

The wonders of the Kimberley

A glimpse at its unique environment – ‘Dragonflies’

(by Brian Kane)



Where do dragonflies come from? What do they eat? Do they sting? Where do they get their name? These are some of the questions that may occur to us when hordes of them appear in the Kimberley after the wet season each year. The old myths have long disappeared and now this beautiful insect is admired to the point where it is common these days to see dragonfly key rings, cards and stain glass hanging ornaments as popular sale items.

In the UK dragonflies were known as ‘horse stingers’ in years gone by. Back then, people observed that a captured dragonfly curled its abdomen as if in an attempt to sting and occasionally horses seemed to be stung as they would twitch and skip about the fields. We now know that flies caused this irritation to horses and that the dragonflies were in fact feeding on the flies. So while dragonflies are fearsome predators of other flying insects, this beautiful creature is harmless to animals and does a huge favour by keeping the fly population down.

Dragonflies are among the oldest insects on earth as fossilized remains show that they existed 300 million years ago and some had a wingspan over 60 cm. Today, there are 4500 different species of dragonfly (300 species in Australia) varying in size and colour. They are sunlight-loving insects who live near fresh water, stagnant pools or marshes. Observation here in the Kimberley indicates that dragonflies are of a green, brown or red colour which becomes stronger as the insect grows older.

Dragonflies move through the air at great speed and they can fly for hours on end but usually they patrol a particular area looking for insects to eat. Mosquitoes, flies and midges are a large part of their diet and these are plucked from the air. This fact alone should endear these delightful creatures to us.

Mating usually takes place in the air, and the female lays its eggs in water, the stems of water plants or into mud. After 2 – 5 weeks the eggs hatch into

nymphs. These are called "mud-eyes" and are excellent bait for freshwater fish. Their emergence as adults is often taken as a signal that the wet season is over.

It is amazing that dragonflies can fly forwards, sideways, backwards and hover like a helicopter. It is said that Di Vinci wrote many papers on the possibility of an aircraft being modeled on the dragonfly after he observed them. Dragonflies have only a short lifespan once they take flight because they disappear after two months. However, they have the vital role of keeping the insect population in balance and their preservation is important to the well being of everyone who lives here in the Kimberley.



Dragonfly on lily pads at Beagle Bay – photo CAS

BK's Kimberley nature web site:

<http://www.stmarysbroome.wa.edu.au/home/nature/aaopen.html>