

# Dragon Hunting in Argyll 2020

*by Steve Carter*

It was back in October 2019, while on a Bioblitz recce at a croft in Carsaig, that the idea of throwing some energy into photographing Argyll's damselflies and dragonflies was hatched.



*Loch an Fhir Mhaoil, north of Carsaig*

I have always been intrigued by this ancient insect group, with their notoriously vicious aquatic larval stage and their brilliantly coloured, agile adults. Over the years I have also photographed the odd dragonfly, but without consciously seeking them out. However, when I came to live in Kilmartin back in 2014, I found myself photographing them more and more.

I discovered Taynish NNR very soon after arriving in Argyll and it quickly became one of my favourite places. It is also, for me, one of the best places to watch and photograph dragonflies and it was there, right at the start of October 2019, that I had something of a seminal experience. I was wandering near to the Old Mill late in the afternoon, when in my peripheral vision, I glimpsed a dragonfly pluck something out of the air. I immediately turned to follow, what I could now make out to be a male Common Hawker, carrying another dragonfly beneath it. It flew into the main part of the Old Mill, plunged to the ground, somersaulted and came to rest lying on its back, holding, what I could now see was a male Common Darter, above it, whereupon it commenced to consume it.

Throwing myself to the ground, I started to photograph the whole gory process that followed. The Hawker first removed the Darter's head before starting to open up its thorax where it feasted on the nutritious flight muscles. The Hawker was so focused on what it was doing that I was able to move my camera, with macro lens already in place, to within a few inches and shot off dozens of stills and even shot a short video of it munching away. Eventually it flipped its prey over and completed its meal.



*Common Hawker feasting on a Common Darter*

I finally got to my feet and brushed myself down, grateful that no one else had come onto the scene, meaning that I would have been distracted from my subject as I would have felt that some sort of explanation was required. Fresh from that experience and having photographed both Common Hawker and Common Darter on the visit to Carsaig a couple of weeks later, the decision to start planning a Dragon Hunting project with John Speirs came very easily.



*Common Darter at Carsaig*

John is a fellow wildlife photographer and naturalist, with a particular talent for capturing images of birds in flight and is probably best known, locally, for his stunning photographs of otters. John had been photographing Dragonflies for some years and he was keen to further develop his skills in the macro world.



*John Speirs*

Apart from being able to identify a few of the most common species, I really did not have much knowledge about Damselfly and Dragonflies and was certainly a long way from being 'an expert'. So the winter months provided time to do some research on what we might expect to find and to produce a list of target species and identify fruitful locations. In February, five of us went on a bird watching trip to Islay and it gave John and I an opportunity to discuss some of our plans. Looking back, we had a wonderful few days completely oblivious of how our lives and those of



everyone worldwide were about to be thrown into confusion and chaos by a global pandemic.

A month later we were in lockdown and we were all coming to terms with how to live our lives under these oppressive but necessary rules. Not being able to travel far from home, not being able to meet up with other people were going to cause us real problems with carrying out our plans. However, we were still able to get out of our homes and many people found that they were able to engage with their local wildlife in a way that they hadn't for many years. I took to my bike and revelled in the quiet roads and the sense that the natural world was taking a deep breath in our absence. I didn't get into my car for 12 weeks. However, it meant that we were restricted to sites that were close to home and as spring turned to summer, I became a very regular visitor to a couple of sites in particular where I followed the lives of the Dragons almost obsessively. I well remember the build up to the emergence of the first Dragon and throughout May I was checking regularly and hoping that the temperatures would warm up and that this would hasten their development. Then on 20 May my site was filled with Large Red Damselflies, engaging immediately with mating, flying in tandem and egg laying, to ensure that their line would continue even if the weather turned cold again.



*Large Red Damselflies*

Over the next few days, the Large reds were joined by Blue-tailed and Common Blue Damselflies and then the first of the heavyweights, the Four-spotted Chasers, appeared. These ubiquitous dragonflies are fairly easy to photograph, as, although they fly rapidly over the surface of the water, they do have the habit of resting on the emergent vegetation where they pose for any attendant photographer. Capturing them mating, on the other hand, is a real challenge, as they mate on the wing and at speed. Both John and I have managed to grab images of these unions, but there is plenty of scope for improving on our efforts in the future!



Stephen Carter  
PHOTOGRAPHY

*Four-spotted Chaser*

As the season progressed, we continued to visit our local sites, which now were sporting a greater variety of species. I know that one of John's favourites is the Beautiful Demoiselle, which certainly lives up to its name and is almost impossible to ignore if you have a camera in your hand, no matter how many photos you have already taken of them. They are exquisitely delicate, with a fluttering flight and are instantly recognisable, having fully pigmented wings – dark blue in the male and coppery-brown in the female. They are a damselfly of running water and their iridescent bodies are at their best when highlighted in a patch of sunlight beside an otherwise shaded stream.



JOHN SPEIRS

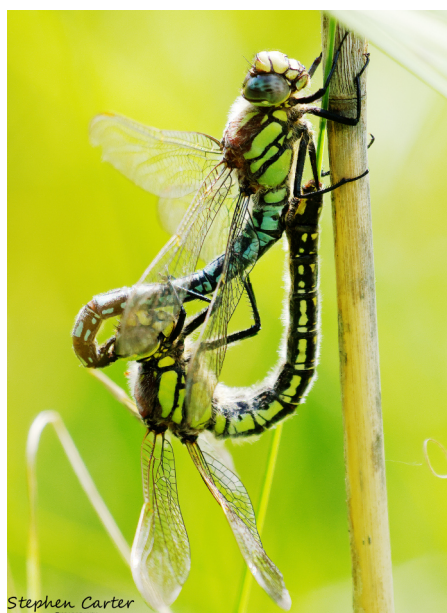
*Beautiful Demoiselle*



The revelation of the early season was our regular sightings of Hairy Dragonflies. These are relatively small Hawker Dragonflies with bright blue paired spots running down the abdomen in the male and bright yellow paired spots in the female, with both covered with fine down. They fly rapidly and low through emergent vegetation on the edge of lochs or slow-moving water and are a real challenge to photograph, resting only occasionally. They mate while clinging to vegetation and John and I were both lucky enough to photograph mating pairs. We both became quite complacent about seeing Hairy Dragonflies as they were regulars at the sites we visited. But a look at a map plotting their UK distribution shows that their stronghold is the South-east of England, with Argyll being but an outpost with few other sites recorded in Scotland. However, there is evidence that their range is expanding and they are likely to become a more familiar species.



*Hairy Dragonfly showing its downy covering*



*Mating pair of Hairy Dragonflies*

One species I was really keen to photograph was the Brilliant Emerald Dragonfly, having heard a description from Colin Woolf, the well-known local wildlife artist. He had photographed an individual last year and enthused about the bright emerald green metallic body and yellow markings on the face. I suppose the other draw was the rarity of this species – it is listed as Vulnerable in the British Red List and is restricted to two distinct and quite separate populations in south-east England and here in western Scotland. It is possible that this situation has arisen as a result of the species being driven south by the encroaching ice during the last ice age and it then failed to recolonise when the ice retreated. The current disjointed distribution may have arisen as a result of separate colonisations from different populations from the continent.

In the second week of June I thought I had seen a flying individual at my usual site but had not been able to grab a photo. Then a visit to a site a little further away brought several definite sightings and finally a couple of photos of an individual in flight. I would love to have got some shots of one at rest, but that was not to be.



*Brilliant Emerald Dragonfly*

By now, I had constructed a dedicated website: [www.argyll-dragons.co.uk](http://www.argyll-dragons.co.uk) where John and I were able to showcase our work. We also brought the naturalist Stuart Gibson on board, to contribute his writing skills with concise 'species notes' and also a few of his photos. Stuart is based on Mull and he regularly publishes his wildlife 'musings' online, under the guise of the 'Musky Mustelid'.

At the end of June, I received a message from a neighbour, David Jardine, to ask if we had managed to 'catch up' with any White-faced Darters for the website yet. He had heard from Pat Batty (a local dragonfly specialist) that they were present not far away and should be on the wing now. The timing was excellent, as the lock-down rules were starting to be relaxed a little and John and I were able to plan to meet up to see if we could track down this nationally scarce species that has been assessed as Endangered on the British Red List. There are only three strong populations of this species south of the border and in Scotland it is found almost exclusively in the northern half of the country. I had not even included it as one of 'target species' as I had not expected it to be present in Argyll! I was determined, therefore, that we should get some photos for the website and so I decided to do a recce a couple of days before John and I were due to meet up. When I saw the site, which feels quite remote, I immediately felt optimistic. There were numerous sphagnum covered, peaty pools in an open area surrounded by forest and at the very first pool I arrived at I saw my first White-faced Darter. As if to emphasise the boggy nature of the habitat, those first photographs show a male, with its characteristic white face with red and black patterned thorax and abdomen, resting amongst yellow mosses and red-beaded sundews. I couldn't resist sending a message to John: 'Got them', I wrote, 'Magic', he replied.

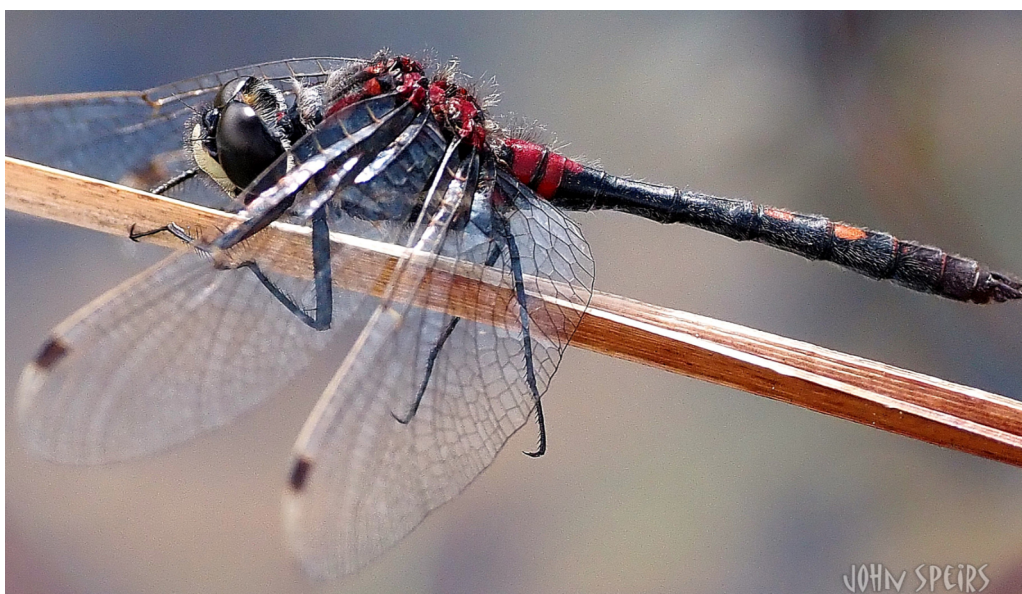




*White-faced Darter surrounded by mosses and sundews*

But it got better! Nearby there was a medium-sized loch which I felt was worth exploring and almost as soon as reached the water-side a male Brilliant Emerald flew along the water's edge. I sat down and waited and the Emerald flew past several times, either searching for prey or a mate. I scrambled along the bank to the end of the loch and saw another two males doing the same thing, presumably occupying separate, adjacent, territories.

Two days later, on a day of intermittent sunshine, John and I met up for the first time in months and made our way along forest tracks to reach the site once again. As we approached the same first pool, I spotted my first female White-faced Darter and attempted to photograph her. Unfortunately, she was too quick for me and was gone. Sadly, that was the only female we found, although over the course of the morning we found and photographed a dozen or so males. Another visit to the adjacent site was rewarded by further close encounters with a Brilliant Emerald, although poor John missed out on getting his definitive Emerald photo. However, that was made up for by some great shots of the Darters.



*Male White-faced Darter*



*Brilliant Emerald Dragonfly*



*Common Hawker Dragonfly*

To cap what was certainly my best day of Dragon hunting in Argyll, we found our first Common Hawker of the season, newly emerged and resting on vegetation at the side of one of forest tracks.

So now we had moved into July, which pretty much saw the end of the season for Large Red Damselflies and they were replaced by the beautifully coloured Emerald Damselflies. The Four-spotted Chasers, which we had come to take for granted also largely disappeared but soon it became high season for Common and Black Darters.

John and I finally visited the Black Lochs, near Oban, which had been on our list of top sites from the start. It was definitely later in the season that we would have liked and we had by now sadly missed the Downy Emerald Dragonflies for which this site is well known. We promised ourselves that we would be back in June next year to try to find this species. We did, however manage to photograph several of the colour variants of the Blue-tailed Damselfly, pick up the first few Common Darters of the year and the highlight was to photograph a female Variable Damselfly. The identification of this species is quite tricky (antehumeral stripes on the thorax look like exclamation marks and the markings on the first abdominal segment resemble a wine glass!) and it is thanks to Pat Batty for getting this one sorted out for us. John also managed to photograph an Azure Damselfly, another small blue damselfly at another loch near Oban.



*Variable Damselfly*



I suppose the last species that we were particularly keen to photograph this year was the Keeled Skimmer, which is a Darter-like dragonfly that has a preference for peaty pools. The males have an unmistakable powder- blue, tapering abdomen, while the females have a yellow abdomen that browns with age. They are dragonflies of the west and are found predominantly in the south-west peninsular, western Wales as well as western Scotland. Stuart Gibson has colonies where he has photographed individuals on Mull and Pat Batty recommended that we focus our attentions on Carsaig.

It was therefore back to the croft where we hatched the whole project in the previous October, initially on my own, where I found plenty of Common Darters, Emerald Damselflies and then both male and female Keeled Skimmers. It was with a great sense of satisfaction that I was able to capture close-up images of both the males and females, feeling that some kind of imaginary circle had been completed. Some ten days later I went back with John and we managed more photos of both males and females.

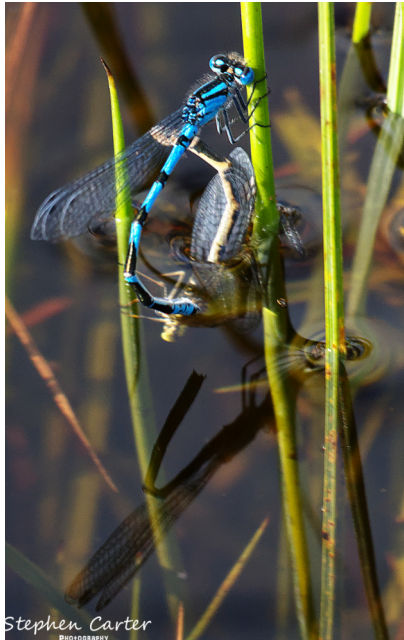


*Male Keeled Skimmer*



*Female Keeled Skimmer*

There were a few other highlights during the season. For example, the first time I saw both the females of both Common Blue and Emerald Damselflies plunging beneath the surface of the water to lay their eggs on submerged vegetation. In the case of the Common Blue, the male helped by pushing the female under the surface and she then climbed down a stalk on her own into the depths. With the Emeralds, both the male and female climbed down a stalk together, in the 'tandem' position to where the female ovipositioned her eggs.



*Common Blue Damselflies*



*Emerald Damselflies*

Then there was the time when I was heading home one day from Oban and I stopped off at a loch that John had shown me and I saw a couple of Golden-ringed Dragonflies flying around. These are a relatively common species, but are notable because of their large size and their dramatic yellow and black markings. They are usually solitary insects, so to see two together was unusual, but the explanation was provided when they joined together and proceeded to mate on the wing with a clear blue sky as a backdrop.



*Golden-ringed Dragonflies mating on the wing*



There were also disappointments, like failing to photograph the female White-faced Darter and missing out on the Downy Emeralds, but in a way the biggest disappointment was the small numbers of Hawker dragonflies that we saw in the latter part of the season. We did see and photograph both Common and Southern Hawkers, but the cool, wet and windy weather that we experienced in the late summer must have had a detrimental effect on their emergence and survival. So there was to be no repeat of the feasting that I had witnessed the previous October at Taynish. Maybe next year?



*Beautiful Demoiselle*

Visit [www.argyll-dragons.co.uk](http://www.argyll-dragons.co.uk) to see all the photos from the 2020 Dragon hunt.