

Dragonfly Etiquette

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Dragonflies, and many insects, are very resilient creatures but when handling dragonflies there are a few things to keep in mind which will minimize the chance of harming your captive.

To start be aware of the vegetation and other materials around you. Don't take out a dozen flowers with your swing if you can help it. Be aware of where you are stepping. This is especially important at the water's edge. If you are not careful you may trample and destroy the habitat of the very creatures you came to observe. Be aware of and do not trample the waterside vegetation as it is a vital part of the ecosystem and the dragonflies habitat. Also be aware of other people around you. If you are in a public park or path be sure your swings will not take out any unsuspecting passerby, make sure you have adequate swinging room. Good locations to look for dragonflies is just about any location where water meets the land. Male dragonflies will often have small territories that they guard and stay close to. If you stand and watch you can often pick up a pattern of movements or a favorite perching location that they will repeatedly return to.



A favorite perch or area is often returned to.

To capture and handle just about any dragonfly the first, and probably much only, tool you will need is a simple bug net. If you are planning to make a hobby of the study of Odonata I would suggest investing in a good quality bug net. Bug nets

are available from many scientific stores and can vary in price from very simple student nets for 10\$ to collapsible detachable nets costing 40 or 60\$. I purchased mine from BioQuip, a company in the states that specializes in entomology equipment (It was cheap until the border crossing costs) but there are places in Toronto that carry them. I have also recently seen a few models available at butterfly conservatories and while they are a bit more expensive than ordering directly you do not have to pay the shipping and border costs so it just about works out. If you are only after Odonata then the standard bug mesh that comes on the aerial nets is suitable. (If you are going to expand into Lepidoptera make sure you order netting that is designed not to damage their fragile wings). Children's nets with the nylon or other netting are not recommended as the mesh size varies and you may get their legs or appendages caught in the mesh. Children's nets are not designed to last nor will they likely be a convenient size for you. The size of the mouth of the net can also vary. I have a good medium at 15" but the standard 12" is just as functional. The larger size nets can be helpful for trying to capture large or very fast odes but you do not want to rely on size alone or have a size that is cumbersome.

When you first get your net I would suggest taking it out to the garden or field to 'test run' it and get use to the way it swings and how to aim for what you want. The biggest danger to odes when netting them is the possibility of hitting them with the ring of the net as you swing. If this does happen it is often a deadly collision so before trying on living creatures aim for a few flowers or grass heads. You don't have to swing the net with all your might to capture a dragonfly. Try to swing light or moderately, as the harder and faster you swing the more likely you are to injure your object. Take it slow at first and you will soon learn which odes need a bit more speed and which do not need it. Damselflies are very weak flies and often need just enough speed to keep the tail of the net open whereas darners are very quick and require fast maneuvering. If you do accidentally severely injure your target it is probably best to collect it and put it out of its misery quickly by immersing it in acetone (available at any hardware store).

Swinging at a stationary target much easier and has less chance of injuring them, so begin with trying to capture dragonflies at rest. As you become more acquainted with your net and how to handle it then it will become easier to capture your targets and move on to capturing odes in flight.

Once you have a dragonfly in the net the next challenge is to get it in hand. If you caught the ode mid air just twist the net so it folds on itself to close the opening. If you captured the ode in the ground, lift the tail of the net and allow the dragonfly to fly up into the small portion of the net. Next grasp the net about halfway down to capture the ode in the end 'pouch'. Lift the net and slide your hand into it, opening the pouch just enough to let your hand and arm in. Wait for the dragonfly to become still and gently grasp its wings. If it is a damselfly you have caught this will be quite easy as they rest with all wings over their backs. All you have to do is slowly move in and grasp its wings between your index finger and thumb. Dragonflies are a bit tricky as they rest with their wings at their sides. When they rest you can use the net to gently confine them and edge their wings over their back and gently grasp all four between your forefinger and thumb. It is important to get all of their wings in your grip as the less wings you have the less control you have and the more chance there is of the dragonfly injuring itself while struggling. If you have a good, firm but gentle grip on all their wings you can now remove it from the net. Slowly move the dragonfly away from the netting, making sure they release their grip on the netting. Once it is free from the netting you can release the net to dangle and open then draw the dragonfly from the net fully. Set the net aside and you are now free to closely inspect your captive. For some species, especially the damselflies, it is helpful to have a hand lens or magnifying glass to inspect the appendages.



Holding a dragonfly, side view.



Holding a dragonfly, top view.

Try not to keep your subject captive for too long as it is stressful on them. Once you are finished examining your captive and it is time to release it do not just drop it mid-air, it could just fall to the ground and be injured. Instead gently place it on your shoulder or a nearby object (tree branch, stump, ect) and release its wings. For dragonflies the position of the wings over their backs is not a natural position and by holding the wings like that you are stretching their 'muscles'. By setting them on a surface it allows them to relax their wings back into a more natural position. Sometimes the dragonfly will take off immediately but sometimes they will require a few minutes before they can fly away.

As a general rule try not to capture teneral (freshly emerged) individuals as they are very fragile at that stage. Many species will also be very hard or impossible to identify without their adult colouring (which will take some time to develop). If you do capture a teneral do not handle its wings and release is as soon as possible.

Most of all take the time to enjoy your time outside. Take some time to not only observe your subject naturally but also make note of their habitat, watch for different behaviors and patterns in different species and different situations. Studying odonata is a fascinating and exciting hobby! We still have much to learn about dragon and damselflies and their habits.

For more information on collecting sight records and on the ranges of odes in Ontario visit **the Ontario Odonata Atlas**.

<http://nhic.mnr.gov.on.ca/MNR/nhic/odonates/atlas.html>