

Damselflies of the Ottawa-Gatineau Region

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Profile 1: Forktails

Family: Coenagrionidae

Genus: *Ischnura*



A female Eastern Forktail perches on the wing of a Common Green Darner with wings too damaged to fly, showing the size difference between one of our largest and one of our smallest odonates.

Welcome to the inaugural edition of our series on identifiable damselflies of the Ottawa–Gatineau region! These articles will differ slightly from the dragonfly articles, as they will focus on identifiable groups or genera rather than individual species. This is because damselflies, being smaller – some no larger than the size of a toothpick – are much more difficult to identify, and many require magnification to distinguish from similar-looking species. That said, quite a few species are distinctive enough that they can be identified in the field or from photos without requiring a hand lens or loupe.

We begin our foray into the world of damselflies with a look at the most common pond damselflies around Ottawa: the Forktails (genus *Ischnura*). Named for the tiny forked structure at the tip of the male abdomen, there are six species in Eastern North America, two of which – the Eastern Forktail and Fragile Forktail – breed in our region. A third species, the Citrine Forktail, is a vagrant with only one known population, appearing and then disappearing at Burnt Lands Provincial Park, when a remarkable 110 individuals were discovered on September 21, 2008. Given the rarity of the Citrine Forktail even within its known range in southern Ontario, this article will focus on Ottawa’s two breeding species.



A mature male Eastern Forktail perching on a leaf. It is the only damselfly in our area with a green front and blue tip.

Forktails are among the smallest damselflies in our region, but are so common it is hard not to find one once you know what to look for. The Eastern Forktail averages about 30 mm (1.2 inches) in length, while the Fragile Forktail averages about 25 mm (1 inch) in length. Rarely will you see just one or two; the more you look, the more you will find! They emerge continually throughout the warmer months, giving them a long flight season. This means that while you might find dozens of forktails in an area one day, there may be none the following week, then dozens appearing again later in the season.

A mature male Fragile Forktail. Note the green exclamation point on top of the thorax and black abdomen. While the male Eastern Forktail may rarely show a broken or constricted shoulder stripe, the tip of the abdomen is always blue, while a Fragile Forktail’s is always black.



Identification

Eastern Forktails come in three different colour variations. Males have a green and black thorax, black abdomen, and two blue markings on segments 8 and 9 of the abdomen; in flight they are often described as a blue dot following a green dot. Immature females are mostly black with orange on the thorax and first few segments of the abdomen, while mature females develop a greyish-purple pruinosity over most of the body. Immature females can also have the same colouration as the males (known as the “homeochromatic” form), though they are rare. The ovipositor at the tip of the abdomen gives them away. Immature females are capable of reproduction, so you may see either form in a mating wheel with a male.



*A **mature female Eastern Forktail** is entirely pruinose except for the black markings showing through the thorax and sometimes at the tip of the abdomen. Pruinosity is the wax-like substance that covers an odonate's body as it ages.*

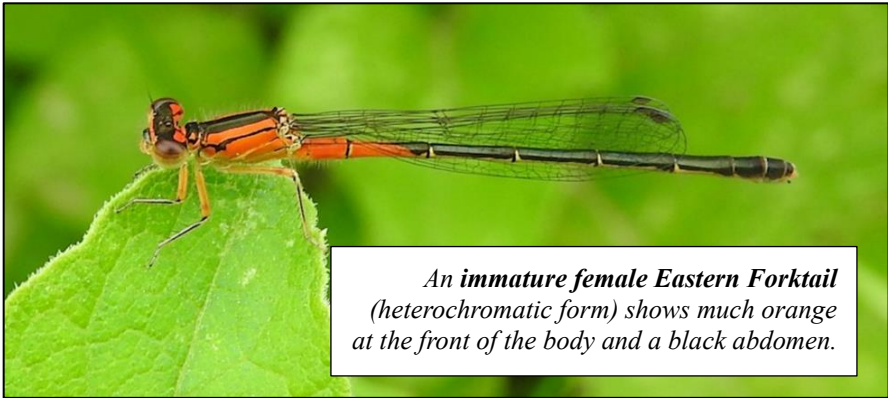


*A **female Eastern Forktail** (homeochromatic form) resembles the male, but note that the blue markings at the tip of the abdomen are reduced to vague triangular shapes. The colour of the thorax is usually a paler green than the males, though I have also seen individuals with a blue thorax instead.*

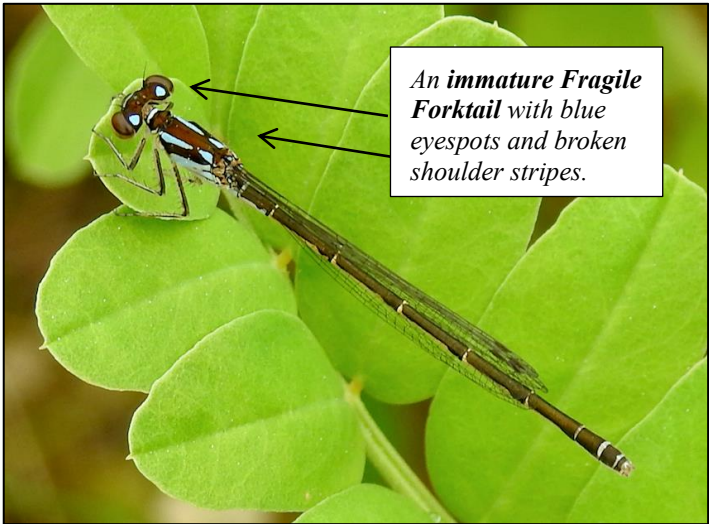
Fragile Forktails are similar to Eastern Forktails, except the males lack the blue at the tip of the abdomen, and the coloured stripes on the thorax are broken instead of solid, forming a green double exclamation mark (!!). Young males and females have blue on the thorax instead, while mature females develop a greyish-purple pruinosity and look almost identical to mature Eastern Forktails, except for the broken shoulder stripes, which usually remain visible.



*A mature female **Fragile Forktail** is pruinose like a female Eastern Forktail, but still shows the broken shoulder stripe on the thorax.*



*An immature female **Eastern Forktail** (heterochromatic form) shows much orange at the front of the body and a black abdomen.*



*An immature **Fragile Forktail** with blue eyespots and broken shoulder stripes.*

ID Hints

EASTERN FORKTAIL

Male Eastern Forktail

- Top of the thorax is black with solid green shoulder stripes; sides of the thorax are green
- Green eyespots on top of the eyes; eye colour is green below the black “caps”
- Abdomen is black with narrow, pale rings
- Segments 8 and 9 are blue; from the side, the blue markings are “L” shaped

Immature Female Eastern Forktail (heterochromatic form)

- Eyespots and thorax are dark orange or reddish-orange instead of green, while the eye colour is orange or brown below the black “caps”
- The base of the abdomen (including part of segment 3) is also orange, while the rest of the abdomen is black, including the final segments
- Only species confusable with this form is the Orange Bluet, which is a lighter shade of orange and has orange at the tip of the abdomen instead of the base

Mature Female Eastern Forktail

- The thorax and abdomen appear almost entirely purple-grey except for the black areas of the thorax
- The solid shoulder stripes remain visible through the pruinosity
- Eyespots on the black “caps” of the eyes are also pruinose, contrasting with the green eyes

ID Hints

FRAGILE FORKTAIL

Mature Male Fragile Forktail

- Thorax and abdomen are mostly black; green limited to the sides of the thorax, a pair of broken shoulder stripes on top, and thin, pale rings along the abdomen
- Green eyespots on top of the eyes; eye colour is green below the black “caps”
- Tip of the abdomen is black

Immature Male and Female Fragile Forktail

- Like the mature male, but with blue replacing the green areas
- The Fragile Forktail does not have an immature orange form

Mature Female Fragile Forktail

- Like the mature female Eastern Forktail, the only difference being the broken shoulder stripe visible through the pruinosity

Mature Male Eastern Forktail



Mature Male Fragile Forktail





Left. Close-up of the thorax of the **female Eastern Forktail**, showing solid, unbroken shoulder stripes.

Right. Close-up of the thorax of the **female Fragile Forktail**, showing broken shoulder stripes. The exclamation points are not always as clear as this; in older individuals, the pruinosity may blur the markings, but still leave a gap between the two parts of each stripe.

When and Where to Look for Forktails

Forktails are abundant and widespread. In the *Checklist of the Dragonflies and Damselflies of Ottawa-Gatineau* by Bracken and Lewis, Eastern Forktails are described as being common, easily found, widespread, abundant and often encountered outside of appropriate habitat in our region, and there is no disagreement with this description. Fragile Forktails, on the other hand, are considered uncommon and local – readily found in suitable habitat, and closely associated with environmental and/or habitat requirements. However, I find them in almost every place inhabited by Eastern Forktails, just in much smaller numbers. I believe they are more common and widespread than initially described in the official Ottawa checklist; they just aren't as easily observed, because they are so small, with mostly black bodies that blend in so well with sun-dappled vegetation. This is especially true for the males, which are black with only a tiny bit of green on the head and thorax. Without any blue segments at the tip of the abdomen, a tiny pale green dot floating through the vegetation is much more difficult to see!

Forktails are chiefly found near dense, waterside vegetation any time from May through October. They breed in practically every type of wetland, including small creeks, large rivers, marshes, stormwater ponds, sewage lagoons, large lakes and roadside ditches – their only real requirement is that there are plenty of emergent sedges and grasses growing in calm water. Bogs and fens, however, are usually avoided. Look for them in the vegetation growing along the banks of any river or pond, resting on lily pads, or perching on emergent vegetation in the water. Fragile Forktails are more likely to be found in shaded areas than Eastern Forktails, and are also more frequently seen on cooler, cloudier days. This may be an adaptation to avoid predation by larger odonate species, as they are one of the smaller damselflies.

I almost always find some on any given outing, at the edges of vegetation areas growing along the shore of Mud Lake, stormwater ponds such as the Eagleson ponds, the ponds at Andrew Haydon Park and the former Richmond Sewage Lagoons, and the banks of the Rideau, Jock, and Ottawa Rivers at various parks and National Capital Commission pathways. However, they can turn up in places well away from the water... I've had both species in my yard about a kilometre away from the nearest pond! They generally perch at waist height or below, or flutter through the sedges looking for mates. Usually, once I start looking at the Eastern Forktails, I find a Fragile Forktail or two flying among them. However, there seem to be some places where Fragile Forktails are more numerous than Eastern Forktails, such as the water below the dock at Sarsaparilla Trail... I almost always see male Fragile Forktails there, and very few Eastern Forktails.

Although they are small, it's worth getting to know these damselflies as they inhabit almost every body of water in our region, making them some of our tiniest and most common neighbours. They are not difficult to identify once they attain their colours, despite their many forms; nothing else looks like the mature Eastern and Fragile Forktails. Females are feisty as well as colourful – they will eat anything up to their own size, including other damselflies, and repel males and other species with questionable intentions by rapidly fluttering their wings and flexing their abdomens to appear threatening. Once you get to know them, it's hard not to love them and look forward to their appearance every spring.

References

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