

Dragonflies of the Ottawa-Gatineau Region

Article and photos by Chris Traynor

Species Profile 14

The Canada Darner (*Aeshna canadensis*)

Family: Aeshnidae



A fairly fresh Canada Darner (Aeshna canadensis).

The Canada Darner is a member of a group of darners that are often referred to as both the “blue” darners and the “mosaic darners”. So-called blue darners appear mostly blue when seen in flight but they are usually a mix of several colours; the term mosaic refers to the type of markings on the abdomen. Either term is a good catch-all name if you can’t readily identify the species, and that is often the case with darners. While the Canada Darner will be our featured species, we will also look at how to identify *Aeshna* darners in general as it is a group that can be quite challenging to identify beyond the family to the species level.

In our region, eight different species of *Aeshna* have been recorded:

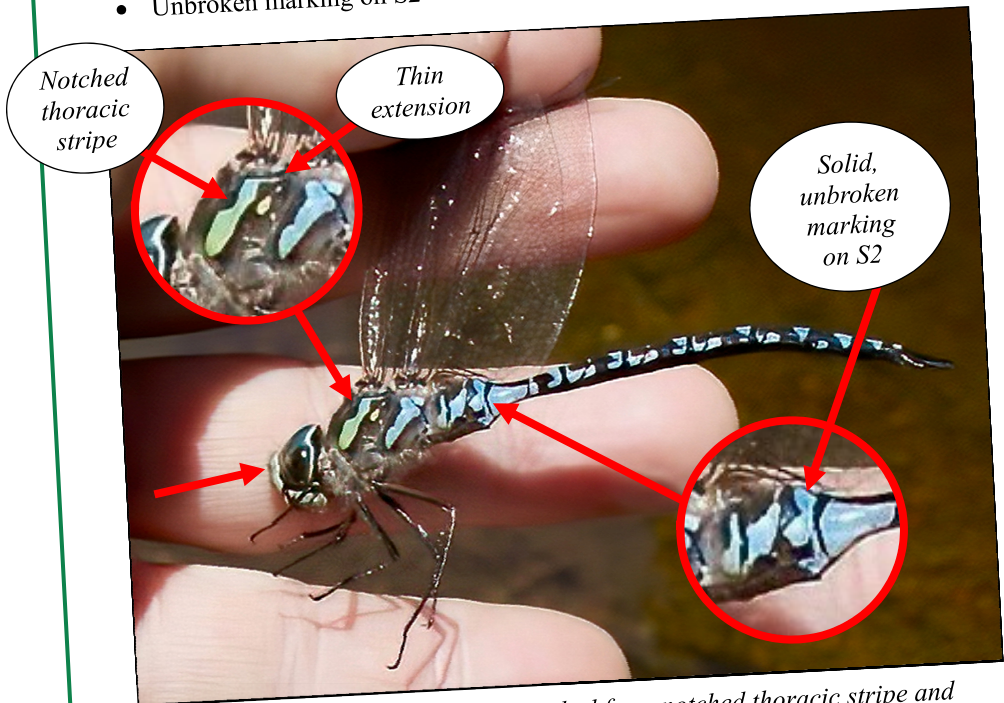
Canada Darner
Green-striped Darner
Lake Darner
Black-tipped Darner
Shadow Darner
Lance-tipped Darner
Variable Darner
Mottled Darner

Canada Darners, which I sometimes jokingly refer to as “default” darners, may be the most common species of darner in our region. Most of the darners that I have caught in my net over the years have been this species. However, there are times in the year when other species are more readily encountered.

ID Hints

Both sexes are very similar and often indistinguishable unless examined in the hand.

- Clean, unlined face
- Strongly notched anterior thoracic stripe with thin “flag” extension
- Little to no notch on the posterior thoracic stripe
- Partial stripe in centre of S2 (see page 75 for a diagram of the segments)
- Unbroken marking on S2



A Canada Darner. Note the unmarked face, notched thoracic stripe and thin extension or “flag” on the anterior thoracic stripe (top inset), and solid, unbroken marking on S2 (bottom inset).



A Canada Darner on a cool morning. Temperature-related colour change in dragonflies is not fully understood but it appears that some species may need to warm up before they are their usual colourful selves.

an interesting species to observe on the wing. They can be quite territorial, and small fights are common amongst the darners. A benefit to the observer of such altercations is that one of the combatants is often tired out by the experience and may “hang up” for a spell to rest. Darners perch in the hanging style, or what my partner Marie refers to as the “holy rood” position. Once they hang up they can often be approached. Darners are also proficient hunters and they will usually perch when they’ve taken prey. Be quick to observe, however, as it is amazing how quickly a darner can dispose of a small meal.

In my experience, the Canada Darner varies in colour more than any other species of darner. Yellow and green forms are fairly common and like many species of dragonfly, its colour can be influenced by cooler temperatures. Most striking to me was a two-tone black and grey darner that I found a number of years ago at the Mackenzie King Estate in Gatineau Park. The temperature had dipped down to about 10 °C during the night, and this particular dragon was looking rather muted while waiting for the day to warm up. It was in the early days of my interest in dragonflies and I recall being somewhat frustrated that I could not find a grey/black dragonfly in my field guides. Generally speaking, though, colour is not a good tool for identification.

Like most darners, Canada Darners spend most of their time on the wing. In my own experience, perched darners make up a very small percentage of the darners that I have seen. This can be rather frustrating when trying to photograph or identify them. I don’t mind, though. They are an

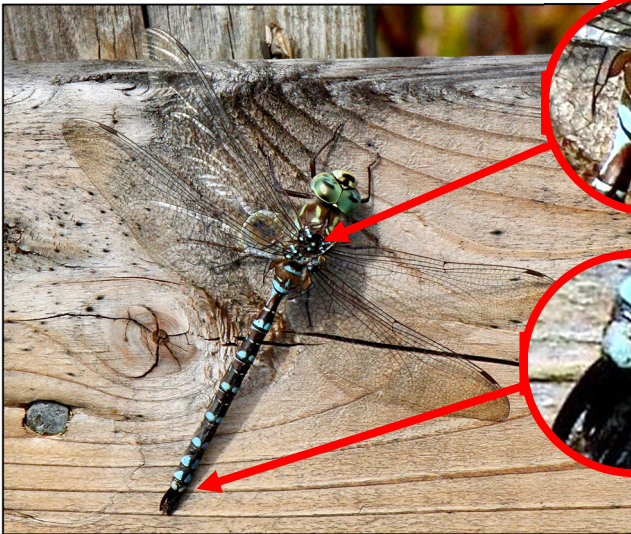
When and Where to Look for the Canada Darner

The Canada Darner is a summer dragonfly in our region, and this species usually starts appearing in mid-July. At this time, they can be quite numerous. They have a fairly long flight period, with some still being present in early October, but these are exceptions. Canada Darners can be found throughout the day but can be increasingly numerous as the day wanes. An hour or so before dusk can be quite productive in finding darners.

A generalist when it comes to habitat selection, Canada Darners can be found along the shores of lakes, bays, rivers and streams as well as quiet ponds and marshes. In general, any body of water can attract them. Perch preferences are many but they also appear to be attracted to wooden fences, rock and stone, and tree trunks. They do not perch on the ground. Like many of our more common dragonfly species, they can – and do – show up almost anywhere.

Possible Confusables – Part I

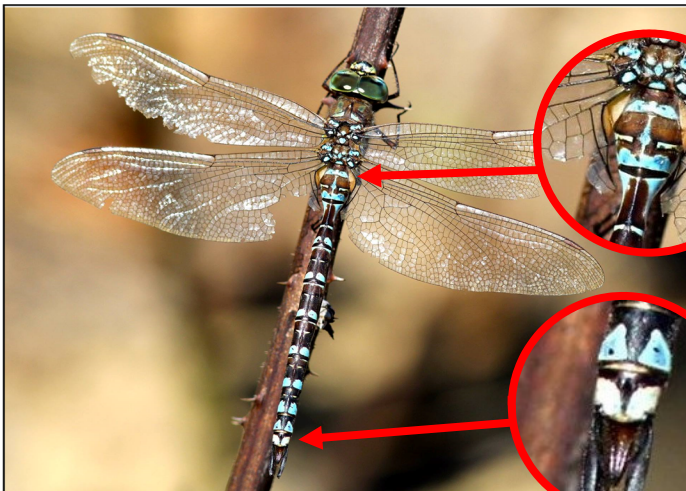
While most *Aeshna* darners can be confused with each other with a limited view or when in flight, two confusable species in particular are so similar that they are often identified as Canada Darners. The Lake Darner (*Aeshna eremita*) is a slightly larger dragonfly but shares many of the same characteristics. They both have a notched anterior thoracic stripe and a similar pattern of markings down the length of the abdomen. However, there are a few subtle differences. The Lake Darner's second thoracic stripe is always more noticeably notched than the Canada Darner's. Also, the very last abdominal segment (known as S10) has dorsal markings that are mostly fused together. Lastly, second abdominal segment (S2) has a fine line in the middle of the segment. In Lake Darners, the line runs the length of the segment; in Canada Darners, it is only a partial line. Lastly, the Lake Darner has a dark line on its face.



Canada Darner.

Note the incomplete stripe down the centre of S2...

...and the two separated spots on S10.



A tattered, old Lake Darner.

Note the complete stripe down the centre of S2...

...and the fused spots on S10.

The Green-striped Darner (*Aeshna verticalis*) probably causes more confusion than any other species of darner, partly because of the name. Many species of darners have green thoracic stripes, including the Canada Darner. Luckily, there are two small differences in what are almost two identical species. At the top of the anterior thoracic stripe of both species is a slight extension that is referred to as the “flag”. It is usually fairly easy to see. In *A. Canadensis*, the flag is fairly thin, while it is much thicker in *A. verticalis*. As well, along the side of the second abdominal segment (S2) where it meets the “waist” of the abdomen, there is a marking that is generally split in the Green-striped Darner and unbroken in the Canada Darner. I will also offer up this general caveat with respect to dragonflies: when going by markings alone, you have to be extra cautious. They are merely some small pieces of the puzzle.



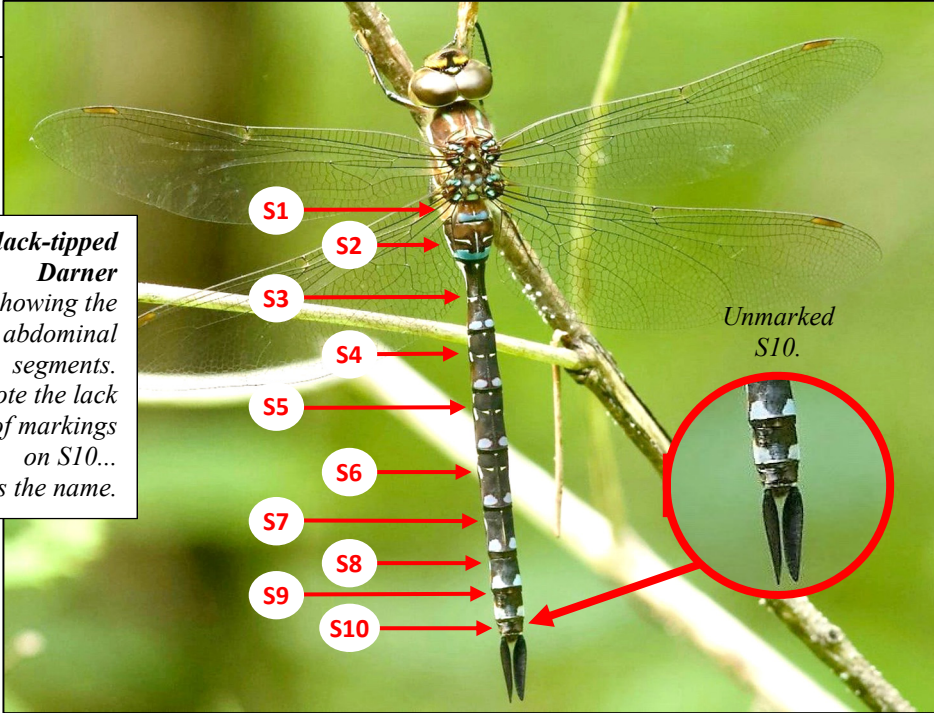
Green-striped Darner.
Note the thick extension or “flag” on the anterior thoracic stripe...

...and the broken marking on S2.

Possible Confusables – Part II
or
How to Identify the *Aeshna* Darners

When dealing with possible confusables, it is important to note that broadly speaking, any one of the so-called “blue darners” (there are eleven in eastern Canada) can be mistaken for another when on the wing. And trying to identify any in flight is likely to be an exercise in frustration. Even when perched, this family of dragonflies probably confuses people more than any other and many observers are just happy to note they saw a “darner” or “mosaic darner” without trying to carry the ID further. Luckily, here in the Ottawa-Gatineau Region, you will most likely only encounter seven (rarely an eighth) of those eleven species, making the task of identification a bit easier. We will look at four features of darners that you should always try to observe, and that should enable you to identify your subject. They are the face, the thoracic stripes, the abdominal markings and the appendages. By getting a front, side and top view, you will be able to obtain all the information you need for an identification.

A Black-tipped Darner showing the 10 abdominal segments. Note the lack of markings on S10... thus the name.



Getting a good look at a darner’s face is not always an easy thing to do, as darners are often “one and done”, giving you just a quick chance to see them before they fly off. However, some are cooperative and if one sits still for you, then you should try to glimpse the face. Is the face clean or does it have a strong cross-stripe in the middle? In Photo #2, you will notice the dark cross-stripe across the face. Many darners will show a slight suture line on the face but it should not be confused with this dark cross-stripe.



Photo #2. I was lucky to be able to get above this darner to get a clear view of its face. As you can see, there is a heavy black stripe on the face. In our region, only the Lake, Variable and Mottled Darner have this line. In this case, we can also see the broken thoracic stripe that identifies this as *A. interrupta*, the **Variable Darner**.

Aeshna darners all have two stripes on their thorax. The shape of the stripes will go a long way in getting an ID. Generally, we just need a view of the anterior stripe. It will be notched, strongly notched or rather straight, mottled (and in one case, broken), and several will have extensions at the top of the stripe. The posterior of the two stripes can help in narrowing

down very similar species like the Canada and Lake Darner but is not always required. We can get all this information from a good side view.



Photo #3.
*This side view gives you a clear view of the thoracic stripes. We can clearly see the straight thoracic stripe of this ovipositing female **Shadow Darner**. If you can only get one view, the side view is the one that will give you the most information.*

The third view is the dorsal view. This is probably the view we see most often after a darner hangs up. This angle will show us the pattern of markings down the length of the abdomen and with some luck, we may also see the shape of the appendages. Darners have two types of appendages: long, paddle-shaped ones or rounded, wedged-shaped appendages. The species that have the wedge shape have small, sharp points at the end of the appendage. Only two of our local Aeshnas, the Shadow Darner (*A. umbrosa*) and the Lance-tipped Darner (*A. constricta*) have this wedge shape.

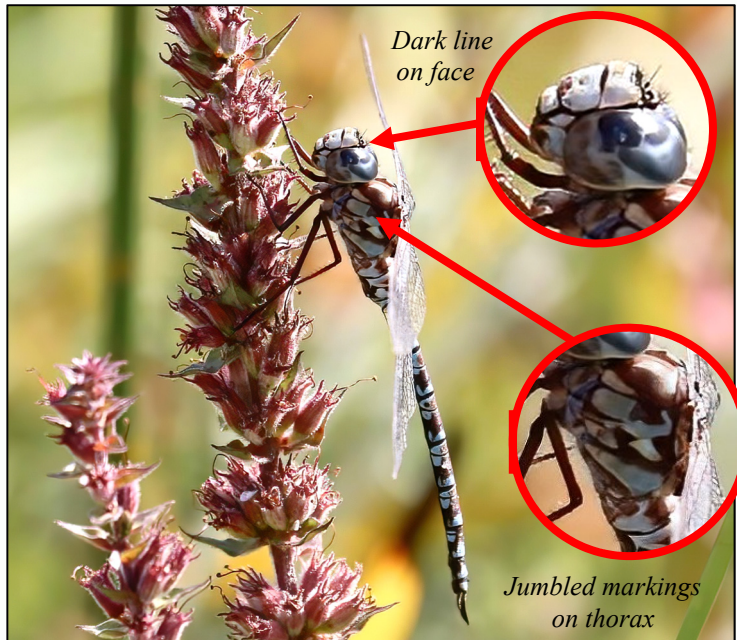
Photo #4. *This dorsal view gives us a lot of information. We can see the abdominal markings for any salient features and in this case, the shape of the appendages (paddle-shaped) is quite evident. I know this is a **Variable Darner** but this photo would not really provide enough information to identify it. This is a good example of the need for other viewing angles.*





Photo #5. Sometimes you're lucky and you can get all the information you need in a single view, but it doesn't happen often. From this angle, we have a clear view of the unmarked face, and a good glimpse of the thoracic stripes and dorsal abdominal markings. Lastly, we can also see the distinct shape of the appendages, in this case, the wedged-shaped appendages of a **Lance-tipped Darner**.

Photo #6. Again, in this great angle you can see the face, thorax and appendages. In this case, the dark line on the face and the odd jumbled markings on the thorax identify this specimen as the regionally rare **Mottled Darner**.
Photo by Jamie Spence



Jumbled markings on thorax

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>