

Eye — D Red Darters

The commonest species of dragonfly in Sussex and the U.K. is the Common Darter, which is on the wing from mid June until the end of Autumn. You all know what the male looks like - red abdomen, brown thorax, brown eyes, dark legs and red pterostigma – so no problem identifying it is there?

Well unfortunately there is. The Ruddy Darter, our other resident Red Darter species, has exactly the same features. So we need to look at other more subtle differences.

Applying our “Rule of 3” to make it easy to confirm identity, we can focus on:

- 1) Colour of legs ...black (Ruddy), dark with pale stripe (Common)
- 2) Shape of abdomen...waisted and shorter (Ruddy), almost straight (Common)
- 3) Colour of abdomenblood-red (Ruddy), orange-red (Common)

Adult male Ruddy Darter



If still uncertain of these features – is it really waisted or is it nearly straight? (there is a fair degree of variance in the various specimens we may happen across) - or unable to gain a sufficiently good view, let's add a 4th feature which could be even more difficult to get a sight of:

Fronsdark line across the top and down the sides (Ruddy), across the top only (Common).

Having said that, my eyes automatically home in on the side of the thorax whenever I see a darter, looking for the two yellow-green stripes and placing a large tick in the Common Darter box, if they are present. That is, after ensuring that I'm not looking at a Black Darter. So after all that, we've finished up with 5 features, which is probably a wise precaution since *Sympetrum*s are a notoriously difficult genus.

We can also apply features 1, 2 and 4 to separate immature males. A couple of years ago, I was walking on the Downs and was surprised to come across approximately 20 immature darters. In the field, it caused a fair degree of head-scratching as to which was Common and which was Ruddy so I took a few photographs and examined them in more detail when I returned home.

Red darters continued



Left: Common Darter, Immature Male. Right: Ruddy Darter, Immature Male

As you can see, both darters have the same coloured yellow-brown abdomen, brown and green eyes and brown upper thorax. However, the differences in leg colour, shape of abdomen and extent of frons are sufficiently clear to make a confident diagnosis.

So now we are reasonably comfortable with sorting out the males or even immature specimens of our two common species, how will we cope if a rarity turns up? What if the insect we are looking at is a Red-veined Darter? This is the most likely rarity to turn up in Sussex as it is a common species just over the channel. You might be alerted to its skittish behaviour or its presence on an earlier date than normal.

So what to look for:-



Abdomen...a brick-red colour and straight

Red veins in leading edge of wings

Pterostigma....pale with dark edging

Frons....red with white edging

Thorax...Pale, bluish diagonal stripe half-way along the side

Eyes...Blue underside

Frons...Dark line along the top and down the side (as for Ruddy).

That's a bit more than a "Rule of 3", but if we are to have such a record "accepted", we cannot have too many distinguishing features.

There are other rare darters, which we may encounter such as Yellow-winged (less likely to occur, but easier to identify because of the fairly obvious yellow colour at the base of their wings), Vagrant (very similar to Common) and Southern. Perhaps keep your eyes out for this but I think they are better kept for another day.