

Dragonflies of the Ottawa-Gatineau Region

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Species Profile 25

The Four-spotted Skimmer (*Libellula quadrimaculata*)

Family: Libellulidae



A Four-spotted Skimmer.

This species is quite difficult to sex in the field, as they are almost identical. In this case, the fairly straight cerci (terminal appendages) indicate this is likely a female.

After 24 dragonfly profiles for *Trail & Landscape*, I found myself wanting to do something a little different this time. So far, we've covered representatives of all the families of dragonflies found in our region, so I knew I'd have to dip back into a family we'd already profiled. I was hoping a unique angle or story would pop into my mind, and for a while I struggled. So I thought it best to drag out my external hard drive and go through my "dragonfly master file" which contains thousands of images of odonata I've taken over the years. I saw within the first five photos in the file, staring back at me, the familiar Four-spotted Skimmer. However, fifteen years ago, it was not so familiar.

It was the second species of dragonfly I photographed on a trip to the island of Gotland off the coast of Sweden. I was interested in dragonflies only from a general naturalist's point of view, with no special interest in odonates, and since it wasn't a very good photograph, it did not stick in my mind. I do recall identifying it, though (even if I subsequently forgot about it), so it is possibly the first species of dragonfly I identified. I would eventually photograph more European dragonflies, including more *Libellula quadrimaculata* – or, as it is known in Sweden, Fyrfläckad trollslända.



Four-spotted Skimmers are very brightly coloured when newly flighted.

Whether we call it a Four-spotted Chaser, Four-spotted Skimmer or a four-spotted troll-spindle in another language, it is all the same species. Luckily for us, we can call it *Libellula quadrimaculata*. And this is appropriate because this species was first described by none other than Carl Linnaeus, the father of modern taxonomy. Linnaeus described this species in 1758 when he had settled down somewhat from his travels and was firmly ensconced in Hammarby, a rural area at the time but now a suburb of Stockholm. Circumpolar in distribution, this wide-ranging species is our only local dragonfly to be described by the great Linnaeus.

Easily seen, they are found in most of our quieter wetlands and often in good numbers, although they never seem to be the most common species anywhere. They are a fairly early species, often emerging in mid-May, and they have a long season, with individuals still being seen in August – though they are certainly on the wane by then. Like many of

the pond skimmers, you will most often see them perched on the end of twigs, sticks and reeds. They can often be found low, sitting on sticks or grass near the ground, especially early in the season when they are recently emerged. I have yet to see one perched directly on the ground, though.



Emerging can be tough! I was quite surprised to see this specimen flying around the Bruce Pit one morning. I had never seen a dragonfly in flight with the exuviae still attached, and no one else I know had, either. Oddly enough, its flight was strong, and I'd like to think it eventually freed itself from this precarious situation.



Four-spotted Skimmers can be very faithful to the same perch and will return again and again. Stick perches like this are often favoured.

Four-spotted Skimmer males are rather feisty and spend a considerable amount of time chasing off rivals in defence of their territories. Their flight is strong, but often predictable, and they can be extremely faithful to the same perch. This is helpful when you're trying to photograph them.

Some of our earlier dragonfly species often emerge when it can still be quite cool at night. Like many of the early emergers, the Four-spotted Skimmer can be quite hairy, but it also has a unique feature among our local odonata, which is noticeable in the more mature members of the species: up close, you can see that parts of the upper abdomen are somewhat translucent. If you look closely you can see the abdomen move in and out with respiration. The visible air pockets are believed to be an adaptation to cold weather for a northerly species (Paulson).



This putative male dragonfly has been very lucky in life so far. Despite taking on a mature appearance, it still has incredibly pristine wings, which is quite unusual for an older dragonfly. Note also the translucent appearance to the upper abdomen.

Photo from Kräklingbo, Sweden.

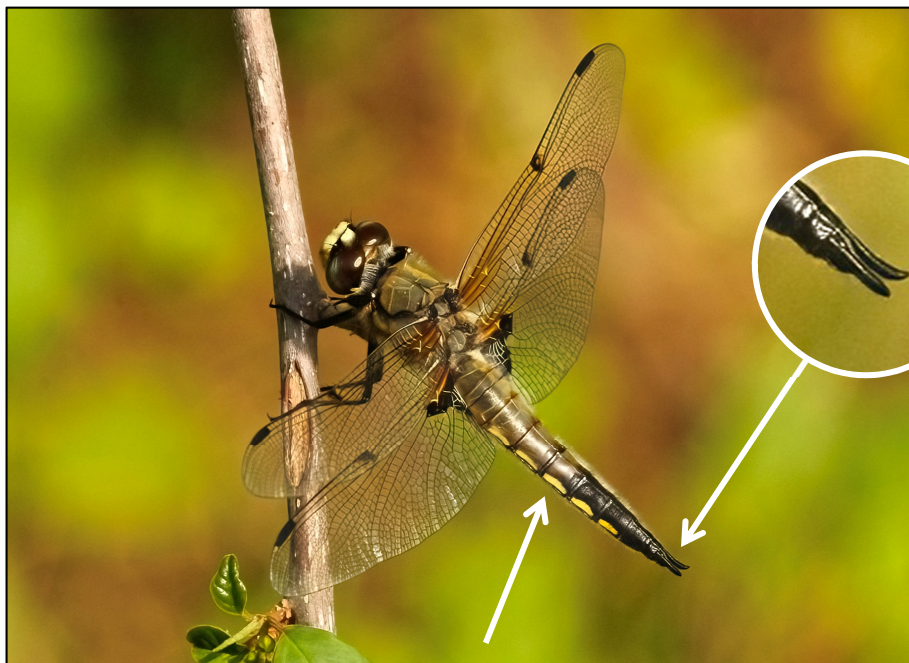
Anytime I've seen this species in Europe, I've always tried to see if there is even the slightest difference between the *L. quadrimaculata* we see here in our region and those in Europe. So far I've detected no differences.

ID Hints

- Mature specimens are a dullish olive drab colour.
- Freshly emerged specimens are a brilliant gold colour.
- Both sexes are similar, but females have straighter cerci; males' are slightly splayed.
- The wings have four black nodal spots.
- Amber hue on the leading edge of the wings extends several veins in (fades with age).
- There are black patches at the base of the hind wings with yellow veining.
- The tapered abdomen has yellow markings on most segments laterally, lacking on the last few segments.
- A rarely seen form, *L. q. praenubila*, has larger bands (smudges, really) below the stigma of the wings. The four spots are also larger in this form.



Note the four dark spots and the black, basal wing patches.



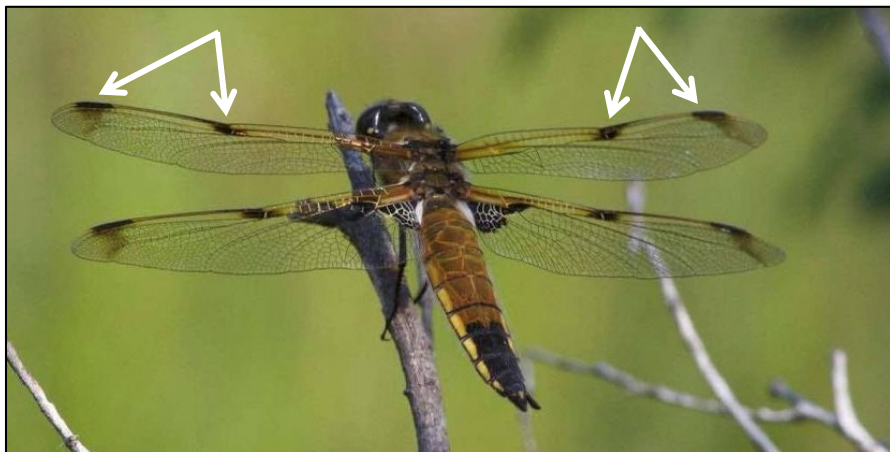
Mature male.

Note the yellow dashes along the sides of the abdomen and the slightly splayed cerci.



Very mature female.

Note the straight cerci and the yellow veining showing in the black, rear wing basal patches.



The rare praenubila form.

Note the larger dark nodes (the four spots) and the smudgy markings below the wing stigmas. Thanks to Paul Lagasi for post-processing of this photo.

**When and Where to Look for
Four-spotted Skimmers**

Last spring, I saw my first Four-spotted Skimmer on May 22, and this is more or less on time depending on what type of spring we're having. Their numbers are generally low at that time, but they will pick up and they're easily seen in the right habitat in the summer months. In the spring, when it is still cool, they will often perch low to the ground, on sticks and grasses, though rarely on pathways or on rocks. Like most odonates, they are most active in the full sun. I have not found this species to be an early riser or a dusk flyer.

Like most of the larger skimmers – or pond skimmers, as they are sometimes called – they prefer quiet bodies of water, such as ponds and small lakes. They can easily be found at the Bruce Pit and the Marlborough Forest ponds, and any similar bodies of water. However, they also like acidic waters, so you can find them at the Mer Bleue bog; it is easy to see them where the boardwalk meets the open channel.

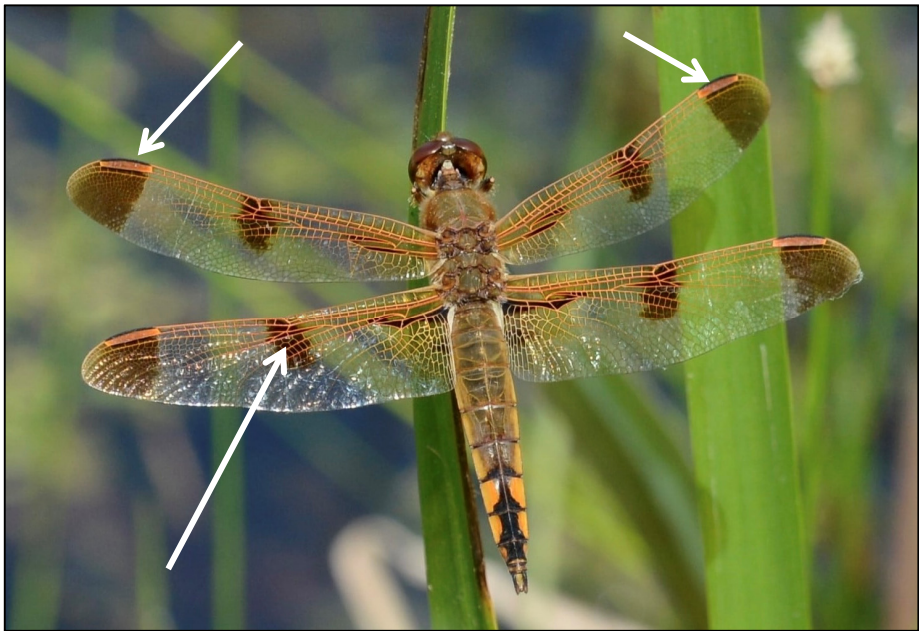


Four-spotted Skimmers often choose low perches in cool weather or when newly emerged. Although down low, they rarely land on paths and rocks.

Possible Confusables

Up until last year, there wasn't another dragonfly species in our region that you could confuse with the Four-spotted Skimmer. My European field guides mention a few species, but none of them are found in North America. However, last summer a Painted Skimmer, *Libellula semifasciata*, was discovered in our OFNC 50K study area (Skevington 2024). This is the one species that may be confused with the Four-spotted Skimmer, although the likeness is slight, with most of the similarities being confined to the abdomen.

The Painted Skimmer has large orange patches rather than the dark nodes on the wings. It also has large orange patches under the stigmas, which Four-spotted Skimmers don't have. Additionally, the stigmas of the Painted Skimmer are orangey, not black.



Painted Skimmer. Photo by Levi Turnbull.

References

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