

Dragonflies of the Ottawa-Gatineau Region

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Species Profile 10

The Elfin Skimmer (*Nannothemis bella*)

Family: Libellulidae



A female Elfin Skimmer

Earlier in this series of profiles in T&L 54(3), we looked at one of the largest dragonflies in the world, the Dragonhunter. In this profile we will be looking at one of the smallest dragonflies in the world, the Elfin Skimmer. In fact, only *Nannophyopsis clara* (Dwarf Emerald found in China) is smaller, but only marginally. They are well proportioned dragonflies with a similar body plan to most skimmers, so in a photograph without scale, it's hard to appreciate just how small these Elfin Skimmers actually are. We have other small dragonflies like Blue Dashers and the various meadowhawks and whitefaces, but Elfin Skimmers are smaller still. The females in particular, with their contrasting black and yellow colours, very much resemble small wasps or bees.



A male Elfin Skimmer.

My first experience with this species was at a roadside fen in the Frontenac Region. I had been given some directions to a fen where they had been found in the past and though I had heard how small they were, I really had no template in my mind for just how small they truly are. So naturally, upon arrival at this site, I started my search looking at the fen vegetation and I wasn't having any luck. I saw a few small dragonflies, but they turned out to be Hudsonian Whitefaces (also a small dragonfly) and a few Calico Pennants. My partner, Marie, called out to me that she'd found one. Marie excitedly pointed to some grasses, but I couldn't see the object she was pointing at. "There...right here"... and then I saw it. "Wow!" I exclaimed, "That *is* small". Now having seen one, suddenly I started finding more. They were not abundant but there were about a dozen of them. On this, my first visit, I only found the females. On my next visit I was able to find a few males, though they were heavily outnumbered by females.

Most often we encounter more male than female dragonflies. In most situations, the males are found at the water defending their territories from competitors and pursuing any available females that come down to the water. Females, for the most part, only go to the water to find a mate and to lay their eggs, so they just aren't seen as often. They spend most of their days in tree canopies or other habitats where they hide quite easily. In this case, with a roadside fen, the males were patrolling and defending territories in the fen proper (largely inaccessible), and as luck would have it, the females' territory away from the males was the vegetation between the fen and the road, making viewing somewhat easy.

ID Hints

Male:

- A darkish black body in the immature male that becomes pruinose with age
- Pruinosity can be blueish, grey and sometimes quite white
- White face

Female:

- Yellow striping on the black thorax
- Yellow markings dorsally on the abdomen giving a striped appearance
- White face
- Strong resemblance to a small bee or wasp



A mature male showing the blueish pruinosity. Some older males can be quite white as well.



Immature males are quite black but quickly develop pruinosity as they mature.

When and Where to Look for Elfin Skimmers

Finding the Elfin Skimmer is no easy task in the Ottawa-Gatineau Region. Both of the two sites I'm aware of are on private property. One is a bog north of Gatineau and the other is the White Lake Fen near Carleton Place. Although it is possible to get permission to access this fen, it is, from what I'm told, an arduous bug infested trek that can even be somewhat hazardous. A well-known Ottawa dragon hunter had the misfortune of falling through the fen mat up to her waist. Luckily, she was not alone. It is possible that there are populations of Elfin Skimmers in smaller fenlands that have escaped the notice of local naturalists over the years. Surprisingly, this species is not found at either the Mer Bleu or the Alfred Bog, both of which have some suitable pockets of habitat similar to where the Elfin Skimmer is often found.

The best bet for viewing Elfin Skimmers close to Ottawa is in the Chaffey's Locks area and the fens/bogs of the Frontenac Region north of Kingston. Many of these wetlands are adjacent to the roads and make for easy viewing.

I have consistently found this species in the last week of June when they seem to be at their peak in Eastern Ontario, and that is when I would suggest looking for them. They do emerge earlier in June and can linger into August in other regions. As you can imagine, with a limited population of Elfin Skimmers in our region, there is still much to learn about their flight season here.



A female Elfin Skimmer.

Note the white face, yellow markings on a dark thorax and the striped abdomen

Chris's Dragonfly profiles are available on the OFNC website, ofnc.ca: go to Publications, then to *Trail & Landscape*; the list of profiles is under "Online access".

<https://ofnc.ca/publications/trail-landscape>



An Elfin Skimmer in hand showing exactly how tiny they are. Photo by Jimmy Dee.

Possible Confusables

Once you've seen an Elfin Skimmer it would be hard to imagine mistaking it for anything else, and in the case of the male I believe this is true. However, the female looks enough like a female Blue Dasher that it would be possible to confuse the two if one had no experience with either species. Blue Dashers, though much larger than Elfin Skimmers, are still very small dragonflies. When looking through a field guide or checking a photo against an online app image after the fact, the relative size of each species may not be so apparent. It's important when you are studying dragonflies in the field to note other dragonflies near the object of your attention both for scale when judging size, and to help with the ID, as males are usually to be found near any available female.

Female Blue Dashers look somewhat similar but note the dashers markings down the side of the abdomen. Also, the dasher has more striping on the thorax and the stripes are thinner. She's also twice the size of the Elfin Skimmer.

