

Dragonflies of the Ottawa-Gatineau Region

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Species Profile 8

The Cobra Clubtail (*Gomphus vastus*)

Family: Gomphidae



The Cobra Clubtail derives its common name from the wide abdominal club that somewhat resembles the hood of a cobra snake.

We are dipping back into the Gomphidae family again for this latest profile, the Cobra Clubtail, a mid-sized member of the family and certainly one of the finest representatives of the Gomphidae.

The Cobra Clubtail gets its common name from the widening on the last few segments of the abdomen. This is somewhat reminiscent of the hood of a cobra snake. The club is the widest of any clubtail you will find in the region, with its width equal to the width of the thorax. This club can be very striking, particularly in the male with its very thin abdomen.

Like many species of clubtail, the adult looks much different from the immature dragonfly. A bold, contrasting yellow and black teneral (immature) turns into a more subdued, light green and black adult. Though described in most field guides as having green eyes, I've found the mature adults in our region tend to have beautiful turquoise eyes.



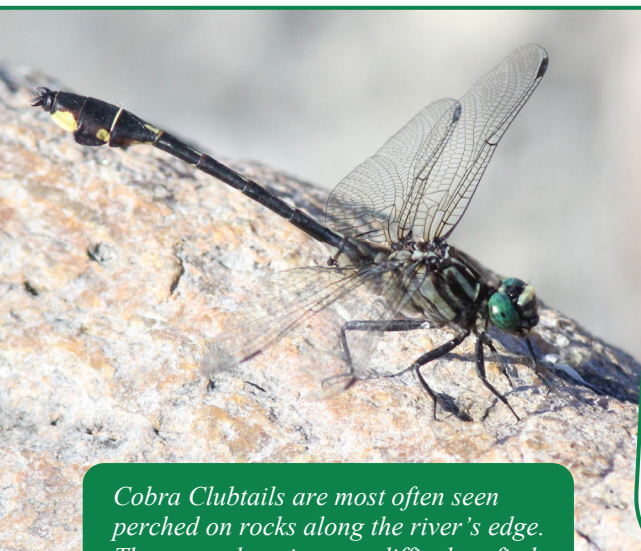
Young Cobra Clubtails are a very vibrant yellow colour with contrasting black markings. Note also the heavy black cross-stripes on the face.

The Cobra Clubtail is one of the “big river” clubtails and though they’re considered a very rare species, the Ottawa River is a provincial stronghold for them.

These dragonflies spend most of their day cruising low over large rivers and only coming to the shore to rest. I have found them on numerous occasions by using my binoculars to identify dragonflies that I see sitting on the ground or on rocks near the shore. They can often be difficult to approach, so binoculars do come in handy. While they appear to spend most of their time hunting insects over the water, they seem to prefer to predate the smaller damselflies when they do come to shore. The most common damselfly along the Ottawa River shoreline is the Powdered Dancer (*Argia moesta*), and I’ve noted the Cobra dining on them on numerous occasions. In fact, I don’t recall them catching anything else, though I’m sure they do.



A young female Cobra Clubtail. Note her very thick abdomen. The red arrow points to the Z-shaped dorsal markings on the top of the thorax that allow you to ID the Cobra Clubtail when you see its back.



Cobra Clubtails are most often seen perched on rocks along the river's edge. They are otherwise very difficult to find.

ID Hints

- Bold black cross-stripes on the face
- Two thin diagonal black stripes on the sides of the thorax
- Z-shaped dorsal markings on the thorax
- Largest flared club of any dragonfly in our region
- Lacks a yellow triangle on abdominal segment 8 (S-8)

When and Where to Look for Cobra Clubtails

Cobra Clubtails are true summer dragonflies. Sadly though, their summer is short. They start emerging in late June, and with some exceptions (I had a late one on August 1st one year), they are mostly gone by mid-July. However, some years the weather may cause a slight shift in this schedule, with some of them still emerging in July. This short flight season is such a shame, as it makes your window for finding this species somewhat limited. Traditionally, the best place to find a Cobra Clubtail is along the Ottawa River near the ferry dock at Fitzroy Harbour in late June.

They appear to emerge in the early morning, and by noon they are mostly to be found fluttering about when you inadvertently flush them as you walk. On a good day, you may encounter dozens of the fresh teneral in the shrubbery along the shoreline, though they can be very hard to see until they move, as they are much the same colour as the shoreline vegetation. They're somewhat fickle in emerging, however, as you can come a week early or a week late and completely miss this species. Just a bit west along the river, the Morris Island Conservation Area is also a good place to look. Searching the trees and shrubs that line the parking lot can prove fruitful. There are usually other interesting dragonflies in the parking area as well, so it's always worth a look.

Eastbound along the Ottawa River from Fitzroy Harbour, the next best habitat is the rocky shoreline along Sheila McKee Park (have a picnic on the rocky shore and you may well be rewarded), then Shirley's Bay (where they can be found on the causeway when it's accessible), and further east to Andrew Haydon Park and Britannia Pier. Keep in mind that the adult Cobra Clubtail is very rarely seen and it would be quite easy to miss this species in any given season.

Possible Confusables

There really is only one possible confusable in our region, the Midland Clubtail. Both species are very much alike and also share similar habitats (both are big river clubtails) and similar flight seasons, adding to the possibility of confusion. The Midland emerges a bit earlier in June, and they've pretty much vanished by mid-July. Most of my own records are from late June. Like the Cobra Clubtail, the Midland Clubtail can be found along the Ottawa River, and I have found this species from Petrie Island in the east to Morris Island in the West. Any appropriate river habitat in between could turn up this species. Their perch preference seems to be on the ground (including beach sand) rather than on rocks, but that is from my personal observations only.

The major differences between the two species are easily visible to the naked eye if a close view is allowed. The first difference is the face. The Cobra Clubtail has thick, black cross-stripes on the face. These lines stand out easily if you get a head-on look; any time I see a Midland or Cobra, I immediately try and see the face. If you have a dorsal view of the Cobra Clubtail, you will notice thick Z-shaped markings on the top of the thorax. (See bottom picture on page 153.)

Another noticeable feature is a distinctive yellow triangle on the 8th abdominal segment (known as S-8) of the Midland Clubtail. The Cobra Clubtail does not have this marking.



A Midland Clubtail. The red arrow points to the distinctive yellow triangle on the 8th abdominal segment, which is NOT present on the Cobra Clubtail.

Possible Confusables - continued

Other differences include the striping on the side of the thorax, but in the field this difference can be hard to make out. The Cobra has two thin black stripes that run diagonally across the thorax. In the Midland Clubtail, the anterior stripe is broken and appears often as only a 1/2 stripe. However, as we can see in the following photo, this is not always the case.



An adult Cobra Clubtail. Note the exceptional black 1/2 stripe on the thorax (red arrow); this stripe is usually complete in the Cobra Clubtail.

As well, though the Cobra Clubtail has a larger club than the Midland, the Midland's club is also large and the difference in size may not be too noticeable from certain angles.

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