

# Dragonflies of the Ottawa-Gatineau Region

Article and photos by Chris Traynor

## Species Profile 7

### The Slaty Skimmer (*Libellula incesta*)

Family: Libellulidae



*Male Slaty Skimmer (Libellula incesta). Photo by Marie Clausén.*

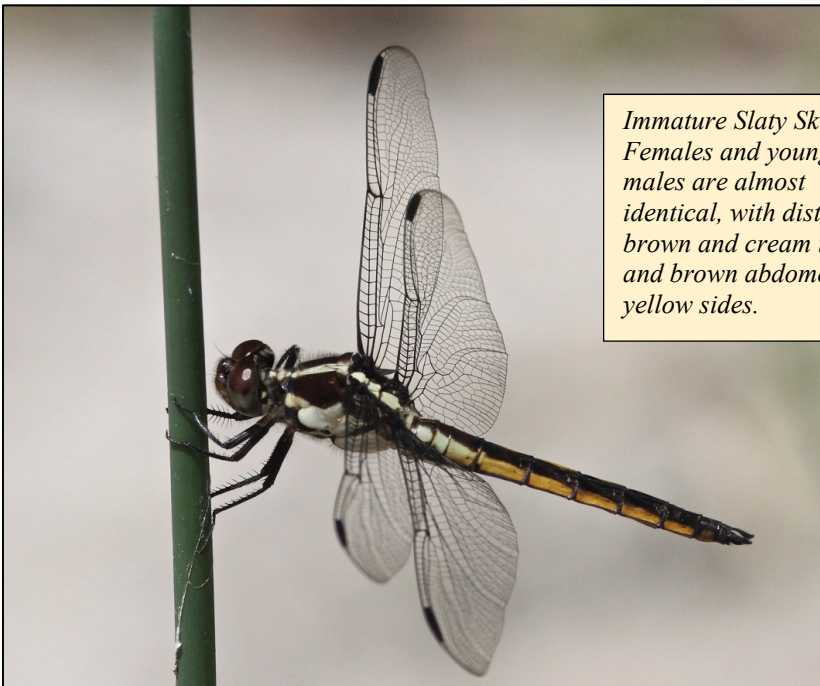
The Slaty Skimmer is one of the easier dragonflies to identify should you be fortunate enough to see one. Though often common in the right places, they are completely absent from other locations that may seem every bit as suitable. The mature male is almost unmistakable in his blue-black colour and unlike most of our large skimmers, the Slaty Skimmer has a very long abdomen. The colour, known as pruinosity, is a waxy substance that grows as the dragonfly matures. Many species become pruinose with age, but only the Slaty Skimmer becomes dark blue. In flight, they may appear to be a uniform black colour, and they can easily vanish from sight over dark water or in shade.

### ID Hints

- Very long abdomen, in males a dark blue/black
- Female: unique brown and cream thorax
- Immatures of both sexes have brown abdomens with yellow sides
- Black legs
- Dark face



↑ Male Slaty Skimmer; note the dark face, black legs, and solid blue body.



*Immature Slaty Skimmer. Females and young males are almost identical, with distinct brown and cream thorax and brown abdomen with yellow sides.*

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The female and immature males are very similar, so much so that it is hard to tell them apart in the field unless one gets a very close look at them. While I have seen a number of immature females over the years, the mature females (which can become dark blue as well) are very hard to find. In fact, the next one I see will be the first one!

Luckily for those of us who wish to both admire and photograph them, they are often faithful to a few select perches. From there, they will chase away any other dragonfly from their spot, including the much larger Dragonhunter.

Though the Slaty Skimmer is a fairly large dragonfly, they seem most often to hunt smaller prey, and they can take a heavy toll on the teneral young of many odonate species. Teneral is the term given to dragonflies that have just become capable of flight. They are quite delicate at this stage and their flight is very weak. As such, they make easy prey for predators. A few years back, I watched several Cedar Waxwings make short work of a huge number of young clubtails that were taking their first awkward flights. In the vegetation, taking its turn, was a Slaty Skimmer. Unlike the waxwings, he didn't miss and he was satiated in no time.



*Slaty Skimmers are perchers and sit-and-wait predators, often showing great fidelity to a favoured perch.*

In the years that I have been studying dragonflies, it has become very apparent to me how different each year can be from one year to the next, with some species being more vulnerable to seasonal variations in wind and rain than others.

The year 2017 was one such year for the Slaty Skimmer. For several weeks in June, we had a pattern of calm weather to start the day followed by wind and rain in the late morning. This weather would prove hazardous for Slaty Skimmers at one of my favourite sites. When Slaty Skimmer nymphs are ready to emerge, they will often do so in rather large numbers on the semi-submerged tree trunks and branches of fallen trees along the water's edge. These exposed perches are very susceptible to the weather. Many of the newly emerged young, waiting for their wings to harden, would have been washed away or, if they managed to survive that combination of weather, it was with damaged and



misformed wings that offered no chance of flight. I saw very few of them that summer and the branches and drowned limbs, normally festooned with the discarded exuviae of dragonflies, were very bare. I had to look very hard to find even one or two shed exuvia where normally I could find hundreds: a sad end for such beautiful creatures. Nature does rebound, though, and there seemed to be no lasting effect on the population the following summer.

### When and Where to Look for Slaty Skimmers

The Slaty Skimmer is a true summer dragonfly in our region. They usually start emerging in mid-June and are rarely seen after mid-August, though I did find an old tattered one that lingered into early September. Though not a common dragonfly, in the right habitat they can be abundant and may even be the most common dragonfly on the wing.

Slaty Skimmers are a little more specific in their habitat preferences than many other large skimmers. Liking lakes and the quiet bays of rivers, they find several lakes in Gatineau Park to their liking including Meech Lake, Lac des Fées and Lac Phillippe. On the Ontario side, Morris Island and Petrie Island are the best places to find this species.

### Possible Confusables



Initially, I was inclined to say that there are no possible confusables with the Slaty Skimmer. However, I recalled that a few years ago, a friend misidentified a male Eastern Pondhawk as a Slaty Skimmer, so it is possible to confuse the two species at a glance. The mature males of both species are completely blue, but the pondhawk is a light, powder blue colour and has a green face. In our region, there is nothing similar to the female Slaty Skimmer. She's unique.

← *Male Eastern Pondhawk; note the powder blue body and green face.*