

EYE — D Corner

Red Damselflies

To the expert eye, the Small red damselfly (*Ceriagrion tenellum*) and Large red damselfly (*Pyrrhosoma nymphula*) are very easy to tell apart, not least because they inhabit different habitat niches. The large red damsel is common and well distributed across Sussex, whereas the Small red damsel is a national rarity confined to acid heathland bogs and is indeed one of our smallest damselflies. However, to the untrained eye it may not be so easy to spot the differences. This little guide should help you to tell the two apart in a few easy steps. The good news is that at the moment, only these two red damselflies occur in Sussex.

Appearance

The male Small red damselfly is, except for the blackish thorax, almost entirely red, including its legs. The female Small red damselfly comes in a few forms, one of which resembles the male and another which has a noticeably bronze/black thorax and abdomen with red at the top and the bottom. The Small red also has wing spots (pterostigma).



Large red damselfly showing more immature yellow colouring © B Foreman

The male Large red damselfly is mainly red, with black legs and black bands on the base of the abdomen. The female also occurs in a few forms, with varying degrees of black on the abdomen.

Both species have red or reddish yellow eyes.

Flight period

If seeing a red damselfly early in the year, particularly if it is not on heathland then it is almost certainly a Large red. These are one of the first damselflies to emerge, and they tend to fly from March to September, whereas the Small reds fly from early June to September.

Distribution and Habitat

In Sussex you are only likely to see the Small reds on Ash-down Forest and on heathlands in West Sussex, particularly around West Chiltington.

Large reds can be found across Sussex, although they too appear to prefer slightly acid streams and seepages. Nationally the Small red is only found in Southern England and West Wales.

Like all damselflies, they need water to complete their life cycle, however the Small red requires acid-heathy bogs and pools, while the Large red can be found on anything from newly created ponds, to lakes, canals, and stretches of fast flowing stream.

Neither species are found abundantly on the coast, however if a red damselfly is seen on the coast it is almost certainly the Large red.



Small red damselfly, Ovipositing pair © B Rainbow

Larvae

Small red damselfly larvae are squat with broad and short caudal lamellae with dark veins. Hind margin of head distinctively angular. The Large red has a 'robust larva' with a distinctive black X on the caudal lamellae.