

Dragonflies of the Ottawa-Gatineau Region

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Species Profile 3

The Arrowhead Spiketail (*Cordulegaster obliqua*)

Family: Cordulegastridae



The Arrowhead Spiketail has large, bold yellow, arrow-shaped markings down the centre of its abdomen. Also note the green eyes of a mature individual.

In the Ottawa-Gatineau region, we are lucky to have three species of spiketail dragonfly. These are all big and boldly marked odonates that, with their black and yellow livery, put me in mind of flying tigers. All three are scarce, so they are a challenge to find. The Arrowhead Spiketail is the rarest of the three, known only from a few locations. Even where it is known to exist, it can be a difficult insect to find as it is generally found around small outlet streams (running from ponds or small lakes) with overhanging vegetation, which are difficult to negotiate.

ID Hints

- Large, black and yellow dragonfly with:
 - Two bold, yellow stripes on the side of the thorax
 - Yellow markings running the length of the abdomen
- The markings are, not surprisingly, in the shape of an arrowhead
- Spiketails fly low and fast over water and ‘hang up’ only occasionally

The first time I found this species was a few years ago on a hot June day, having been given a tip by fellow dragon hunter Gillian Mastromatteo. I was unfamiliar with spiketail habits, so had no expectations that day other than to catch a glimpse – and possibly a photo – of one. I sat by the stream for half an hour, watching and waiting. I admit to not being the most patient of naturalists; after the half hour was up I decided that more waiting was not for me, and I hopped into the stream to seek one out. On a hot summer’s day, wading is not an unpleasant way to spend some time. Besides, in order to get a good look at this dragonfly, it is often necessary.

I followed the stream’s meanderings, treading softly, ducking under vegetation, stopping and observing until I came upon a lovely little sunlit glade at a bend. There, ‘hanging up’ in front of me, was a lovely male Arrowhead Spiketail. I took a few photos of him and he didn’t react to my presence. Suddenly another dragonfly appeared a few feet above the water heading in our direction. My spiketail attacked as soon as he saw the interloper. As a result of this tendency of males to fiercely defend their territory, it is the male of the species you have the best chance of seeing. After such a burst of activity, they often need to rest. If you do encounter a patrolling male, you can wait in the same spot as they will then pass you by again and again. With luck, it will perch close by. I find spiketails will allow a reasonably close approach when resting. Most often this species settles just a few feet above the water on overhanging vegetation and, like the cruisers, most often with the abdomen held on the diagonal.

This individual still has blueish eyes, indicating it is not fully mature. The arrow points to the yellow costa (the wing’s leading edge), a trait shared by local Spiketails.



When and Where to Look for Spiketails

June is the month to look for all three species of cordulegasters, with mid-June being optimal for the Arrowhead Spiketail. Though the Twin-spotted Spiketail and the Delta-spotted Spiketail can also be seen in early July, they are on the wane by then. All three species have been recorded at Lac-des-Fées, Gatineau Park in general being a good place to search them out. The Arrowhead has also been sighted sporadically at Stony Swamp and Marlborough Forest.



↑ *Small streams with overhanging vegetation that drain ponds and small lakes are the preferred habitat in our region for this species.*

Possible Confusables

Although spiketails look superficially like some darners species, sharing not only a basic dragonfly body plan but also bold thoracic stripes, there are no darners in our region with bold yellow markings on the abdomen. Also, the leading edge of the wing, called the *costa*, is yellow, and darners never have this feature.

And though it is possible to mistake a Swift River Cruiser for a spiketail, the cruiser has only a single stripe on its thorax and is not as vividly marked along the abdomen.

The species most likely to be confused with the Arrowhead Spiketail are our other two local cordulegasters, the Delta-spotted Spiketail (*C. diastatops*) and the Twin-spotted Spiketail (*C. maculata*).



↑ *The Swift River Cruiser (a female in this picture) only has a single stripe on its thorax, and irregular, less prominent markings on its abdomen.*

Possible Confusables – The other two local Spiketails



↑ *Though the markings are quite similar, the Delta-spotted Spiketail has its markings on the side of the abdomen. It is also slightly smaller than the Arrowhead, which is the largest of our three local spiketails. Often found in the same habitat as the Twin-spotted Spiketail, it prefers larger streams than the Arrowhead Spiketail. Note the typical diagonal position of the spiketail.*



← *Not as boldly marked as our other two species, the Twin-spotted Spiketail has smaller markings and they run in pairs down the abdomen. In flight, this gives the appearance of being ringed or striped. Of the three local species of spiketail, the Twin-spotted is the more common though still considered scarce. This particular individual is an ovipositing (egg-laying) female.*