

Literature

Askew, R. R. 1988: The dragonflies of Europe. — Harley Books. Colchester. 291 pp. ISBN 0 946589 10 0. Price £55/FIM875.

In the mid-Eighties one of us arrived at a small hotel at a remote oasis in the northern Sahara in Tunisia. A familiar-looking man was sitting in the furthest corner of the lobby, engaged in arranging his bag, probably for collecting. The newcomer went up to him: "Dr. Askew, I presume?" He looked up: "Oh, Miko'la!". Indeed, Dr. R. R. Askew travelled widely when preparing his dragonfly book.

The dragonflies, Odonata, are well-suited to be of interest to all nature-lovers. But compared with the birds, or with the butterflies and moths, why so little interest, why so few amateurs? One problem has been that there are few good guides on dragonflies.

Askew's large-sized dragonfly book looks luxurious. Its best characteristic is the excellent quality of the illustrations. There are watercolours of all European species, drawn by Askew himself, mainly in dorsal view, the female sometimes shown in a lateral view. The book has been a giant project: each drawing has taken on average five days, and there are 210 of them! And the text is scarcely less commendable in quality.

Sometimes the use of space is lavish: the first plate shows only two specimens of *Agrion virgo* (*Calopteryx* v. sensu Askew), but the same plate may include 13 specimens of *Sympetrum*.

Askew shows much consideration for amateurs. At least all the Finnish species can be determined straight from the paintings. In addition, the text includes good drawings of details, and the key avoids the use of any details difficult to see. Anyone wishing to use the key has to learn the rather complicated venation system of the dragonflies. The book also includes short texts on species occurring close to the borders of Europe. The distribution maps are very nice and clear. The chapters in the beginning of the book on the biology and morphology of the species are well written and inspiring.

Thus, all is well with the adult dragonflies. Unfortunately this is not quite true for the larvae. Everything has been compressed into an 18-page key, which is, however, well illustrated. There are no

descriptions of the larvae, or their behaviour, or hatching. Sometimes the key leads only to a whole group of species, because of a lack of literature. But the larva of *Somatochlora sahlbergi*, one of the rarest dragonflies of Europe, has been thoroughly described in North America, and the larvae of several *Coenagrion* species have been described in the Finnish references of the book.

Regrettably there are only a few lines on the biology of the larvae and the main characteristics of their occurrence, although there is much literature on the biology of the species. True, some references are given, but sporadically. The flight periods given are useless for northern Europe. To summarize, the biology and the larvae of the species have not been particularly thoroughly treated, but of course, everything is not possible in any single, one-author book.

It is unfortunate that Askew continues to cause confusion with the generic names *Agrion* Fabricius, 1775 and *Calopteryx* Leach, 1815. Just when the former has become widely accepted as the senior synonym of the latter, Askew again decided to use the junior synonym.

The dragonflies may be collected, or they may be observed, by using binoculars, or they may be captured for determination. Equipment needed in the field would include only binoculars, net, a glass jar for examination of a specimen and a handbook.

Askew's book is an excellent determination guide. Unfortunately, it is quite hefty to be carried in the field but, why not print a leaflet of colored photocopies of the plates for field use? Then one could add what was not furnished by Askew himself: small arrows or lines showing the most important characters. We very much hope that Dr. Askew is planning to do a version to serve as a field guide, which could prove a real success in the book stores. In short, we hope — in fact, we are sure — that this book will contribute to an increased interest in the dragonflies, those marvellous memories from times hundreds of millions of years ago.

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