Rebecca Lexa

A mature adult four-spotted skimmer is easily recognized by the four spots on each pair of wings.

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dragonflies' eyes are right next to each other, while the eyes of damselflies have some space between them.

Odonates do not spend their entire lives with wings. In fact, the bulk of their lifespan happens in or around water. Eggs hatch into wingless nymphs, which are active hunters of other insects and arthropods, as well as the occasional fish or tadpole.

Some are strictly aquatic, while others may inhabit landforms around fresh waterways in search of prey. Even before they can fly, they're an important predator of mosquitoes, both in their larval aquatic form and the occasional adult that falls into the water. As they are unable to move very far at once, they tend to ambush their prey.

It may take a few years before a nymph is ready to molt into its winged form. To do so, it must crawl out of the water on a piece of vegetation and shed its old skin. This process may take hours, and the nymph is quite vulnerable until it has molted entirely and its wings have unfolded. Its initial form usually has more muted colors before developing further into its adult form.

With the exception of a few species, adult odonates do not hibernate over the winter. Instead, they spend the few weeks or months of their adult life hunting food on the wing and seeking mates. Two mating odonates will create a sort of head-to-tail loop. Clasps on the end of the male's abdomen hang onto the female's head while she arcs the end of her abdomen almost up to the underside of his thorax. The female then flies off to deposit the fertilized eggs in or very near quiet fresh water.

Because they spend so much time in water, odonates are very sensitive to water pollution. Additionally, they need biodiverse freshwater habitats to provide both food and shelter. It's not just about quantity, but also quality. The more individual species there are in a given waterway, the healthier the odonate population. The rise in indiscriminate and widespread pesticide use also kills both odonates and their prey. To support dragonflies and damselflies, start by advocating for clean local waterways. This can include supporting legislation that prevents and cleans up pollution, volunteering or donating to organizations that restore aquatic habitat and reducing the runoff of lawn and household chemicals into storm drains.

To create an odonate habitat at home, start by creating a water feature. Deeper water is best, as the nymphs need room to hide and hunt. Something as simple as a livestock water trough will work, especially if set in the ground. Another idea is to dig a pond and insert a hard or sheet plastic liner. Add in some rocks in the water so that the nymphs have somewhere to hide and perch for food.

Plants are another crucial component, both in and around the water. Native plant nurseries across the Northwest often have several species of aquatic plants available. You'll also want to put native species around the water feature, especially those with long leaves like grasses and sedges. If you have a large enough pond, the yellow pond lily is an aquatic native plant that provides shelter to both nymph and adult odonates.

You may not get odonates immediately, but it's likely the mosquitoes will arrive quickly. If you find that you have an abundance of mosquito larvae but no odonate nymphs, drop in a mosquito dunk. This will kill off mosquito larvae for 30 days, but will not harm any other insects. Keep your eyes out for odonates, and if you see nymphs, remove the dunk immediately so that the mosquitoes can provide them some food.

Rebecca Lexa is a naturalist, nature educator, tour guide and writer living on the Long Beach Peninsula. Find more about her work at rebeccalexa.com.

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