

Dragonflies by Joann Wallenburn, Clearwater Resource Council

The Clearwater Resource Council (CRC) adopted the dragonfly for its logo for reasons other than it is pretty and everybody likes dragonflies. Dragonflies are voracious predators, the velociraptors of the aquatic insect community. Because they are at the top of their food chain as both juveniles (nymphs) and adults, they are considered indicators of environmental health. A lot of dragonflies flying around is a good thing.

It's fun to write these articles because it gives me a chance (an excuse) to study and learn about something new. I remember dragonflies flying around from my childhood days on the Chesapeake Bay, but didn't give them much attention beyond, "Oh. Pretty."

Dragonflies actually pre-date the dinosaurs by many million years. The largest of the ancient dragonflies had a wingspan of 24". Today, there are over 5000 species world-wide, with 450 species in North America. The largest of today's species is found in South America and has a wingspan of 7".

Dragonflies begin life as eggs laid in the water or on aquatic plants by a female, after mating. The eggs hatch into dull brown aquatic nymphs. Nymphs hide under twigs, sticks, stones or leaves and eat prey as they come along. Its prey includes tadpoles, small fish, mosquito larva, other dragonfly nymphs, and water bugs, devouring its own weight in one feeding.

Dragonfly nymphs are able to breathe underwater by absorbing oxygen from the water and do not have to go to the surface for air like most aquatic insects. They remain in this nymph stage for as long as 4-5 years, growing and molting their skin. On their final molt, into adulthood, they climb out of the water, up a plant. If you look carefully, you may find the discarded nymph exoskeleton of a newly molted dragonfly.

The adult dragonfly only lives a few short months; long enough to mate and lay eggs and start the cycle all over again. As adults, dragonflies are very effective hunters. Their eyes have evolved to give them the best eyesight among all insects. They can look down and up at the same time; up for danger and down for prey. They capture food and eat it while flying. Dragonflies are also known as mosquito hawks because they eat so many mosquitoes, up to 600 a day. I vote to keep dragonflies around!

Each year, at its annual picnic, CRC presents Dragonfly Awards to a few members of the community who exceed expectations in their contributions to conserving our beautiful natural resources and our rural way of life. This year, the Dragonfly Award recipients are: Patricia Bouta, Tonya Smith, and Don Bissell.

Patricia Bouta has been a volunteer with the Adopt-A-Lake program since its inception. She first sampled Salmon Lake, which was quite challenging with a canoe, so she transitioned to Lake Alva and has been instrumental in finding a volunteer to sample Salmon Lake. My husband and I recently paddled to the test point in Lake Alva for a quality control check. That's quite a trip Patricia makes every other week for months. Patricia also serves as the region's loon coordinator for the Common Loon Working Group and gives much time and effort to the annual Loon and Fish Festival. Her energy level is off the scale!

Tonya Smith is a science teacher at Seeley Swan H.S. Her science classes are nothing like mine were! She has her students out in the field doing research-grade work. Tonya met with members of CRC to explore the development of a "Students-In-Action" program. The ultimate decision was to design a research project that would determine the amount of water that flows through Morrell Creek at the high school, and measure the nutrients (nitrogen and phosphorus) at different levels of flow. Tonya submitted several grant requests and was awarded ALL of them, including grants from Plum Creek and the Seeley Lake Community Foundation. When school is in session, her students will frequently be seen in the creek, taking scientific measures. Through this project, the students are receiving hands-on education in hydrology, chemistry, geology, math, engineering, technology, ecology ... Tonya gave a lot of her summer vacation time to continue the sampling throughout the summer.

Don Bissell has been our go-to volunteer on Lake Inez. He and his wife Joyce recently sold their house on the west shore of Lake Inez. This community is losing a valuable resource. Don readily agrees to help and always with a smile and a very pleasant "hello". Like Patricia, Don has also volunteered with the Adopt-A-Lake program since the beginning. He has volunteered his time and his boat for group training, in addition to taking the bi-monthly measures every summer since 2008. Don spent many additional hours on his boat with CRC's AIS prevention coordinator helping to test-out various mechanisms to monitor for invasive mussels, and recruited neighbors to also help with the monitoring. Don has also served as the loon observer for Lake Inez. Don found and trained a replacement for his Adopt-A-Lake duties before stepping down. We greatly appreciate Don's volunteerism and his support for CRC's programs and for our community as a whole.

Please say, "thank you" to these folks when you see them. Our community benefits from their exceptional efforts. If you would like to join in the fun, please contact CRC at 677-0069. Want an excuse to get out on the lake? We have many.