

MOUNTAINS

2 dragonfly species seen for 1st time



Word from the Smokies

Frances Figart
Columnist

In the past few months, two dragonfly species have been documented for the first time in Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

The little blue dragonlet (*Erythrodiplax miniscula*) and the calico pennant (*Celithemis elisa*) were both known to exist outside the Smokies and only recently recorded inside the park boundary.

“We were concentrating on bees, searching this large field, and I saw a flash of bright color that was a dragonfly,” retired NPS biologist Keith Langdon said of his discovery of the Calico Pennant on July 6 along with Nora Murdock and Robert Emmott. “Nora was doing photo documentation, so I called her attention to it.”

Langdon is credited with forming GRISLD — a.k.a. Gang of Researchers in Search of Life’s Diversity — a group of mostly retired volunteer biologists who routinely roam the park surveying species. GRISLD members found the new dragonflies in service of Discover Life in America (DLiA), a nonprofit park partner organization focused on cataloging biodiversity in the Smokies.

“The dragonlet is actually a new genus record,” said Will Kuhn, director of science and research for DLiA. “Together, these two new species bring the park’s total to 97 dragonflies and damselflies, which collectively form the order Odonata.”

Dragonflies and their ‘cousins’ the damselflies are voracious predators throughout their lives, according to Kuhn. Their aquatic young feed on mosquitoes, worms, and even small fish and tadpoles. After one or more years in the water, the young dragonflies take to the skies, where they eat any flying insect they can sink their mandibles into, including adult mosquitoes, flies, wasps, other dragonflies, and occasionally even butterflies. They are incredibly agile flyers, zipping around to catch their next meal or fend off a competitor.

To get to a better estimate of the total number of life forms that exist in the Smokies, GRISLD members collaborate to study groups of species with which each has some scientific background and field experience. They alert DLiA when rare, new-to-park, or new-to-science species are located. These reports are then vetted by NPS officials to be added to the official species list, and DLiA reports significant discoveries to the public.

“If you work with large animals like elk or bears, identification is easy,” Langdon said. “But with 96 percent of animals in the Southern Appalachians being invertebrate, they are often difficult to ID conclusively in the field. Sometimes we are not sure what we have until references and microscopes are used the next day. That’s when the ‘aha moment’ comes.”

That’s how the calico pennant was identified —



The calico pennant was found perching on dead plant stems in a field near the Oconaluftee Job Corps Center on the North Carolina side of the park. PROVIDED BY NORA MURDOCK OF GRISLD



The little blue dragonlet was discovered in the arid soil of Fairview Cemetery about 5 miles east of Fontana Dam on the North Carolina side of the Smokies. PROVIDED BY TOM HOWE OF GRISLD

“We GRISLDs are always on the prowl for new and exciting finds.”

Tom Howe

more or less after the fact. Tom Howe told a different tale of how the little blue dragonlet was found on Sept. 3.

“We GRISLDs are always on the prowl for new and exciting finds, but also endeavoring to collect distribution data for rare and uncommon species in the park,” said Howe, whose history has included studying the feeding habits of wild boar and doing biological inventories of prospective properties for the Foothills Land Conservancy.

“The GRISLDs were on a boat trip to the shores of Fontana Lake that have rarely been visited by other biologists,” Howe recalled. “We try to be prepared for any encounter with species needed for the park’s collections, each one of us focusing mostly on our own specialty, from lichens and plants to bees and other insects.”

They disembarked at the Fairview Cemetery, an open, somewhat arid, and sparsely vegetated area. Once the sun came out from the clouds, insects started showing up, but Howe at first saw only damselflies that proved to be blue-fronted dancers.

“We were about to leave when I spotted a tiny dragonfly landing on debris on the ground. Immediately I knew this was special as it was smaller than any I had seen before. I shot a few poor pictures against the light before it rose up and disappeared. The pictures were inconclusive, but I was strongly leaning towards ID’ing it as a little blue dragonlet. The similar blue dasher can get quite small, but I had never seen one this tiny. Oh,

how I searched and searched to find it again and get more diagnostic photos! I finally spotted it with the light behind me and got some good pictures from about 10 feet away. I attempted to capture it, but one step towards it and it vanished — a very wary dragon indeed.”

The photos proved sufficient for positive identification of the little blue dragonlet, a new species for the park, plus a new record for Swain County and new to Howe as well.

Dragonlets are some of the smaller dragonfly species, according to Kuhn. “Most are tropical, but we do have three species in Eastern North America,” he said. “The little blue is native to the Southeastern U.S. They’re about an inch long and they perch low on vegetation in marshy areas and are often hard to spot as they blend in among the local vegetation.”

In contrast, pennant dragonflies are so called because of the males’ propensity to perch in fields on the tallest vegetation they can find. “They’re all brightly colored and perch off to the side of a twig often blowing in a light breeze, so they look like a flag or pennant,” said Kuhn. “The calico pennant has a nice bright red color at maturity and banded wings with a bright red spot on each wing.”

It is estimated that there are around 120 to 130 dragonfly and damselfly species in the Smokies, so that means there are perhaps still many of these insects left to discover.

Frances Figart is the editor of Smokies Life magazine and the Creative Services Director for the 29,000-member Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Learn more at SmokiesInformation.org and reach the author at frances@gsmassoc.org.

After closure of WNC Birth Center, some patients looking for refunds

Joel Burgess

Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE — The closing of an alternative birth center has left some patients looking for refunds as the center enters a bankruptcy liquidation process.

Because of the nonprofit WNC Birth Center’s revenue model, patients prepaid an estimated amount. After any insurance was collected, they were either refunded any excess payment after the birth or required to pay an outstanding balance, said former Executive Director Nancy Koerber.

But shortly after the 1,000th delivery at its facility on South French Broad Avenue, the center announced it was closing after five years. Despite a growing number of patients, state regulations that hamper midwives and low reimbursement rates “snowballed” into an unreconcilable financial situation, Koerber said.

The July 20 closure eliminated an option for mothers outside the traditional hospital birth setting. It also left some patients having paid for services they did not

receive.

Among them were Jerry and Devin Brown who prepaid for a birth before the closure.

“The center issued us a refund check in the amount of \$479.19. The check isn’t able to be cashed,” Jerry Brown said.

The check was returned because of a Chapter 7 bankruptcy procedure that freezes payments and can even claw back those already made within 90 days. Patients owed money and other creditors must now file through federal bankruptcy court for payment.

Attorney Robert Mays, the court-appointed trustee responsible for liquidating the center’s assets, said the center appears to not owe many patients.

“I understand that the debtor believes it owes a relatively small number of patients for overpayments, and also is owed by a number of patients for the cost of their care,” he said Sept. 22.

Mays said he was “sure the employees who dedicated their careers to helping patients and giving them an

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