

Dragonflies of the Ottawa-Gatineau Region

Article and photos by Chris Traynor

Species Profile 13

The Autumn Meadowhawk (*Sympetrum vicinum*)

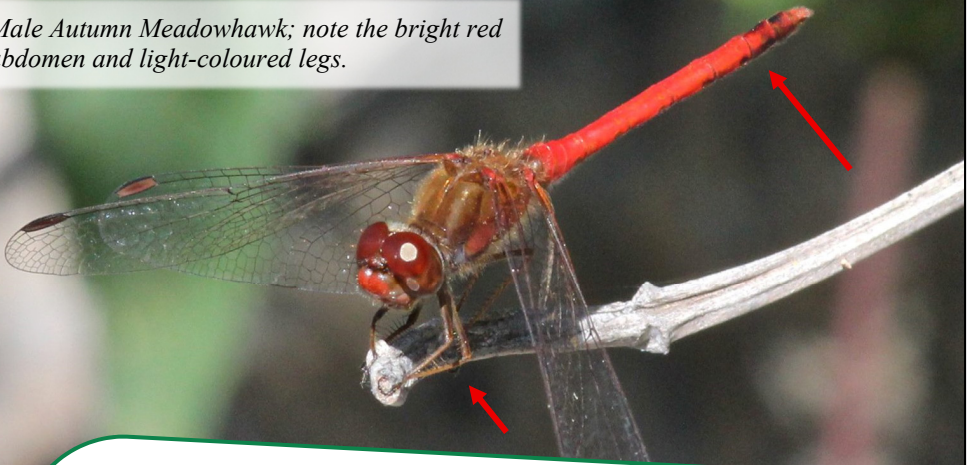
Family: Libellulidae



A male Autumn Meadowhawk in the fall foliage.

By the time this issue of *Trail & Landscape* is in your hands, there will be very few members of the Odonata (the dragonflies and damselflies) still flying about in the Ottawa-Gatineau Region. Perhaps you may see a late Common Green Darner or find a Spotted Spreadwing, but for the most part, all our local dragons and damsels are either in their waning days or they are gone completely. There is an exception though, the aptly named Autumn Meadowhawk. Not only is the Autumn Meadowhawk still on the wing in October, these hardy creatures are still emerging from their nymph stage in the fall months and still going strong. On a sunny and warm late October day, near a pond or cattail marsh, you can still see this species in the hundreds.

Male Autumn Meadowhawk; note the bright red abdomen and light-coloured legs.



ID Hints

This species was formerly known as the Yellow-legged Meadowhawk, so all meadowhawks in our region with yellowish legs will be this species.

Male:

- Rust-coloured thorax
- Bright red abdomen with smudgy dark markings along the edge
- Reddish/brown face
- Light-coloured legs ranging in colour from yellowish to light brown

Female:

- Distinctive triangular genital plate under her abdomen
- Yellowish green in colouration
- Light-coloured yellowish legs
- Often a very bulbous 2nd segment to her abdomen



Female Autumn Meadowhawk; note the large, triangular genital plate.



Much like the Northern Cardinal for birds, the common status of the Autumn Meadowhawk may make many take it for granted despite its brilliance. This tendency should be avoided, as this little skimmer is deserving of admiration. The female, as is often the case, is not as brightly marked, but she is also worthy of study as she can appear in a variety of guises late in the season. Some older females will show quite a bit of red in their abdomen. Others will reveal a dark brownish colour.

← *An old female Autumn Meadowhawk.*

When and Where to Look for Autumn Meadowhawks

Autumn Meadowhawks have one of the longest seasons of any of our local dragonflies. There are records in late June but those are rare. Typically they start showing up in numbers in late July. By the time August rolls into September, they are the most common dragonfly in our region. They can still be emerging in good numbers in October and you can even find very fresh-winged specimens flying in late October. As well, this is our latest lingering odonate, with my personal late date of November 16th. I remember that day well: it was 10 degrees and sunny when I came upon a male sitting on a rock alongside the creek in the Dominion Arboretum.



A male Autumn Meadowhawk warms himself on a late November day.

Autumn Meadowhawks can be found in a wide variety of habitats. They frequent ponds and lakes, streams, sand quarries, wet meadows and even forest edges. In short, they can be found pretty much anywhere. Most likely, rather than finding an Autumn Meadowhawk, they will find you. They do like to perch on leaves, rocks and logs, especially light coloured ones, staying low to the ground while still sitting off the ground. Tall stems and the ends of branches are also perches, but they rarely take a high perch.

The Autumn Meadowhawk is one of the easiest of all our local dragonflies to identify. Formerly known as the Yellow-legged Meadowhawk, it is the only meadowhawk in our region with yellowy legs. The name was changed a number of years ago to acknowledge the fact that some members of this species may have darker legs when they are mature. The legs, though slightly darker, will never appear black. The female is also easy to identify as she is unique for having a very large and noticeable downward spike under the tip of her abdomen. This is her genital plate and it's where her eggs emerge. It is hard to miss.

Autumn Meadowhawks are generally very approachable and not quick to take flight. On warm fall days they will often land on you and use you as a convenient perch... even more so if you are wearing light coloured clothing.

Possible Confusables

In our region, there are five species of meadowhawk that could, at a glance, be mistaken for the Autumn Meadowhawk. Four of these, the Band-winged, Ruby, Cherry-faced and White-faced Meadowhawks, can be easily distinguished by the presence of black legs. Also, all of these four species have distinct black markings down the side of the abdomen. They are somewhat triangular in appearance. The Autumn Meadowhawk lacks these markings, but usually has some indistinct black smudges instead.



Male White-faced Meadowhawk; note the black triangular lateral markings on the abdomen. All local meadowhawks (male and female) other than Autumn and Saffron-winged have these markings.

Possible Confusables, continued

The species most easily confused with the Autumn Meadowhawk is the Saffron-winged Meadowhawk. Like the Autumn Meadowhawk, it lacks black triangles on the sides of the abdomen. It also has a similar coloured face. They are often seen together in the same habitats, too. However, when this occurs, the size difference between the two is apparent. The larger size of the Saffron-winged Meadowhawk is detectable to the naked eye. Additionally, in males, their bodies are a darker, wine-coloured red. Females of both species are somewhat similar but the tint (yellow to saffron orange) of the Saffron-winged Meadowhawk's wings is quite apparent.

*Male Saffron-winged Meadowhawk;
note the darker,
wine-coloured body
and darker legs.*



*Female Saffron-winged Meadowhawk;
note the distinct tint to the leading
edges of the wings and the lack of the
triangular genital plate.*

