



Mudpuppy's Pond

DRAGONFLIES

Have you ever spent the afternoon beside a backyard pond, just watching the dragonflies? Although these long, slender insects are often called ‘stingers’ or ‘devil’s darning needles’, they do not have stingers and are totally harmless to humans. They are welcome at the many lakes and ponds in Kansas City because they are ferocious predators of mosquitoes.



(Photo: Laurie Brown)

Dragonflies are incredibly ancient. Ancestors of the insects you watched last summer flew over marshes nearly 300 million years ago.

Like most insects, dragonflies begin their lives as eggs, hatch, develop into larva, shed their skins as they get bigger (molting) and turn into adults. Dragonfly eggs are laid in the water or on the stems of submerged plants. Once it is hatched, the larva begins to hunt. It has no wings, but propels itself around water eating

other insects, tadpoles and tiny fish. Once the larva is fully-grown, a process that may take up to six years, it emerges from the water, using the claws on its feet to crawl onto a plant. Although the dragonfly hunts over land, it must return to the water to lay its eggs.

Dragonflies consume huge numbers of insects each day. These amazing creatures form a basket-like trap with their legs to catch a tasty treat on the fly. Then they can use their sharp mouthparts to cut up their prey.

The dragonfly has a three-part body – head, thorax and abdomen. It doesn’t have a nose so it breathes through spiracles, which are tiny holes in the abdomen. They have three pairs of jointed legs and two pairs of long, delicate membranous wings

Their legs are used for perching, not walking. You will often see them resting on water lilies or foliage in ornamental ponds. They can hover in mid-air because their two sets of wings move independently. Their wings beat 20 to 90 times a second and its speed in the air is phenomenal. The insects escape their greatest enemies – birds – by flying at speeds approaching 50 miles an hour!

Dragonflies have large compound eyes, which are made up of many smaller lenses or facets. *The dragonfly has the best eyesight of all insects*; its 30,000 lenses allow it to see up, down, sideways, forward and backward.

Look around this spring and summer and keep track of the different varieties of dragonfly you see.—Debby Barker

AN A-“MAIZE”-ING SNAKE!

The red rat snake is also known as the “corn” snake because of the black and white checkerboard pattern on its belly that resembles Indian corn or maize. Corn snakes are non-venomous and very popular in the pet trade because they are relatively easy to care for and have a docile nature. They have been bred in captivity for over 40 years.



(Photo: Andrea Schubert)

Corn snakes are not native to Missouri but are found in the southeastern United States, being most abundant in Florida. A large variation in color and pattern occurs in this species, depending on the region of the country where the snake is found. These snakes are adaptable to many habitats including

rocky hillsides, meadows, wooded areas and especially abandoned buildings. Corn snakes are excellent climbers and can be found in trees or down in animal burrows. Mostly active at dusk and dawn, these snakes hunt mainly mice and rats and therefore are extremely helpful in the control of local rodent populations. Corn snakes are constrictors and use their muscular bodies to coil around and suffocate their prey before swallowing it whole.

Breeding season for this species is March though May and the females usually lay their eggs from May to July. A normal clutch of eggs can number from 10 to 30 and the eggs are laid in decaying vegetation or rotting logs where there is enough heat and humidity to incubate them. No parental care is given to the eggs which hatch in about 2 months.



(Photo: D. Clark)

Our corn snake is captive-bred and was donated to the nature center because it had bitten its owner. Further inquiry revealed the previous owner was feeding the snake live mice *by hand* --- a case of mistaken identity! Warm hand = warm live mouse = food = a bite! After “training” this snake NOT to associate food with a human hand by using metal tongs and non-live food during feeding, it has become a favorite for education programs!

Andrea Schubert, Staff Naturalist