

# Eye D - Skimmers

Skimmers are very similar to the Chasers and as a beginner you may find it difficult to distinguish between the Black-tailed Skimmer (*Orthetrum cancellatum*), Keeled Skimmer (*Orthetrum coerulescens*), Broad-bodied Chaser (*Libellula depressa*) and Scarce Chaser (*Libellula fulva*).

All four dragonflies are reasonably sized, with males with powdery-blue bodies, and more or less yellow coloured females. Skimmers are similar to the Chasers but are less broad in the abdomen and they have completely clear wings. The skimmers are fast, low-flying insects which spend time resting on a regular perch (usually a stick or bare ground) when they are not defending territories.

It is probably easiest to first eliminate the male & female Broad-bodied Chasers with a beginners eye. Both male and female Broad-bodies have dark patches at the base of each wing where it connects with the abdomen which is obviously broad and flat.

Next to eliminate the Scarce Chaser which has a unique combination of a black-tipped, powder-blue abdomen, and dark patches at the base of each wing. Both males and females often have a smoky-yellow patch running along the upper edge of the wings.

**Right: Male Broad-bodied Chaser**  
© B Rainbow.

**Note the dark patches at the base of each wing and the broad abdomen.**



Now to the Skimmers themselves.



The Black-tailed Skimmer is relatively common in Southern England and is locally common throughout Sussex. It is likely it is also under-recorded in Sussex. It flies from mid May to late August and prefers large, shallow, open ponds, lakes, gravel pits, ditches and slow moving rivers. They have a liking for bare ground near the water where the males can sun themselves.

**Left: Male Scarce Chaser**  
© J Luck. **Note the black rub marks where mating has taken place with a female, and the dark patches at the base of each wing.**

# Skimmer Eye-D Continued . . . . .

The male Black-tailed Skimmer has a grey-brown thorax and a powder-blue abdomen with a black tip (tail) and yellow/orange elongated spots on the sides.



**Female Black-tailed Skimmer © D Mitchell. Note there is no black line running along the middle of the abdomen as in a female Keeled Skimmer**



**Black-tailed Skimmer male © J Wilson**

The female has striking black, curved, bracket-shaped markings on either side of her abdomen.

With age, the male of the Scarce Chaser and Black-tailed Skimmer often develops black scratch marks where the female's legs have grasped the abdomen during mating. The female tends to become more tawny-brown or bluish-grey with age.

In comparison, the Keeled Skimmer is locally common in the UK but is rare in Sussex and has had under 100 recorded sightings in the County since 1989. The Keeled Skimmer prefers acid habitats such as acid pools, streams and ditches in heathy areas, usually where Sphagnum mosses are present. Most of the Sussex records are found at Ash-down Forest where the dragonfly is at the eastern edge of its range. The Keeled Skimmer flies later than the Black-tailed, and can be seen only from around later June to mid August.



The Keeled Skimmer is a darter-sized dragonfly with an obviously slim, tapering abdomen. The male has a pronounced 'keel' especially when viewed from the side and the female has a black line running along the top of the abdomen from the head to the tail.

So, in summary, when looking for ways of distinguishing the Skimmers, keep an eye out for:-  
Skimmers — which have completely clear wings

Chasers — which have partially or completely coloured or marked wings

Male Black-tailed Skimmer — Yellow/orange spots on side of abdomen and obvious black 'tail'

Female Black-tailed Skimmer - Bracket-shaped, curved black markings on side of abdomen

Male & female Broad-bodied Chaser — Dark patches at bases of wings and obvious broad abdomen

Male Scarce Chaser - Unique black-tipped, powder-blue abdomen

Scarce Chasers - Dark patch at base of each wing, smoky-yellow patch along upper edge of wings.

Keeled Skimmer — Prefers acid, heathy habitats.

Male Keeled Skimmer - Obvious 'keel' or pinched abdomen

Female Keeled Skimmer — Obvious black stripe running along centre of abdomen