

Damsels and Dragons

By Ian Cox



Dragonflies and damselflies both belong to the order Odonata. Dragonflies belong to the sub order Anisoptera and damselflies to the sub order Zygoptera. Odonata undergo simple metamorphosis, which is they go through three life stages, egg nymph and adult so it is one of the easier orders to understand and imitate. Happily it is also a major food source, especially for Stillwater trout.

Though there are some adult mayfly and dragonfly imitations about it is really only the nymph stage is the only one of real interest to fly fisherman.

Aquatic dragonflies are divided into four families and damselflies into seven. All are found in rivers, even fast flowing ones, as well as in still waters. Their habitat also varies from vegetation to under and about rocks, with damselflies being more common around the latter, especially weeds beds.

Both are highly predatory and fairly big (between 2.5 and 7.5 cm). However while dragonflies have flat thick bodies, damselflies' are a lot slimmer. Damselflies also often sport three short gill tails. Dragonflies have no tails at all. Both have very large and prominent eyes.

Neither is very colourful in their nymph form. Olive through to dark brown covers their colour range.

Where they really differ is the way they move. Dragonflies are jet propelled while damselflies are not. Much like a jet ski, dragonflies squirt water out there rear ends, and can thus move about very quickly indeed. Damselflies are limited to wriggly little flicks to get about which means they don't.

For how dragons swim and hunt look at [this](#) and for damselflies look at [this](#). They hunt in much the same way. Click [here](#) to see damselfly hunting.

So it should come as no surprise that you should fish them differently.

Dragonfly imitations are fished with a short strip (5 to 8 cm) retrieve pausing between each strip. You can achieve the same effect with a slow figure of eight retrieve. Dragonflies can be fished throughout the water column so anything from a floating line to a sinking one and all in between will work.

Damselflies tend to congregate nearer the surface and given their lack of jet propulsion swim a lot more slowly. They are especially vulnerable on hot summer days as it is then that congregate in the shallows especially in still water. A floating or intermediate line and a very slow retrieve with tiny strips (never more than 2cm) work best. In fact you will probably do best to leave this fly to a dead drift allowing the occasional twitch to imitate a wriggle. Remember if you fast strip a damselfly imitation, and let's face it, which of us has not, you are imitating a dragonfly and not a damsel.

The odd thing is that dragons and damsels are both often regarded as still water imitations in this country. But they are not. Both are found in streams nestling under rocks and near vegetation even in fast flowing water. If you look at the opening blurb in Bill Hansford Steele's excellent booklet "Freshwater Flies for South African Waters" you will see that this is only a slightly more successful still water pattern for him. I was reminded of this fact last year when a friend hooked into a 42cm trout fishing a tiny mountain pool on the upper Bell River drifting a large damsel imitation.

Both can be fished the whole year round.

So what is available when it comes to patterns?

In both cases the primary trigger are their large eyes. Members of the order Odonata are predators and as such need 20/20 vision. Their eyes are huge and your fly should reflect this.

The most widely available and best damsel imitation is the [Red Eyed Damsel](#). It is very hard to beat if it is tied well, that is with an abdomen that is so thin so as to be almost non existent. This is seldom the case with most damsel patterns I have seen. Indeed I sometimes think we have this fly all wrong. I wonder if we ever imitate a damselfly at all. Think about it damselflies wriggle and how often do you see an imitation that does that? It's the tail that wriggles. So why do we use a long shanked hook and tie an abdomen? If we were true to the insect we would tie a fly where the thorax and head took up all of what would be a very short shanked hook with a long marabou tail behind, perhaps tied off near the tip thus representing the abdomen and gill tails. That would be a lot closer to what we are trying to imitate which perhaps makes the [Kamberg Nymph](#) the nearest thing we have to a true damselfly imitation even though it is punted as a dragonfly imitation.

Getting a damselfly to wiggle is not easy. The best way to do this even though it does in my view, cross the line between true fly fishing and dragging a rapala is to use a Petitjean [Magic Head](#). See the excellent article [That Elusive side to side Wiggle](#) by Ed Herbst that was recently published on Tom Sutcliffe's [The Spirit of Fly Fishing](#).

The most ubiquitous commercially available dragonfly imitation is Randall Kaufman's [Lake Dragon](#) though some truly horrible variations of Herman Botes' [Papa Roach](#) are also sold. Buy it if you must. It's a hell of a lot better than the Lake Dragon. But we are fly tyers so much better to tie your own. The best dragonfly imitation by a country mile, in my view, is Herman Botes' Papa Roach. Tom Sutcliffe's [Neutral Density Dragon](#) is an excellent dragonfly imitation, so is one of my all-time favourites, the [Filoplume Dragon](#). Terry [Ruane's Dragon](#) is another. In fact such is the attractiveness of dragonflies to trout that very few of our better fly tyers haven't had a go at creating a dragonfly nymph imitation. See for example Fred Steynberg's [Stream Dragon](#).

Finally if you want to learn more you can do a lot worse than visit Fred Steynberg's excellent web site [Linecasters](#) where you will find an article he and Mario Du Preez wrote entitled "[A South African dragonfly nymph imitation](#)". They also did one on [damselflies](#).