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Statewide Survey of New Hampshire Dragonflies Completed

CONCORD, N.H.: Between 2007 and 2011, a small army of net-wielding naturalists was unobtrusively scouring the wetlands of New Hampshire for dragons – or more specifically dragonflies and damselflies. And they found them – lots of them. Over those five years, roughly 100 volunteers collected more than 18,000 records of dragonflies and damselflies, representing 157 of the 162 species known to occur in the state. They surveyed sites from the southern border along the Connecticut River to Fourth Connecticut Lake (only a couple of hundred feet from Canada), and at elevations from sea level along the coast to the top of Mount Washington.



These citizen scientists were participating in the New Hampshire Dragonfly Survey, a joint project of New Hampshire Audubon and the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department. Dragonflies and damselflies are easier to study than many other insects, and they can serve as indicators of ecological health and water quality. In addition, several species are considered of conservation concern in the Northeast. A major goal of the survey was to better understand the New Hampshire distribution of these species, while at the same time collecting statewide data on the group as a whole.

With those 18,000 records now mapped and analyzed, biologists can reassess which species might warrant conservation attention. “The good news is that most of the rarer species turned out to be far more common than previously believed,” said Dr. Pamela Hunt, who coordinated the project for NH Audubon. “We even doubled the number of sites for the state’s only endangered dragonfly – the ringed boghaunter – from 8 to 15.” Particularly impressive was the increase in sites known to support the scarlet bluet, a small red damselfly that likes lily pads. “This species was unknown in the state until 2002, and at the start of the dragonfly survey there were only five sites,” says Hunt. “Now they’re known from over 40 sites, including as far north as Berlin. Not bad for a bug that’s supposed to occur in the coastal plain!”

“It’s really phenomenal what the survey volunteers have been able to accomplish,” says Fish and Game nongame biologist Emily Brunkhurst. The Department funds the project through State Wildlife Grants, recognizing the need for better data on the state’s insect populations. “For the first time, we now have comprehensive statewide data for an entire order of insects.” These data can now be used to revise the state’s list of species of conservation concern, and also serve as

a baseline against which future changes can be measured.

As for the small army of net-wielding “dragonhunters,” they are already preparing for the upcoming season. The project may be officially over, but this isn’t stopping them from exploring new places, adding species to town lists, or simply learning new things about these fascinating insects. In fact, two volunteers kicked off the season in style by finding emerging Hudsonian Whitefaces in southeastern New Hampshire on April 4 – fully 10 days earlier than any previous record of any dragonfly in the state. By the end of April, 10 species had been recorded including the state-endangered ringed boghaunter. “There’s no stopping these folks,” adds Hunt, “Once bitten by the dragonfly bug it’s really hard to put down your net!”

To learn more about the dragonfly survey, visit www.wildnh.com/Wildlife/Nongame/dragonflies.html.

About New Hampshire Audubon:

New Hampshire Audubon is an independent statewide membership organization whose mission is to protect New Hampshire’s natural environment for wildlife and for people. It operates five nature centers throughout the state that provide educational programs for children and adults. It is also involved in statewide conservation research and wildlife monitoring projects, protects thousands of acres of wildlife habitat, and advocates for sound public policy on environmental issues. For information on New Hampshire Audubon, including membership, volunteering, programs, and publications, call 603-224-9909, or visit www.nhauudubon.org.

About New Hampshire Fish and Game:

The New Hampshire Fish and Game Department is the guardian of the state's fish, wildlife and marine resources and their habitats. Fish and Game's Nongame and Endangered Wildlife Program is the steward for species not hunted, fished or trapped. Through wildlife monitoring and management, plus outreach and education, the Nongame Program works to protect over 400 species of mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians, as well as thousands of insects and other invertebrates. The program works in cooperation with other New Hampshire wildlife organizations to develop and implement effective conservation strategies to protect and enhance this diverse group of wildlife. Visit www.wildnh.com/nongame.

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