

# Dragonflies of the Ottawa-Gatineau Region

Article and photos by Chris Traynor, unless otherwise noted

## Species Profile 27

# The Harlequin Darner (*Gomphaeschna furcillata*)

Family: Aeshnidae



*Male Harlequin Darner. Horizontal perches are common.*

The Harlequin Darner is the only representative in our region of the genus *Gomphaeschna*, the Pygmy Darners. In previous profiles, we looked at other species of darners: the Common Green Darner (genus *Anax*; T&L 55(1)) and the Canada Darner (genus *Aeshna*; T&L 57(1)), where we also looked at other regional members of the Aeshnidae family. Like their namesake character from the Italian theatre, commedia dell'arte, Harlequin Darners are boldly patterned and often show a fair bit of orange on their abdomens. In that respect, they are unique among the darner family. Harlequin Darners are also much smaller than other darners, hence the name “Pygmy Darner”.



***Female Harlequin Darner.***

*Harlequins often perch on light-coloured surfaces.  
In this case, not a birch tree but Gillian Mastromatteo's pant leg!*

Harlequin Darners are one of our earliest flying darners, with only the Springtime Darter (*Basiaeschna janata*) being officially an earlier flyer. I say that because I always see Harlequin Darners in the spring before I see the Springtime Darter, but that may be due to my own habitat preferences in the spring, rather than the flight schedules of either species in question.

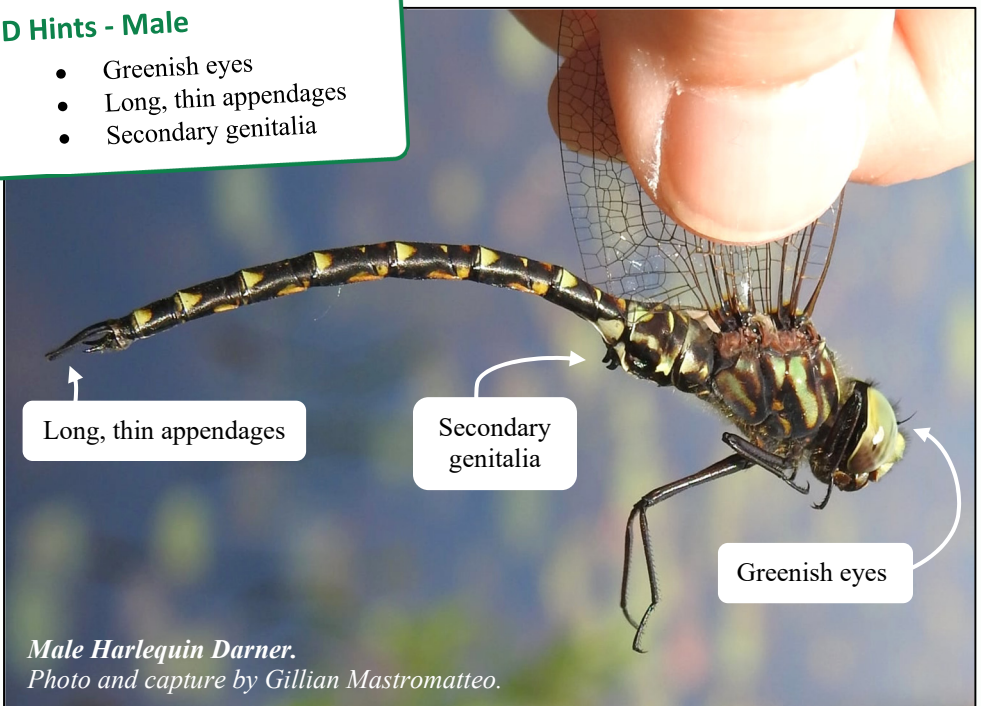
Considering the last decade or so, I would say there has been more of a focus on looking for odonates in May than in years past, and though the official checklist (Bracken and Lewis) shows Harlequin as being on the wing in mid-June, it is now often seen in May by those who make a point of looking for them. At that time of year they are much inclined to hang up on light-coloured tree trunks or, as is often the case, light-coloured clothing. It is best to wear white when looking for Harlequin Darners in the spring!



***A male Harlequin on a spring perch.***  
*Harlequins rarely hang up like most darners, but they do perch vertically on trees and humans.*

### ID Hints - Male

- Greenish eyes
- Long, thin appendages
- Secondary genitalia



***Male Harlequin Darter.***  
*Photo and capture by Gillian Mastromatteo.*

*Male Harlequin Darner. Note the green eyes.*



### ID Hints - Female

- Greyish eyes
- Short appendages
- Short ovipositor

Short appendages

Short ovipositor

Greyish eyes

*Female Harlequin Darner.*  
*Photo and capture by Gillian Mastromatteo.*



***Female Harlequin Darner.*** Note the black T-shaped mark on the top of the frons. Photo by Gillian Mastromatteo.



***Female Harlequin Darner.*** Note the flared club. Photo by Nathalie Paquette.

## Possible Confusables



A mature Springtime Darner has blue abdominal markings, which Harlequins never have. However, **freshly emerged specimens of Springtime Darners**, like this one, have an abdomen heavily marked in brown tones, not unlike a Harlequin Darner. But note the two straight thoracic stripes, which are very different from the mottled markings on the Harlequin's thorax.

### When and Where to Look for Harlequin Darners

When they're not landing on you, they can be quite hard to find. They don't seem to have specific habitat preferences; "wetlands in May and June" is all I can say. However, this past spring, I found two different female Harlequin Darners sitting on the sidewalk under coolish conditions. One never knows where a dragonfly will turn up!

### Literature Cited

- Bracken, B., and C. Lewis. 2008. A checklist of the dragonflies and damselflies of Ottawa-Gatineau. *Trail & Landscape* 42(3): 115–131.
- Traynor, Chris. 2021. Dragonflies of the Ottawa-Gatineau Region, Species Profile 6: Common Green Darner (*Anax junius*). *Trail & Landscape* 55(1): 40–43.
- Traynor, Chris. 2023. Dragonflies of the Ottawa-Gatineau Region, Species Profile 14: Canada Darner (*Aeshna canadensis*). *Trail & Landscape* 57(1): 70–77.