

Taper-tailed Darner



Andy Rabin

Taper Tailed Darner (*Gomphaeschna antilope*) – 2.2", 52-60 mm

Habitat Conservation Alert!

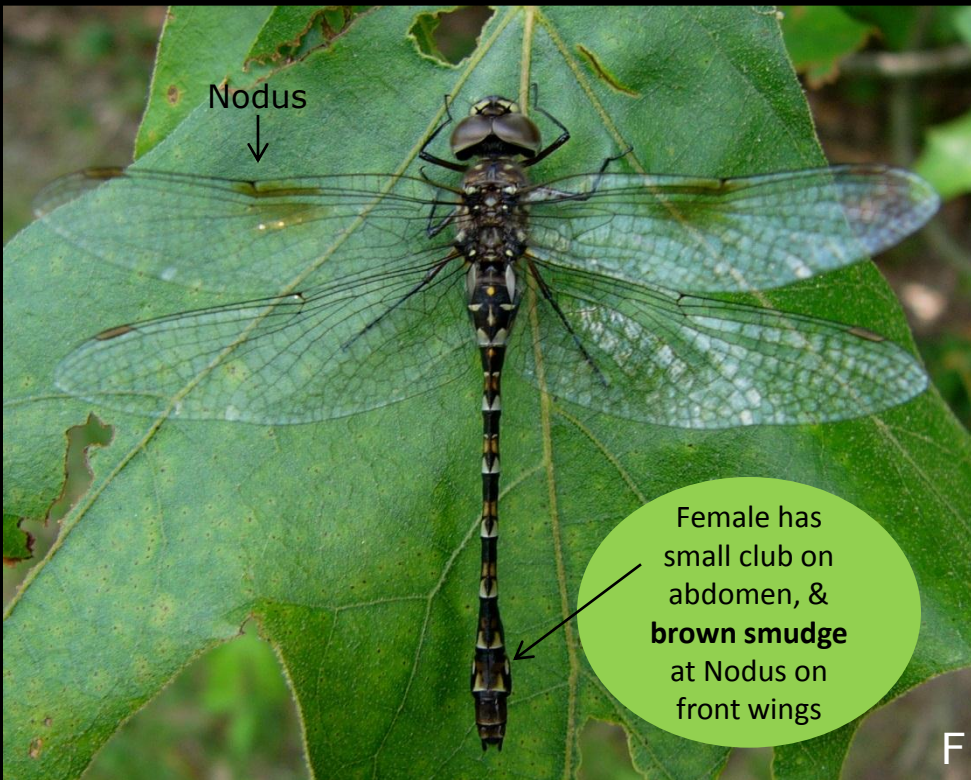
Flight Record:
(6/11-6/24)
Peaks in mid-June.

Rare

Habitat:
Swamps, woodland bogs, shallow forested pools

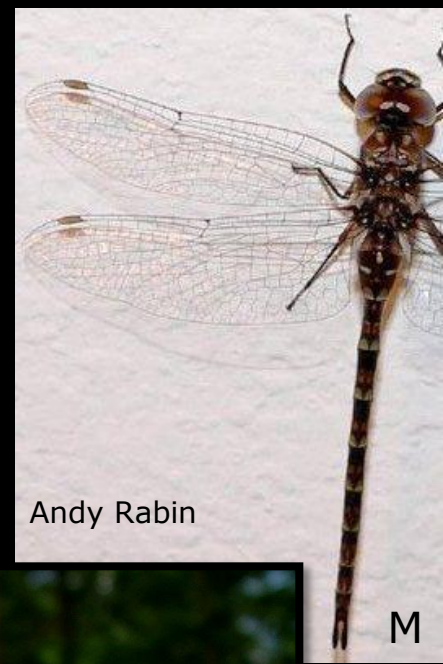
First Glance:
Medium. Thin, dark body, clear wings (female wings have faint brownish smudge). Flies high over clearings, and perches on tree trunks.

Compare:
Harlequin Darner



Female has small club on abdomen, & brown smudge at Nodus on front wings

Male is duller (no green), & thinner than the male Harlequin Darner



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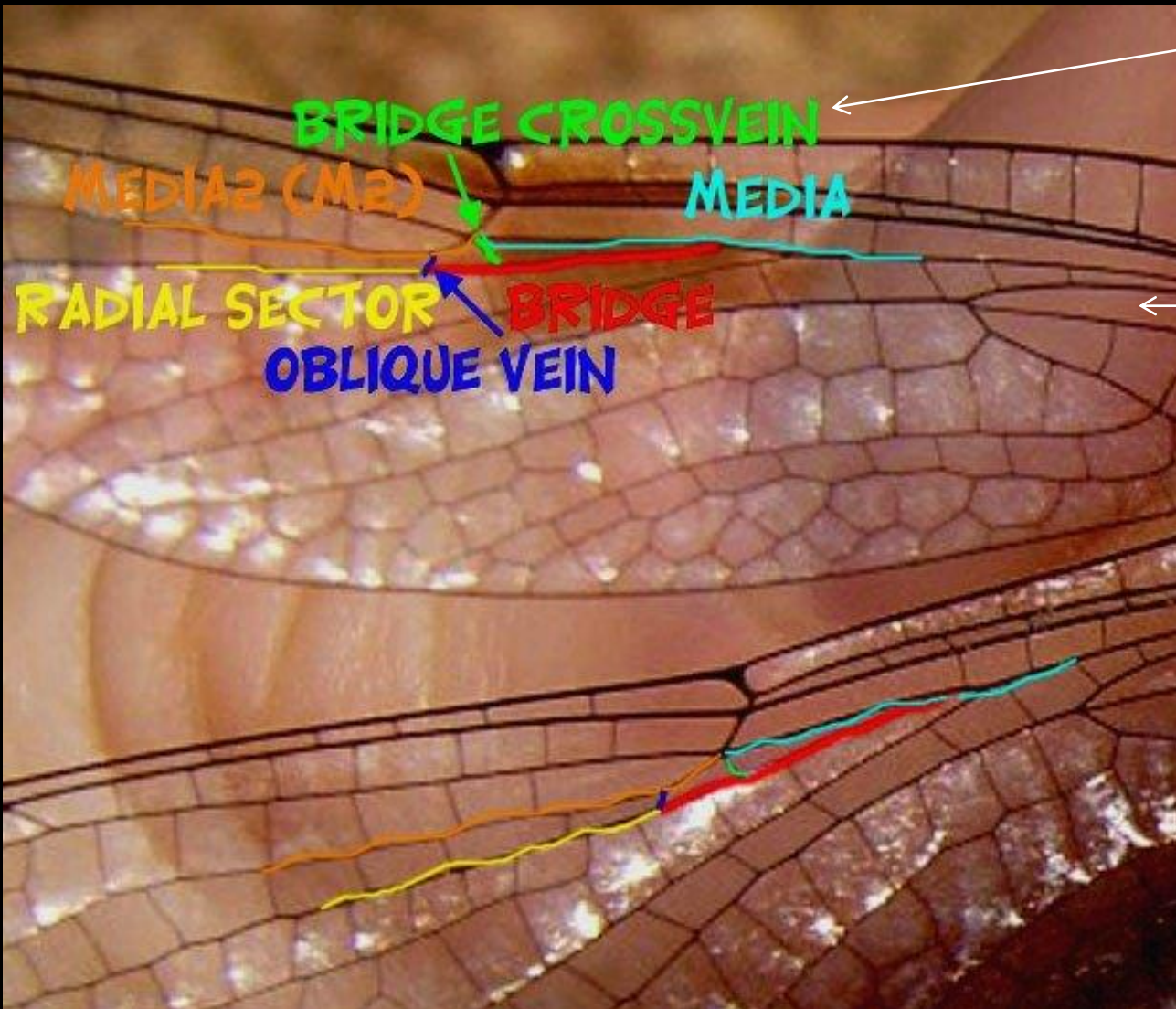
Adult eyes gray/brown - adult Harlequin males have green eyes.



Wing veins next page

Taper Tailed Darner (*Gomphaeschna antilope*)

Taper-tailed
Darners have
one Bridge
Crossvein –
Harlequin
Darners have
two



*wing-vein diagram by Andy Rabin

Clearly, this is
difficult, and only
possible **in-hand**,
but it's one of the
few *sure* ways to
tell the two
females apart.

Notes from the field – Taper-tailed Darner:

This secretive swamp and bog dweller is rare in our area - you're even less likely to see Taper-taileds than their only slightly more common cousin, the Harlequin Darner. Together, they make up the genus *Gomphaeschna* – Pygmy Darners. Small for a darner, both species are about the size of a Great Blue Skimmer or Black Saddlebags.

Trying to tell the two apart can leave the most dedicated dragonfly geek cross-eyed, and wondering whose bright idea it was to separate them into two species. If you're looking at a perched male, it's actually not too hard, or at least not impossible. Taper-tailed males have a *noticeably thinner*, almost pointed abdomen, and the eyes and body are much less colorful than those of mature Harlequins. Females and immature males are much more difficult, hence the wing vein diagram (thanks Andy!).

Probably the best way to tell them apart is to use the calendar. If you're in Northern VA and see a pygmy darner *before* May 7th, it's a Harlequin – *after* June 7th, it's a Taper-tailed (climate change may make this technique slightly less reliable). I imagine variations of that may work elsewhere, but those specific dates just work here (see Northern VA map). Between May 7 and June 7 the calendar can still be useful, just not a definite ID.



Taper-tailed,
mature male

Harlequin,
mature male

I spent several years slogging through local swampy forests to find this species. A true habitat specialist, Northern VA just doesn't have many of the swamps and bogs this species needs. My attempts lost a few sneakers, gave me soggy feet, and produced many *other* beautiful dragonflies, but never a Taper-tailed.... until the day I stopped looking. One sunny June morning as I explored a power line meadow easement in the Cub Run watershed, I was thrilled to see my first Bar-winged Skimmer! After many photos, I watched the beautiful blue male soar high over the meadow, to get away from me and my camera. As I watched him join several Mocha Emeralds feeding on a

swarm of high-flying gnats, I noticed that one of the emeralds didn't look right, or rather, looked different. I watched for awhile, my dragonfly alarms going off as I begin to realize what I *might* be looking at. It was flying a little lower, and closer to the trees than the emeralds – I might just be able to net it and get a closer look. It looked like a pygmy darner, but this was way too late for Harlequins, which meant... so I jumped! And despite a rather uncoordinated effort, I heard the rustling of dragonfly wings in my net! The sound of success, and possibility. Because of the date, I figured it had to be a Taper-tailed, which of course I'd given up on by now, which is why I was walking through hilly meadows, not riparian swamplands. I took a flurry of photos, then set her on a leaf (right photo). She gave me one more picture before heading straight up into the canopy. That was 2005, and I haven't seen one since.

The only other people I know who've seen one in our area are Andy Rabin, a Loudoun County naturalist, and his dragonfly-whisperer wife, Laura. It landed on the wall outside their second story apartment, near Ashburn. Laura spotted it, and



brought it to the attention of her dragonfly-nut husband. Andy took it inside for a closer look, realized what it was, and sent me an excited email. Thanks to his research into the details of their wing venation, we were able to make a positive ID of both his male, and the female I'd photographed earlier. Two dragonflies, much sought-after, that only appeared when no one was looking for them.