

## Audubon at Home in Northern Virginia

4022 Hummer Road, Annandale, VA 22003  
 Phone: (703) 256-6895 • Fax: (703) 256-2060  
[www.audubonva.org](http://www.audubonva.org)



### Dragonflies and Damselflies

Dragonflies and damselflies are beneficial, fascinating, acrobatic insects with two very different life stages. The larval stage is aquatic and breathes through gills. The colorful, winged adult is what most of us picture when we think of dragonflies. Contrary to popular belief, these insects do not bite or sting. Both stages are voracious predators of many small creatures, especially insects like gnats and mosquitoes, making them welcome additions to any landscape. Many hunt over fields, forest clearings and even parking lots, but all need water to breed. The number of dragonfly and damselfly species you see in your neighborhood directly reflects the health of your surrounding streams, ponds and wetlands.

#### What Dragonflies and Damselflies Need

**Food:** These insects mostly eat other flying insects such as flies, wasps and other dragon and damselflies. They may also pull spiders, beetles and grasshoppers from plants. Like flying solar panels, they need direct sun. Having a strong affinity for water, adults look for perches along the water's edge.

**Breeding:** Different species have different requirements, but all larvae need clean water, substrate to burrow in, and aquatic vegetation to hide in and hunt or emerge from.

**Shelter:** Woody debris and vegetation in and around the water is essential for both larvae and perching adults. In addition, hunting adults need meadows, forest edges and open wetlands to find food and mates.

**Other:** Dragon and damselflies do best in low-fish or fishless wetlands. Pesticides and fertilizers can poison the water where dragonfly larvae live. Bug zappers actually kill beneficial insects instead of mosquitoes.

#### How You Can Help

- Plant a wildflower garden to attract insect prey.
- Create a water feature like a mini-wetland. Plant native grasses, wildflowers and shrubs along the pool's edge to provide shoreline vegetation for perching. Leave a few feet of muddy or sandy bank exposed to attract species that like to perch on bare ground.
- Add aquatic vegetation like native wetland grasses, rushes, sedges, irises, pickerelweed, duck potato, and arrow arum to cover about 50% of the surface. Avoid fast-spreading plants like cattails, water lilies, water hyacinth, parrot's feather and water lettuce.
- Add soil and leaves as substrate for some sections and sand and gravel for others.
- Place branches both in (underwater and sticking out) and around your wetland pool.
- Most species like still water, but a small pump or fountain that moves a portion of the pool will attract additional species and keep your mini-wetland healthy.\*
- Provide rock piles and brush shelters to act as basking sites.
- Wind Breaks – most dragon and damselfly species are very sensitive to wind. Try to place your wetland pool in a somewhat sheltered spot, or plant a few small evergreens like eastern red cedar to act as a wind-break.
- Don't mow down to the edge of streams and ponds. This only attracts mosquitoes and geese, while eliminating habitat for dragonflies, frogs and herons.
- Refrain from introducing any fish, native or exotic into your dragonfly wetland pool, including goldfish and mosquito fish. Never release exotic fish into any wetland. They will eat the majority of beneficial aquatic insect larvae, as well as frog and salamander larvae.
- Reduce your pesticide and fertilizer use.
- Don't use bug zappers.

\*If mosquitoes are still a concern, BT mosquito dunks/rings can be added to the water. They release naturally occurring bacteria that only eat fly larvae, not damsel or dragonfly larvae.



## Audubon at Home in Northern Virginia

4022 Hummer Road, Annandale, VA 22003

Phone: (703) 256-6895 • Fax: (703) 256-2060

[www.audubonva.org](http://www.audubonva.org)

### Resources:

Pond liners, water circulators, soil, sand, rocks—available at local home improvement stores and garden centers  
Native plants— Merrifield Garden Center, DeBaggio Herbs, Nature By Design, Hyla Brook Farm and other local nurseries

### Model Dragonfly and Damselfly Habitats:

Huntley Meadows Park—[www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/huntley/](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/huntley/)

Occoquan Bay National Wildlife Refuge—[www.fws.gov/refuges/profiles/index.cfm?id=51611](http://www.fws.gov/refuges/profiles/index.cfm?id=51611)

Bles Park—[www.loudoun.gov/prcs/parks/other.htm](http://www.loudoun.gov/prcs/parks/other.htm)

Visit [audubonva.org](http://audubonva.org) for more information and other fact sheets