

SKIMMERS



Skimmers are among the most common and colorful of all dragonflies. They are the primary group in the family *Libellulidae* (that also includes pennants, saddlebags, and others), which is the largest dragonfly family, containing over 1000 species world wide. At least 15 species occur in the Mojave Desert region. Like all dragonflies, they have large compound eyes that meet at the top middle of the head. In most cases, their body length (generally ranging from about 1 to 3 inches in length) is longer than their wingspan (over 4 inches in the larger species). Emerging from nymphs, called naiads, that are strictly aquatic and can live for several years, adults usually live for no more than a few weeks to a couple months. Most species are sexually dimorphic, that is, the genders are distinctly different in appearance. Males are the more colorful, while some females that look nothing like their counterparts can easily be mistaken as an entirely different species! Skimmers are mainly diurnal and get their name from their style of flying low over water before returning to a favorite perch.

Family LIBELLULIDAE (Skimmers)

Flame Skimmer (*Libellula saturata*)



Corn Creek; DNWR; NV



Corn Creek; DNWR; NV



Red Spring; Red Rock Canyon NCA; Nevada



photo: Steven Kessel



Measurements:

Average Length: 2" Wing Span: 3.5"

Distinguishing Field Characteristics:

medium size; orange abdomen; red-brown thorax; clear wings with orange basal patches, braces, and veins (extending half way down wing); dark red eyes, stigmas; (m) brightly colored; orange face (frons); (f) duller; tannish; yellowish veins; tan face

Notes:

common; diurnal; found near warm waters (ponds, streams, springs, etc.) mainly in the sw US; female dips abdomen into water to lay eggs; aka **Big Red Skimmer**; adults eat small insects; nymphs eat insects, small fish, tadpoles, etc.

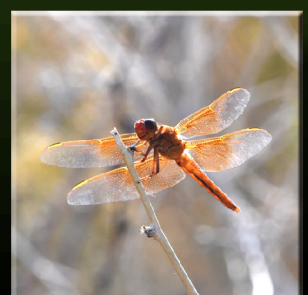
Mojave presence: May to September

Comments:

Common in riparian areas of the Mojave (marshes, springs, ponds, etc.), these brilliantly colored dragonflies (essentially the males) stand out in sharp contrast to their surroundings, which is a great aid to photographers--the vivid color helps in focusing on the insect.



Corn Creek; DNWR; NV



Mt Potosi; SMNRA; NV

Family **LIBELLULIDAE** (Skimmers)

Widow Skimmer (*Libellula luctuosa*)



CCWP; Las Vegas, NV



CCWP; Las Vegas, NV



Clark County Wetlands Park; Las Vegas, NV



Measurements:

Average: Length: 1.8" Wing Span: 3"

Distinguishing Field Characteristics:

medium size; transparent wings with dark basal patches; dark eyes, face; dark stigmas; (m) blue, pruinose abdomen; clear wingtips, basal patches bordered by wide bluish-white bands; (f) dark abdomen with yellow longitudinal stripes; green to yellow thorax with dark bands, pale stripe down middle; basal wing patches lack white borders

Notes:

common; diurnal; found near calm, warm waters (ponds, lakes, streams, etc.) throughout US and e CAN; often abandoned by male, female lays eggs (ovipositing) just under surface of water; adults prey on small aquatic insects, especially flies and mosquitoes, while nymphs eat insects, small fish, tadpoles, other naiads, etc.

Mojave presence: spring to summer

Comments:

Though common in wetland areas of the Mojave, I have yet to recognize and photograph a female. While males are very apparent and distinctive with their blue bodies and dark wing patches with white outer borders, the girls--not being gifted with the great looks--haven't stood out to grab my attention. I'll just have to be more attentive the next time I see the guys around. After all, where there's boys, there's girls!

Family LIBELLULIDAE (Skimmers)

Whitetail Skimmer (*Libellula/Plathemis lydia*)



Mammoth Hot Springs; YNP



Mammoth Hot Springs; YNP



Mammoth Hot Springs; Yellowstone National Park



Measurements:

Average: Length: 2.5" Wing Span: 3"

Distinguishing Field Characteristics:

medium-large size; thick, flattened abdomen; brown thorax; colorless wings with brown-black bands; dark face, eyes; (m) pruinose, **bluish-white abdomen**; wings have large central bands, smaller basal spots, colorless tips; (f) smaller size; slender, shorter abdomen with white or yellow markings on sides; smaller bands and dark tips on wings

Notes:

common locally; diurnal, territorial; found near wetlands (marshes, ponds, riparian areas, etc.) throughout most of NA; females lay eggs while flying by dipping abdomen into calm water; aka **Common Whitetail**, **Long-Tailed Skimmer**; adults eat small flying insects, particularly mosquitoes; naiads primarily consume aquatic insects

Mojave presence: rare

Comments:

Though Whitetails are common where you find them, which is rarely in the Mojave region, the boys above at Mammoth Hot Springs in **Yellowstone National Park** in September of 2019 are the only ones I've seen in the wild. I didn't see any females, but the guys were on constant patrol up and down the stream, apparently staking their territory while waiting for the girls' arrival.

Family LIBELLULIDAE (Skimmers)

Globe Skimmer (*Pantala flavescens*)



HBVP; Henderson, NV



CCWP; Las Vegas, NV



Clark County Wetlands Nature



HBVP; Henderson, NV



OWMA; Overton, NV

Measurements:

Average: Length: 2" Wing Span: 3"

Distinguishing Field Characteristics:

medium size; yellow to greenish thorax; **golden-yellow abdomen** with dark median stripe or dark spots near tip; transparent colorless wings, broad at base; **yellow face**; eyes red above, greenish below; amber stigmas; (m) often darker abdomen; amber patches at tips of wings; (f) paler abdomen; lacks wingtip patches

Notes:

very common; diurnal, migrates in large swarms; cosmopolitan in moist open areas in the tropic/temperate latitudes; most widespread dragonfly; aka **Wandering Glider**; female lays up to 2000 eggs in calm warm waters while in tandem flight; adults consume small insects; nymphs eat invertebrates, other nymphs (naiads), small fish, tadpoles, etc.

Mojave presence: migratory

Comments:

Since these migrants require moist areas with calm waters to propagate, they are not common to the Mojave Desert aside from wetlands, such as **Clark County Wetlands Park** and Corn Creek at the **Desert NWR**. I observed these females at the **Overton WMA** in October of 2020.



Family LIBELLULIDAE (Skimmers)

Roseate Skimmer (*Orthemis ferruginea*)



Iowa, Louisiana



Iowa, Louisiana



Iowa, Louisiana



The Villages; Leesburg, FL



Mills Pond; Pompano Bch, FL

Measurements:

Average: Length: 2" Wing Span: 1.5"

Distinguishing Field Characteristics:

medium size; transparent wings with reddish veins; (m) purplish-red thorax; pruinose, pinkish-red abdomen; purple-red eyes above, grayish below; red face; dark stigmas; (f) greenish thorax with brown markings and light stripe down middle; brownish abdomen; brownish eyes above, greenish below; tan face; brownish stigmas

Notes:

common; diurnal (males very territorial); found in a wide variety of habitats near open, calm water (marshes, ponds, creeks, etc.) in southern tier of US, Caribbean, south to Brazil; breeds in mud; perched male guards female as she lays her eggs by dipping her abdomen (ovipositing) in shallow water while flying; adults forage for insects in vegetation; nymphs eat any aquatic organisms they can catch

Mojave presence: rare

Comments:

This roseate at Corn Creek in the Desert NWR in southern Nevada is the only one I have seen and photographed in the Mojave. That should serve as a testament to how rare this species is in the region.



Family LIBELLULIDAE (Pennants)

Four-Spotted Pennant (*Brachymesia gravida*)



Pompano Beach, FL



Pompano Beach, FL



Paurotis Pond; Everglades National Park; Florida



Lake Rochelle; Lake Alfred, FL



Pompano Beach, FL

Measurements:

Average: Length: 2.5" Wing Span: 3"

Distinguishing Field Characteristics:

medium-large size; **dark central spot** (variable intensity) on each colorless wing; **white stigmas**; dark eyes; dark face with white patches; **(m)** dark thorax/abdomen with blue cast; **(f)** brown thorax/abdomen with black markings; often paler wing spots; **(juv m)** similar to female

Notes:

common; diurnal; sometimes in large groups; found near shallow, calm water mainly in the southern tier of the US from the Atlantic seaboard west to CA (rare); mate in flight, after which female lays her eggs by dipping her abdomen in the water; typically seen perched atop stems, grass blades, etc.; insectivorous

Mojave presence: rare

Comments:

These pennants are rarely spotted in the westernmost reach of their range, being far more prolific in the eastern US. The ones shown here, amongst hundreds in a field at Lake Okeechobee in May of 2021, are striking a pose that is very typical of their species--perched at the tips of upright stems.



Family LIBELLULIDAE (Dashers)

Blue Dasher (*Pachydiplax longipennis*)



Clark Co. Wetlands Park; NV



Clark Co. Wetlands Park; NV



Henderson Bird Viewing Preserve; Nevada



Clark Co. Wetlands Park; NV



Henderson BVP; NV

Measurements:

Average: Length: 1.5" Wing Span: 1.5"

Distinguishing Field Characteristics:

medium size; brown- and yellow-striped thorax (all blue in western/older males); **white face**; colorless wings (often with amber patch at base) with dark streaks; black stigmas; **(m)** long, pruinose, pale-blue abdomen with dark tip; **blue eyes**; **(f)** shorter, brown- and yellow-striped abdomen with pale tip; **green eyes**

Notes:

very common; diurnal; found in calm-water wetlands (ponds, marshes, etc.) throughout US (except Rockies, Dakotas), north just into CAN, south into MEX; eggs laid on aquatic vegetation; aka **Blue Pirate**, **Swift Long-Winged Skimmer**; perches on twigs, rocks, etc., with wings swept forward; adults eat small flying insects, larvae, etc.

Mojave presence: summer

Comments:

These are among the most abundant dragonflies in NA, emerging in late spring to early summer, and are commonly seen flying as late as October. They are very active fliers, territorial, and aggressive as they compete with other species and members of their own for the best perches to hunt from. Since the naiads can tolerate poor-quality water, they are considered an environmental indicator species.

Family LIBELLULIDAE (Meadowhawks)

Variegated Meadowhawk (*Sympetrum corruptum*)



Ash Meadows NWR; NV



Ash Meadows NWR; NV



Ash Meadows National Wildlife Refuge; NV



Corn Creek; DNWR; NV



Corn Creek; DNWR; NV

Measurements:

Average: Length: 1.75" Wing Span: 2.5"

Distinguishing Field Characteristics:

medium-small size; brown eyes, **tan face**; short white hairs and **two yellow dots** on thorax; colorless wings; **(m)** gray thorax; red bars on abdomen; wings have pinkish leading edges; red stigmas; **(f)** yellow-brown thorax with light stripes; yellow to orange bars on abdomen; wings have yellowish tan leading edges; yellow-tan stigmas

Notes:

common; diurnal; found in open areas and calm-water wetland environments (ponds, swamps, etc.) throughout most of NA from s CAN south through US, migrating to Central America; female lays eggs by dipping her abdomen in the water; seen late spring to fall; adults eat small flying insects, while nymphs will eat whatever they can catch.

Mojave presence: migratory

Comments:

This is one of the few dragonfly species that is occasionally seen far from any obvious source of water in the Mojave Desert. However, the one shown at left was not one of them. I found this male demonstrating his best tail-up perching skill, called **obelisking**, at the **Overton Wildlife Management Area** in Overton, NV, in September of 2020.



Family LIBELLULIDAE (Saddlebags)

Red Saddlebags (*Tamea onusta*)



Lake Alfred, FL



Lake Alfred, FL



Lake Rochelle; Lake Alfred, Florida



Measurements:

Average: Length: 1.75" Wing Span: 2.5"

Distinguishing Field Characteristics:

medium-small size; black dorsal patches on last two segments of abdomen, black cerci (rear appendages); colorless wings with red veins and stigmas, large **red basal patch** on hindwings; (**m**) overall pale red body; eyes red above, bluish below; red face; (**f**) orange-brown body; eyes orangish above, gray below; yellow face; (**juv m**) similar to female

Notes:

common; diurnal, solitary, territorial (males); found near clam waters (ponds, creeks, marshes, etc.) in NA from Ontario south to FL, west to CA and south to MEX; aka **Red-Mantled Saddlebags**; female perches on aquatic plant to lay singular eggs on stem; adult diet consists of small flying insects; naiads eat aquatic insects and other small prey

Mojave presence: summer

Comments:

Though common in the eastern US, these saddlebags are not nearly as abundant in the Mojave. The only ones I've spotted in the region thus far are a few, such as the one at right, at the **Overton Wildlife Management Area** in Overton, NV, in July of 2020. They are very active fliers, darting quickly about their territories, which makes them rather difficult to photograph.



Family **LIBELLULIDAE** (Saddlebags)

Black Saddlebag (*Tamea lacerata*)



Overton WMA; Overton, NV



Overton WMA; Overton, NV



Overton Wildlife Management Area; Overton, NV



Measurements:

Average: Length: 2" Wing Span: 2.5"

Distinguishing Field Characteristics:

medium size; colorless forewings, **dark basal patches** on hindwings; black stigmas; large head; **(m)** black body; single golden dorsal spot on one segment of abdomen; dark face; eyes dark red over dark blue (appear black in poor light); **(f)** brown body; usually several abdominal segments have **gold dorsal spots**; amber face; eyes lighter red over gray

Notes:

common; diurnal, congregate in swarms; found near calm waters (ponds, creeks, etc.) throughout NA from CAN to MEX; female temporarily separates from the male's clasp to deposit some eggs by dipping her abdomen in the water; two generations per year in warm climates, one in cold; adults feed on small flying insects, particularly mosquitoes; larva eat anything they can catch

Mojave presence: migratory

Comments:

Black saddlebags are fast, active fliers. They seldom settle on a well-exposed perch, which makes getting good shots quite the challenge. Uncommon in the Mojave Desert, I encountered the male above at the **Overton Wildlife Management Area** in Southern Nevada in October of 2020.

Family **LIBELLULIDAE** (Amberwings)

Mexican Amberwing (*Perithemis intensa*)



HBVP; Henderson, NV



HBVP; Henderson, NV



Bird Viewing Preserve; Henderson, NV



HBVP; Henderson, NV



HBVP; Henderson, NV

Measurements:

Average: Length: 1" Wing Span: 1.5"

Distinguishing Field Characteristics:

small size; **orange stigmas**; yellow face; eyes brownish red over pale green; **(m)** orange-yellow abdomen with pale rings between segments; orange to green thorax; **orange wings**; **(f)** brownish-yellow abdomen with pale rings between segments; greenish-yellow thorax; colorless wings with two separate patches of orange per wing, brown spot in each basal patch (sometimes both patches)

Notes:

common; diurnal; found near calm waters (ponds, creeks, wetlands, etc.) in semi-arid areas of sw US (s CA east to w TX), south through MEX (rare elsewhere); seen flying April to November; adults feed on small flying insects (especially flies and mosquitoes); larva eat variety of aquatic insects

Mojave presence: late summer to fall

Comments:

This dragonfly is rare in the Mojave aside from wetlands habitats in the eastern part of the region in the fall. They are particularly conspicuous in such areas as the **Moapa NWR**, the **Clark County Wetlands Park**, and especially the **Bird Viewing Preserve** in Henderson, NV, as depicted by the specimens shown above in September of 2022.