

# DRAGONFLIES IN THE GARDEN

To see a World in a Grain of Sand,  
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand,  
And Eternity in an hour.

William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*

*An apt quotation to describe the work of Jeff Huntley, whose regular column 'Veld Sketches' has been published in The Natal Witness for the past sixteen years. Many of his fascinating observations and drawings were made in the Natal National Botanical Gardens in Pietermaritzburg, as was this one.*

Augustine Suh Niba arrived at the Natal Botanical Gardens in Pietermaritzburg on a clear sunny morning to introduce us to dragonflies. Augustine is from Cameroon and specializes in the study of these beautiful insects from his base at the University of Natal. His cheerful ebullience soon got us involved in the subject and showed us how interchangeable are the two faculties of eyesight and mind. You see what you understand and think about. Augustine sees dragonflies where we saw only grass stems or water-lilies. But he patiently pointed them out and then we began to see more and more of them: St Lucia widows, jaunty dropwings, Julia's skimmers and goldtails. He pointed out that these

glittering insects are part of the early warning system (which includes frogs and crabs) revealing the condition of streams and dams. Plenty of dragonflies mean good pure water as their larvae cannot live long in polluted water.

I observed a damselfly hovering just above water level. She dipped downwards repeatedly so that her tail-tip touched the water as though she was bouncing on it. Augustine explained that she was laying eggs in this manner and that she had placed them in still water close to aquatic plants which would prevent them from floating away. This reminded me of a dragonfly I once saw hovering above the smooth reflective surface of a car parked

in shade. The insect dipped downwards to bounce off the flat greeny-grey surface in which she could see her reflection. Had I known what she was doing I might have found some dragonfly eggs on the bonnet. Her evolutionary development had not prepared her for Henry Ford. Close scrutiny has made Augustine aware of the choices these insects make as to favourite still-hunting sites and he knows where to find certain species as if by intuition. But it comes with practice, he laughs.

Although fast on the wing, dragonflies are easily caught by whitefronted bee-eaters. And by other dragonflies. Augustine likes to talk about the forest sylph, probably Africa's damselfly of greatest antiquity. Scientists consider it a primitive form – a flying fossil.



Dragonfly and ant undertakers.

But whether it flew alongside the huge (65 cm wingspan) *Meganeura monyi* dragonfly of the silent fern-forested Upper Carboniferous is not known. What is known is that our dragonflies are a link to a past inconceivably remote.

Like butterflies and moths, dragonflies and damselflies abound in the summer months. In Africa they are reputed to follow migrating butterflies to take stragglers, but one's chances of being in the right place at the precise moment to see such a thing is slight. Here in Pietermaritzburg I once saw about fifty large red dragonflies patrolling up and down a paddock. There must have been a lot of small flies or gnats attracted by the horse dung. A pretty sight until the wind changed towards me!

The aquatic nymphal stage of dragonflies is an interesting as their adult life. They catch prey using a cup-like gadget at the end of an 'arm' tucked under the head of the creature. When not in use it fits over the lower part of the face like a mask. It is actually a lower lip with a 'shoot-out' extending scoop that instantly brings small insect prey into the mouth of the nymph. The nymph of the extinct *Meganeura* must have been a fearsome creature.

But on a sunny day, why not take a pair of binoculars and go to the Natal Botanical Gardens to see dragonflies for yourself. ♣

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If you are interested in visiting the Natal National Botanical Gardens, contact your BotSoc representative at the Pietermaritzburg Branch, Andi Durow, at tel (0333) 43 1386, e-mail <umvumvu@sai.co.za> or the Durban Branch representative, Dave Newmarch at tel (031) 261 2197, e-mail <newmarch@mtb.und.ac.za> for more information.

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#### **About the Author**

Jeff Huntly was born in Rhodesia, and frequently accompanied his father on prospecting and butterfly-collecting trips in the bush. A prospector himself for a while, Jeff also spent a year in Hwange National Park painting wildlife. He published *Veld Sketchbook* and a definitive set of fifteen postage stamps for Rhodesia in 1974, and later designed the coins used in Zimbabwe after independence in 1980. He also published the book *African Wildlife Sketches* in 1990, a fascinating collection of drawings accompanied by observations and anecdotes on Africa's wildlife and flora. The author of many articles and regular columns in newspapers and magazines over the years, Jeff is now based in Pietermaritzburg where *Veld Sketches* has been published weekly for the past 16 years in *The Natal Witness*.