Book Review of *A Dazzle of Dragonflies* by Forrest L. Mitchell and James L. Lasswell

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Dragonflies are beautiful animals, important predators in and around aquatic environments, and often good indicators of ecosystem health. Stimulated by digital photography, close-focusing binoculars, and many new regional field guides, the study of dragonflies has exploded in the last ten years. Most importantly, the Internet has connected beginners with experts; observers from everywhere now share their experiences. Here is a book that puts it all on paper.

Dragonflies are perfect insects for watching in the field. Big and colorful, with fascinating and easily observed behaviors, they offer esthetic pleasure and all sorts of opportunities for original scientific discovery, even for the beginner.

The authors are well known among dragonfly watchers for their popular Web site and especially their innovative color images of live specimens made in electronic scanners. They have, in a beautifully conceived volume, summarized the wonderful and diverse details of dragonflies’ lives and introduce readers to ways they can study dragonflies and develop their interests in them.

The book’s primary impact is its attractive design, with 130 large, color images laid out in all their detail and glory. It is worth the reasonable purchase price simply to feast the eyes on these spectacular pictures. But there is much more. In a conversational style, the well-written and authoritative text outlines a wide range of information for the dragonfly enthusiast.

Many experts and books use “dragonfly” to represent the whole insect order Odonata, but here, except in passing, damselflies (suborder Zygoptera) are not treated. Only the dragonflies proper (suborder Anisoptera) are included. The geographical scope is North American. The authors are Texans, and much of the material leans towards the southern states. There are ample examples of species that range across the Great Plains, and the book, with its good general biological information and practical suggestions, will be valuable anywhere where dragonflies are found. I’m from Canada, and the book will be popular there. But I was disappointed to see that most of the dragonflies’ ranges are described in U.S. terms only. We’re told, for example, that “the Elfin Skimmer is found in the northeastern United States,” but in fact it is common in peatlands in eastern Canada, too.

A chapter entitled “Dragonfly Tales” is the most comprehensive treatment of dragonflies in myth and folklore that I’ve read. The common connection of dragonflies with the devil in western culture is explored, as is the reversal of this concept in eastern Asia where the insects signify good luck and prosperity. Elsewhere, the 300-million year evolution of dragonflies and their fossil record are clearly treated. Think of Meganeuropsis permiana—with a 28-inch wingspan, one of the largest fossil insects known, and a resident of Permian ponds in what is now Kansas.
Another chapter deals with habitat and behavior, including seasonal migration, a special interest of the authors. They describe its complexity and encourage observations of this poorly understood phenomenon. The heart of the book, “Watching Dragonflies,” compares and contrasts the diversity, structure, habitats, and behavior of the larvae and adults of the families of North American Anisoptera. The last chapters focus on practical applications—collecting and developing a scientific collection; water gardening to attract dragonflies; and making photographic and digital images of the insects. This final section will be one of the most thumbed in the book, for photography of dragonflies is hugely popular. And the authors’ specialty, the scanning of live specimens, is also explained. Useful appendixes give important Web sites to explore and books to read.

This is a marvellous production. Get it, absorb the pictures, read it, and go out and enjoy the dazzling world of dragonflies. Rob Cannings, Curator of Entomology, Royal British Columbia Museum.