

Common Whitetail



Common Whitetail (*Plathemis lydia*) – 1.7", 42-48 mm

Flight

Record:

(4/11-11/14)

Peaks

June-Sept.

Abundant

Habitat:

Most
freshwater
habitats –
prefers still,
shallow water.

First Glance:

Medium.

Wing patch &
white-blue
abdomen
(male),
checkered
wings & brown
abdomen
(female).
Perches on
low
flat surfaces:
paths, rocks,
logs, sidewalk.

Compare:

Widow
Skimmer,
Twelve-
spotted
Skimmer



Male –
2 patches
per wing

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Female –
3 patches
per wing



Juv male & female have
slanted pale dashes on
abdomen edge. Twelve-
spotted Skimmer females
have *straight* pale dashes

Notes from the field – Common Whitetail:

Without question, this is our most commonly seen and easily identified dragonfly. The male especially is hard to miss and easy to remember. Its bold wing patches, white-blue abdomen and habit of perching on pathways and sidewalks brings it into contact with more people than any other dragonfly. The whitetail larvae, or nymph, is a tough and adaptable little creature, able to exist in waterways too degraded for most species. Not only do they thrive in nearly every natural aquatic habitat, from streams and rivers to swamps and ponds, but they also seem able to eek out an existence in urban waters too polluted for much else. I've seen them using parking lot puddles, storm drains and culverts, drainage ditches and polluted urban canals.

Dragonfly geeks like myself tend to turn our noses up at the ubiquitous and ever-present whitetail – but thank goodness for them! Often seen in large numbers, almost swarm-like, they're essential members of the urban and suburban food chain. There they are, eating mosquitos (both as larvae and adults) in our urban parks where few other dragonflies can help us out. And literally everything eats them: prying mantids, birds, frogs, raccoons, fish, spiders. Even urbanized neighborhoods like Falls Church, Springfield, Alexandria and Claredon have whitetails; prey and predator for other urban wildlife survivors.

True sun-worshippers, they love to bask like turtles, on flat surfaces and often in large numbers. How many can you count on this tree in Huntley Meadows Park, and can you find the one female? Soaking up the last bit of evening light, whitetails covered the west side of this sun-bleached old tree.



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Notes from the field – Common Whitetail:

Whitetails appear both tame and fearless, gravitating towards many of the same outdoor places we find ourselves. Their love of perching on flat, sunny surfaces brings them not only to our sidewalks and pathways, but also our porches, balconies, picnic tables, boats, hats, and even our insect nets! I have several photos of both male and female whitetails basking on my net, just seconds after I laid it on the ground. If you find a dragonfly perched on your picnic basket, swing set, park bench or boat deck, it's probably the gutsy little whitetail.

Although the male is hard to confuse with other dragonflies, the female can be a little tricky. It took me a while to feel confident in telling her apart from a female Twelve-spotted Skimmer. White marks on their abdomen edge are the key. Female whitetails have marks that slant and angle (see lower photo). The same marks on female Twelve-spots are straight and parallel. Another ID tip has to do with behavior – whitetails usually perch low, often on the ground, while twelve-spots rarely do, preferring tall stems and shrubs.

Whether it's perched on rocks alongside a remote mountain trail (title photo), or swarming along dirt roads and urban sidewalks, this adaptable skimmer is at home just about anywhere with a flat sunny perch, and a few tasty mosquitoes.



Angled white abdominal marks, opposed to straight marks on Twelve-Spotted Skimmers.

