

Dragonflies of the Ottawa-Gatineau Region

Article and photos by Chris Traynor

Species Profile 28

The Harpoon Clubtail (*Phanogomphus descriptus*)

Family: Gomphidae



A mature male Harpoon Clubtail.

Note the green eyes. These are unique among Phanogomphus.

I first encountered the Harpoon Clubtail on a sunny day in late May while looking for dragonflies near the Gatineau Park Visitor Centre. I was still somewhat new in my dragonfly pursuits, when a bright-yellow and black dragonfly caught my eye. He was sitting on a fern frond and I found him quite striking. I took quite a few photos of this beauty, but I had no idea what it was. Later at home, I was able to identify it using my copy of the *Dragonflies and Damselflies of Algonquin Park*, though a bit of sleuthing was required as field guides don't show the juvenile forms.

The *Phanogomphus* genus, of which the Harpoon is a member, is generally considered to be rather dull looking, with the Harpoon being considered one of the more brightly coloured members. I would concur.



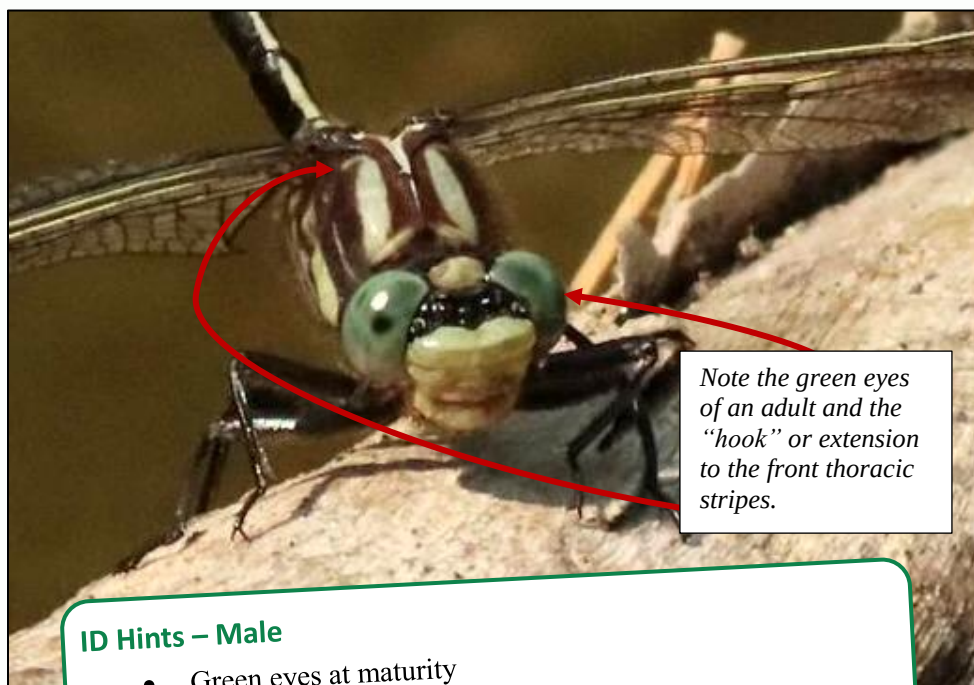
A female Harpoon Clubtail.
Note the eggs under her abdomen tip. She will dip her abdomen in the water to deposit the eggs.

As long as I've been interested in odonates, I've been familiar with their common names. But it wasn't until the late 1980s that a list of common names was first put forward, and not until 1996 that the Dragonfly Society of the Americas published the first list in an annex to *Argia*. Clearly, quite a bit of imagination went into many of the names. I was fascinated when Bob Bracken and Christina Lewis published the Ottawa checklist in 1998, containing so many amazing names: boghaunters, dragonhunters, pondhawks and clubtails! So much fun! Of course, after identifying a Harpoon Clubtail, I had to find the source of the name.



At the tip of the male's abdomen are two structures consisting of an upper cercus and lower epiproct. These make up what is commonly termed the claspers. They are the appendages that grasp the female during copulation. In the Harpoon Clubtail, these appendages look similar to a harpoon. Perhaps a little imagination is needed!

← *A young Harpoon Clubtail.*



Note the green eyes of an adult and the "hook" or extension to the front thoracic stripes.

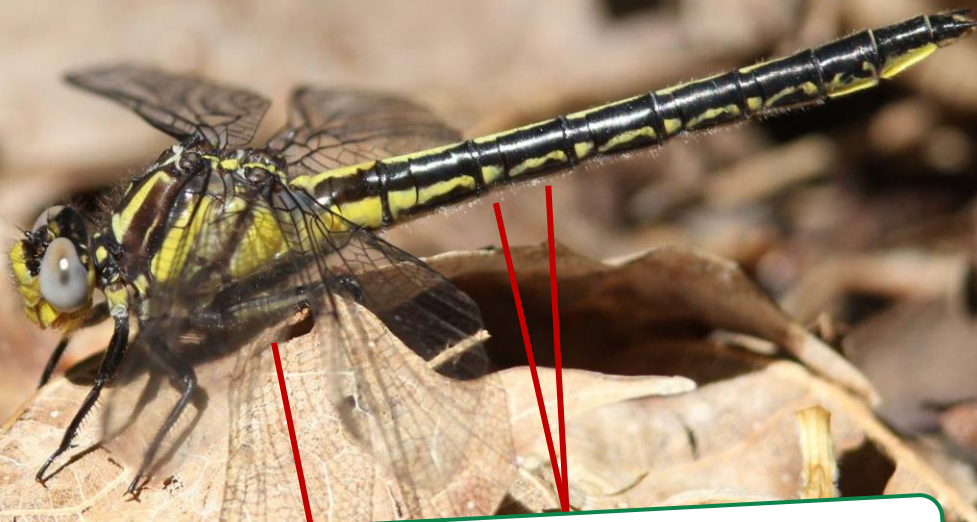
ID Hints – Male

- Green eyes at maturity
- Single lateral spots on the abdomen
- Hook or extension at the top of the front thoracic stripes
- Harpoon-shaped upper appendages
- Black legs (rarely, a faint green stripe on the hind femora)
- Weak club



Note the single spot on each abdominal segment and the harpoon-shaped appendages.

Note the female's thick abdomen with short and long markings, and the noticeable light-green femora.



ID Hints – Female

1. Similar to male, but with noticeable green stripes on the hind femora
2. Thick abdomen, with two markings laterally along each side of the abdomen. One marking is a blunt triangle and the other is a longer squiggle.

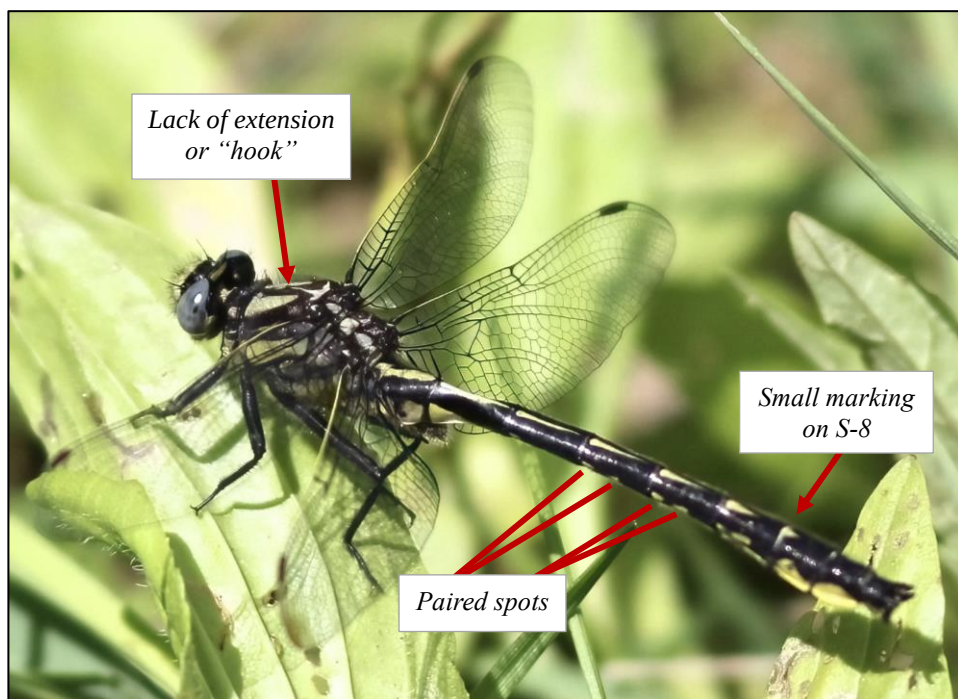
Possible Confusables

Six representatives of the *Phanogomphus* genus can be found in our region, but upon inspection, only one can be confused with the Harpoon Clubtail. I should add the usual caveat: To the novice, most of these species can be said to look like each other. Over time, careful observation and attention to fine details will make all the difference in identification. Photographing dragonflies is very useful in this regard and I often finalize an identification after careful scrutiny of a photograph.

Possible Confusables – continued

The Beaverpond Clubtail (*Phanogomphus borealis*) is found, as the name suggests, in close proximity to beaver ponds, but those ponds do not need to be extensive. While the Harpoon is listed as scarce by Bracken and Lewis, the Beaverpond Clubtail is recorded as rare in our region.

Beaverpond Clubtails do share habitat overlap with Harpoons, and I've found both on the same date at the same place. The differences are small but notable.



A male Beaverpond Clubtail showing all the distinct characteristics: the lack of a "hook" or extension on the front thoracic stripes, the paired spots along the abdomen and the small marking on the top of S-8.

Beaverpond Clubtail males have paired lateral spots on the abdomen. The Harpoon has only a single spot per segment. The other key difference, when you look at them closely, are the two pale-greenish stripes on the front of the thorax. The Beaverpond's markings are a crude triangular shape. Those of the Harpoon, though somewhat similar, have an extension or "hook" at the top of the stripe and this is noticeable even to the naked eye. Also, Beaverpond Clubtails have a small triangular marking on the top of the S-8 abdominal segment. Other differences are more subtle (the genitalia and appendages) and require an in-hand view. I've found *P. borealis* only in Gatineau Park, near Lac Fortune, and in the southerly portions of small creeks that drain out of Lac Fortune.

Possible Confusables – continued



A female Beaverpond Clubtail showing the lack of a “hook”, black legs and small marking on S-8.

When and Where to Look for Harpoon Clubtails

Harpoon Clubtails are one of our earlier emerging clubtails. Though Bracken and Lewis listed them as a mid-June emergent species, I have found them as early as May 22. I believe this is simply due to a search bias. In years past, people just didn't spend as much time looking for dragonflies in May as some of us do now. Personally, I used to avoid Gatineau Park in the last two weeks of May because of blackfly season. I find now that blackfly season is not as long as it once was (this may be just my perception), and so I find myself in Gatineau Park in late May. This has proven fruitful. The Harpoon Clubtail flies into July, although it is certainly on the wane by then. Mid-June is the best time to see fully mature Harpoons, but they are not easily found away from their emergent sites.

When and Where to Look for Harpoon Clubtails – continued

The Harpoon likes rocky creeks and their adjacent wetlands and these are not always the easiest locations to find or to search. Considered a “scarce” species (Bracken and Lewis), I can concur, though I think that status is a reflection on the mature specimens. When emerging they can be somewhat easily found in some very accessible areas. The Sugarbush Trail at the Gatineau Park Visitor Centre is one of the best places to find Harpoon Clubtails. In late May, the fresh emergents will often dry their wings in the bushes and grasses that line the open lawns of the parking lot areas. The sunlit patches along the pathways of this trail can also be quite productive for other early emerging clubtails. This holds true for many pathways or trails (and their parking lot edges) in Gatineau Park that are close to wetlands. Like many clubtails, Harpoons like to perch on broad leaves, but you need to look on the ground for them too, as they often perch down low.



Harpoon Clubtails often perch on the ground and should be looked for there.

All my personal records of this species are from north of the Ottawa River. I’ve yet to find suitable habitat for this species south of this river in our region.

Literature Cited

- Bracken, B., and C. Lewis. 2008. A checklist of the dragonflies and damselflies of Ottawa-Gatineau. *Trail & Landscape* 42(3): 115–131.
- Jones, C., A. Kingsley, P. Burke, and M. Holder. 2013. The dragonflies and damselflies of Algonquin Provincial Park and the surrounding area. *The Friends of Algonquin Park*, Whitney, Ontario.
- Argia*, the news journal of the Dragonfly Society of the Americas. Volume 8 # 2, 1996, appendix.