

Dragonflies of the Ottawa-Gatineau Region

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Species Profile 17

The Maine Snaketail (*Ophiogomphus mainensis*)

Family: Gomphidae



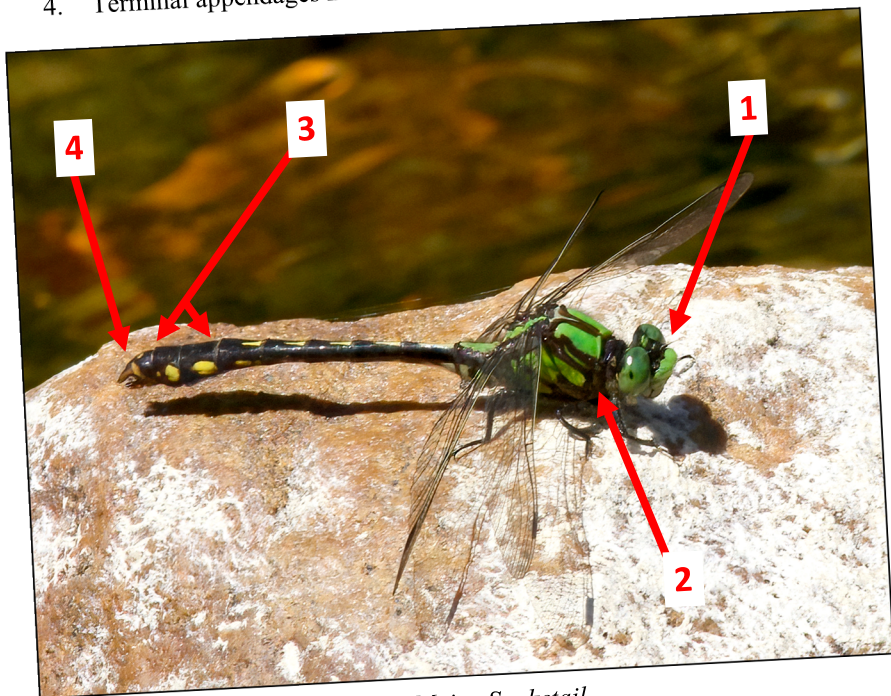
A male Maine Snaketail.

When I set out to write this series of profiles I had it in mind to introduce some of our more unusual species as a means of illustrating how lucky we are in our region to have such an incredible diversity of local odonata, even if some species may rarely or ever be encountered. The Maine Snaketail is one such species. It is considered rare across its range in North America. Much of that is likely due to habitat preferences and a relatively short flight period, combined with a lack of naturalists focused on dragonflies. The “Dragonhunter” is not as common as the birdwatcher after all, leaving many exciting species to fly under the radar of the general naturalist. Even those interested in odonates are unlikely to encounter the Maine Snaketail without a deliberate search and perhaps that is as it should be for such treasures would not be quite so special if they were everywhere or easily found.

ID Hints

Males and females are similarly coloured, but the male has a wider club and a thinner abdomen.

1. Lime green body and face at maturity
2. Thorax has several black stripes on the side
3. Black abdomen with yellow dorsal streaks (usually not present on the last two segments)
4. Terminal appendages in the male, dirty yellow in colour



Male Maine Snaketail.

Much like my search for the Zebra Clubtail (T&L 53(4)), I needed to do some research to help in my search for this rare dragonfly. I looked over maps and queried others, but few people seemed to have much intel on any species of snaketail in our region. The fact that this species is only known from a few streams in all of Ontario and a few more in Southwestern Quebec (Jones et al.) was cause for concern when contemplating finding them in our region.

Undaunted, I headed up to Gatineau Park in the summer of 2015 with some map knowledge in my head. The park has an abundance of lakes, streams and ponds and is an incredible haven for dragonflies. Many of the park's lakes are fed or drained by wild streams. Streams with rocks and sandy substrates are the favoured habitat of Maine Snaketails and though I was not able to determine rocks and substrates from maps, I did at least have a number of sites to target in my search.



Habitat of the Maine Snaketail in our region.

When and Where to Look for Maine Snaketails

Maine Snaketails are quite rare in our region but can be found with a little bit of hard work. Well honestly, a lot of hard work. They are found in quick flowing streams with rocks/boulders and a sandy substrate in forest habitats. Habitats such as this are hard to find anywhere south of the Ottawa River within the OFNC's 50 km-radius study area. South of the Ottawa River, I suspect that the Waba Creek area northwest of Ottawa may be a good bet as this stream has turned up Eastern Least Clubtail, Dragonhunter, Mustached Clubtail and Rusty Snaketail. I've found all these species in the same creek as where I've found the Maine Snaketail.

Heading north from Ottawa, Gatineau Park and the forested areas east of the Gatineau River, though largely unexplored, have suitable habitat for snaketails. Any rocky stream in our region could be worth checking.

My earliest observations of snaketails are from mid-June, and then I've seen them in the third week of July. It appears from my dates and those of Bracken and Lewis on our local checklist, that you have a small window of opportunity to see this fine looking dragonfly. Like most dragonflies, they are more readily found when the day warms up and I've generally found the mid-afternoon period to be the most productive time to locate the Maine Snaketail, but this could be some observational bias as I tend to concentrate my searches for when the day warms up.

Though it took several hours of difficult hiking to access my search area, luck was with me as I found several snaketails at the first site I searched. I fondly recall rounding a corner in a stream and seeing quite a number of exposed rocks. Having read that snaketails like to perch on exposed rocks in streams, I cast my eyes about and almost instantly a gorgeous green dragonfly alighted a few metres away. I knew instantly it was a snaketail and the view through my camera lens confirmed it was a Maine Snaketail. That memory is engraved in my mind to this day.



Female Maine Snaketail.
Holding a dragonfly by the wings is the preferred method when examining a species. The wings are very strong. Holding them by the legs should not be attempted unless you are very confident and experienced.

Like many male dragonflies, the male snaketail patrols his territory in rapid fashion up and down the stream. They can be quite difficult to track when doing so. Luckily, they tend to rest on dry rocks in the middle of the stream when they need a break. I've found that by sitting still on an adjacent rock to where you've seen a snaketail perch and waiting patiently, you should eventually be rewarded with the returning dragon. I've even had the wonderful experience of having a Maine Snaketail land on my shoulder!

My favourite snaketail highlight was in the summer of 2021 when I came upon a Rusty Snaketail sitting on a rock in the middle of a stream in Gatineau Park. It was my first clear and close view ever of this elusive species. Despite the park being well studied (mostly by Quebec naturalists), this was the first record I could find of this species from Gatineau Park. After I took a few photos, another snaketail came in and pushed it off the rock. This one was a Maine Snaketail. Two snaketail species in one day certainly made it a day to remember.

Young snaketails,
like this female,
are yellowish and black
when newly emerged.
The yellow will become
a vibrant green
with age.



Possible Confusables

Years ago, when still new to odonates, I mistook a female Eastern Pondhawk for a snaketail. So that is a logical species to look at when considering confusables. Several differences are apparent on close observation. Firstly, the eyes. Snaketails are members of the Gomphus family or the clubtails. Clubtails eyes are widely separated, whereas the pondhawk's eyes touch in the middle of the head. Secondly, the pondhawk's abdomen is green with black markings. The female pondhawk also has a large downward spike near the tip of the abdomen which is quite noticeable. Immature male Eastern Pondhawks are also green and could be mistaken for a snaketail but they turn powder blue as they mature and in most cases, show little hints of blue on the body even when not fully mature. Lastly, pondhawks have solid coloured thoraxes lacking the stripes that the Maine Snaketail sports. The habitat preferences of the two species are quite different with the pondhawk favouring ponds, marshes and more still waters. The snaketail is a species of swift flowing small rivers and streams.



Female Eastern Pondhawk. Note the solid green thorax; her abdomen is green and brown and has white coloured appendages. Also, note that the eyes touch.

Possible Confusables – continued

Though rare in our region, the Rusty Clubtail (*Ophiogomphus rupinsulensis*) could also be confused with the Maine Snaketail. The Rusty Snaketail's abdomen is distinct in our area with its mottled brown and cream-coloured abdomen.



Male Rusty Snaketail. Note the distinct brownish abdomen.

As well as the Rusty Snaketail, one other snaketail could be confused with the Maine. The almost identical Riffle Snaketail has been photographed by myself on a few occasions and confirmed by two experts to be that species, but the two species are so similar that a capture is really necessary to add it to our local list.



Unidentified snaketail species.

*This is likely a Riffle Snaketail (*Ophiogomphus carolus*). Note the markings on all the abdominal segments. While *O. mainensis* sometimes have these markings, they are usually not this wide. This photo stresses the importance of capture to identify very similar species.*