show hues of blue, pink, red, green, yellow, white, brown and black. That's a lot of colour for one dragonfly, but you may need a close view to see all these colours. And this is easier said than done, as the adult Common Green Darner can be a hard dragonfly to approach closely. They are, in fact, notorious for being difficult to find perched.

*A young, freshly emerged male Green Darner, hanging or in the Holy Rood posture. They are very similar to females, but you can see a small point or tip to the end of their appendages if you examine them closely.*



This is a truly migratory species here in the Ottawa-Gatineau Region. These early migrants (generally in mid-May but sometimes earlier) will have come up on southerly winds from the United States. They are often followed by migrating American Kestrels which take advantage of this plentiful protein to be found on the wing.

Having emerged in the warmer waters down south, these early arrivals will spend their relatively short lives eating and mating and setting the stage for their progeny to migrate south in the fall, again to be followed by migrating kestrels. However, the study of migratory patterns in odonates is still in its infancy and there is wide speculation that a percentage of the population is also non-migratory and are true residents of our region.

### ID Hints

- Bulky with a solid green thorax
- Huge eyes, head almost as wide as thorax
- Males have a bright blue abdomen
- Females and young males have reddish abdomens
- Large bull's eye pattern between the eyes

↓ A female; note her relatively slender abdomen compared to the young male. Most female odonates have thicker abdomens than males of the same species.  
Photo courtesy of Lev Turnbull.



### When and Where to Look for Common Green Darners

There is no other odonate in our region that can be seen in every month from May to October, but the best time to observe them is probably in September when large numbers emerge. At such times they can be abundant. Grassy meadows adjacent to wetlands can hold large numbers of newly emerged Green Darners. At this time and with patience they can be approached, as their wings are not yet hardened and they are reluctant to take flight. The Bill Mason Outdoor Education Centre is an excellent spot to observe this emergence. As well, the various shoreline vegetation along the Ottawa River can also be productive.

## Possible Confusables

There is really only one legitimate confusable in our region, the Eastern Pondhawk. For a brief period the young male sports a green thorax and a blue abdomen before maturing into an all blue colour.



← *A young male Eastern Pondhawk. Though he has a green thorax and blue abdomen, note the abdomen is solid blue and not dark reddish brown down the middle like it is in the Green Darner. Eventually, this male will turn blue on the thorax as well.*

The female, with her green thorax and a sometimes brownish abdomen, can also be mistaken for the Green Darner, but the resemblance is slight.

→ *A female Eastern Pondhawk, with her green thorax and brownish abdomen. Note the perching posture. This is rarely if ever seen in the Common Green Darner.*



Though superficially similar, pondhawks and darners differ in their behaviour. Pondhawks are more of a wait and pounce predator and spend most of their resting time on the ground or in the vegetation, where they tend to perch in a horizontal position. In contrast, the Common Green Darner is a more active hunter, spending more of its time in flight and taking its prey from the chase. As well, when at rest, it assumes a hanging position or what my partner, Marie, has aptly named the Holy Rood posture. Pondhawks do not perch in this manner.

There is one other possible confusable, but it has never been recorded in our region: the Comet Darner, *Anax longipes*. Comet Darners have been recorded in the Toronto area as well as just south of Montreal, so it is a possibility that we may see one in the Ottawa-Gatineau Region in the not too distant future. It looks much like the Common Green Darner, but it has a bright red abdomen.