

Flirting Dragonflies

Brooke Williams

Between a dragonfly's two compound eyes, three simple eyes called the ocelli cluster on top of its head. These eyes measure light levels, orient the organism toward the horizon, and map visual space. In a 2006 paper, Australian scientists documented their discovery that the photoreceptors of the dragonfly's *Median Ocellus*—the middle of the three eyes, are connected via eleven long neurons down its neck directly to its motor centers. This helps explain why dragonflies are the most effective flying hunters in the animal kingdom.

The ocelli are represented by Part #4 of 20 that when properly assembled make up my Metal Earth Series "Dragonfly" facsimile. It is one of dozens of 3-D Laser-Cut Models, which includes a World-War II bomber, a tank, a schooner, a windmill, and a train engine.

My friend, Erin, gave me the dragonfly model knowing about my fascination/obsession with these organisms. After four frustrating hours with needle-nosed pliers, a magnifying glass, and a pair of tweezers, bending pieces into proper form and putting nearly invisible tabs into slots so small they must have been made with a hypodermic needle, I held the finished dragonfly out in my hand, expecting it to fly.

Assuming that the size was somewhat accurate and noting the shape and that the hindwings are broader than the forewings, I surmised that I'd built a model of *Anax junius*—the Common Green Darner.

My model dragonfly matches the first vision I had a decade ago, which opened a door to a world more deep and intricate than any I'd previously imagined. This vision came in a dream I had while lying against a boulder on the edge of an island off the coast of British Columbia. In my dream, I found a small round stone into which a perfect dragonfly had been carved. An hour later, on re-joining my group, I noticed four small, bright blue dragonflies (I now know that they were damselflies, specifically Dancers, of the genus *Argia*) bobbing among the bright-headed flowers in a wild garden. Time disappeared as I watched in awe as they hovered and darted after individual gnats

swarming in a just-hatched cloud. When I pointed out these magnificent creatures to a colleague, she said, “There are hundreds of them. They’ve been here all week.”

The poet Ezra Pound believed “the natural object is always the adequate symbol.” When I first read this, I suspected he was referring the mechanics of a poem. But with my dragonfly dream I discovered that attaching symbolic value to an actual natural object opens up a wide and wondrous world of possibility.

In all the biological field work I’ve done, and during the thousands of hours I’ve spent bird watching, I’ve seen many dragonflies. But I had not given them my quality attention before. Those blue dancers were actually *flirting* with me, that day, on that island, demanding my attention, absorbing all of it.

To Arnold Mindell, the founder of Process Oriented Psychology, *flirting* is when an archetype outside of us attracts our attention because our unconscious has important information for us. According to Carl Jung an archetype is an image, thought pattern, or idea passed generation to generation in the same way that genes are passed on. Archetypes have meaning that is universally understood by all humans. Dragonflies have been on the earth for 300 million years (compared to our 200,000 year history) and must play a role in our evolutionary memory. One purpose of archetypes is to bring elements of our unconscious to the surface. Flirting may be the action of an archetype stimulating the collective unconscious. Dragonflies have shown me the deeper importance of paying attention to what attracts my attention.

For years, I focused on the mythological, the symbolic aspect of each dragonfly. As I studied what dragonflies meant to different cultures, I developed a sense of their archetypal meaning. As with most insects, they represent transformation—eggs becoming larvae becoming adults. My particular interest focused on dragonflies as messengers between worlds or souls of the dead. Now, when I encounter a dragonfly, there’s the chance that something significant is occurring. I stop and ask myself if my unconscious might have knowledge for me. Or perhaps my ancestors are attempting to contact me.

As a birder, I once thought that placing too much importance on knowing the names of natural things interfered with pure observation. I watched too many intense birders care only about a name they could add to their life list. Nothing about the bird mattered once they’d properly identified it. But naming, I’ve learned, is the first step

toward understanding an organism, which leads to exploring the role it plays in its particular part of the natural system.

I didn't need to know the names of dragonflies until one day, I did.

One summer, I began noticing different behaviors in different dragonflies. First, I focused on their wings: did a particular dragonfly perch with its wings perpendicular to its body (of the suborder "Anisoptera"?) or did it hold its wings back, parallel along its abdomen when perched (suborder "Zygoptera" or damselflies) Gradually I began paying attention to color and markings, size, location, and flight season. I wondered, based on my experience and belief in their archetypal and symbolic power, if increasing my knowledge and specificity might result in clearer messages from the inner world.

For a decade, I've documented and analyzed my dragonfly encounters. Most recently—last week, in fact—while walking up a steamy trail in Maine.

Rain had been falling all morning. The new sun which found its way through thick trees puddled in large pools along the trail. I had a lot on my mind and didn't pay much attention to the many different flying beings rising as I passed through each sun pool. The third time a group of creatures rose in front of me, I thought: wait. "Isn't May too early for dragonflies? But if not dragonflies, what are these insects?" I followed the next one I flushed into the deep grass, a risk this year, based on the current tick infestation. Definitely a dragonfly, it landed close to the ground on a dried twig. Slowly lowering myself, I got a glimpse of its tan and black abdomen, its brown eyes, and I felt hope watching its wings shimmering in the sunlight. I snapped a photo before it flew off.

Based on its small size, I guessed it was a species of Meadowhawk. I stood there for a minute hoping to understand the purpose of this very significant flirt. Back at the house where we were staying, I googled "Dragonfly symbolism" and just for fun, I clicked on a random selection and came up with this: "... *getting beyond illusions...*[the dragonfly] shows us the path to new worlds as she dances in and out of mystical portalsthrough the mists of changewith swift precision actions and movements. Of course.

I opened my *Dragonflies and Damselflies of the East* book to the Meadowhawk section and thumbed through it. I stopped at the photo of the White-Faced Meadowhawk,

and read the description, which described to a tee what I'd captured in my photo: *Sympetrum obtrusum*, a female.

Without thinking about it, I had not only read the complex description, but *understood* it. "Abdomen tan with wide black ventrolateral stripe from S4-S9, covering larger parts of the segments toward rear", for example. For the first time. I wasn't intimidated by the scientifically academic language. The Metal Earth Model had made the difference.

When I built my Metal Earth Model I tried to follow the steps in the Assembly Flow Chart *exactly* and *in the order given*. The marathon assembly process reminded me that my experience with dragonflies had included very little anatomy. I'd ignored any point of species differentiation which required killing and dissecting the animal to find out who it was. In putting together the model, I discovered that there's much more to a dragonfly than wings, abdomen, head, eyes, thorax, and legs.

Using my field guide for reference, I went back over the instructions and labeled the parts with their anatomical names, noting interesting details. For example: Part 7, properly bent became the box-like synthorax, to which the legs and wings are attached. This is a major part of the organism, housing the large and important flight muscles. Dragonflies, I've learned, fly with such effortless precision because each of their four wings operate individually. In the living Common Green Darner, the thorax is "bright to dull grass green," according to the book.

Reproductive and digestive organs are contained in the long abdomen, its length necessary to provide the weight to balance the dragonfly. According to the book the Darner's abdomen is divided into eight segments—S-3 through S-10 which are often important in distinguishing different species. An actual darner has bright blue segments (through S-6), dull, bluish green (7-8), and mostly dark (9-10). The abdomen parts are 12 through 19 in the instructions for the model.

The head, including the dragonfly's massive eyes, is comprised of parts 1 through 6. Each eye took forever to build. An eight-tabbed piece shaped like a tiny snowflake required bending into a hemisphere. I learned about the face and mouthparts by their absence: The frons and clypeus, labrum, and mandible were even too complex, too intricate for the sadistic designer who created this model.

I built my Metal Earth model one year ago. Recently, when I came across the instruction sheet with the notes I'd made, the Ocelli *flirted* with me. The Ocelli, I recalled, was the smallest piece on the model, so small I couldn't pick it up without tweezers.

If, as Mindell suggests, "the everyday world is a huge, semi-human field of relationships, of flirts and flashes"!, that "everything is you," then symbols that flirt with me are my unconscious attempting to communicate with me. The flirting ocelli becomes *my* third eye. My unconscious is suggesting that I need to acknowledge my third eye chakra.

I've never paid much mind to my chakras. I know there are seven of them, that each one has a center of spiritual power. And I assumed like most things these days there are those people who believe in them and those that, since they can't be seen, don't. Learning about the ocelli becomes *proof* of my third eye, albeit a different kind of proof.

The third eye chakra, I'm discovering from the literature, is the center of insight and inner wisdom which we can trust without fear or delusion. If open and awake, our third eye opens us to being able to imagine our lives. It is the Third eye which sees and understands archetypal images.

My ocelli, although invisible, are mirrored in that tiny, nerve-filled organ on the top of the dragonfly's head. It reminds me to move confidently in the world fueled by true wildness, the power of which comes from knowledge contained in my inner, unconscious, evolutionary world. This knowledge is not limited by space or by time.