

Gray Petaltail



Gray Petaltail (*Tachopteryx thorayi*) – 3.0", 71-80 mm

Habitat Conservation Alert!

Flight Record:

(6/24-7/25)

Peaks
late June-
early July

Rare

Habitat:

Clean,
flowing,
sandy or
gravely
sunlit forest
seeps (very
shallow &
often tiny)
and nearby
sunny
clearings.

First Glance:

Large,
grayish,
darner-like.
Low, slow,
lazy flight,
perches on
tree trunks.
Often tame.

Compare:
Harlequin &
Taper-tailed
Darners



Notes from the field – Gray Petaltail:

Our oldest and most primitive dragonfly, species almost identical to petaltails flew alongside dinosaurs during the Jurassic period. Imagine petaltails and a herd of Brontosaurus sharing the same giant, fern-filled forests.

This wonderfully odd dragonfly stands out in several ways: 1) Their eyes, unlike most dragonflies, are widely spaced and don't touch. Only clubtail dragonflies share this trait. 2) This is our only dragonfly with *no* bright colors that uses camouflage as a daily defense. 3) They spend most of their lives perched on, or vertically exploring, tree trunks. 4) Seemingly quite tame, petaltails often perch on people – perhaps they mistake us for trees. 5) They establish territories at tiny forest seeps, and their larvae can live out of water, among wet leaves on the forest floor in and around their seeps.

This is truly a dragonfly of the woods, rarely if ever venturing into meadows or open fields like most of its cousins. Look for petaltails in mature forests at sunlit seeps, with sandy or gravelly substrate, and a visible flow. Stagnant seeps don't seem to attract them as much. Keep a close eye on the nearest, sun-splashed tree trunk, or fallen, sunny log. Also nearby road edges and pathways – but rarely far from their seeps.



This is my favorite Petaltail photo, because of its story. Exploring a park in the Occoquan River watershed with my dragonfly buddy, Tony Robison, and his brother Drew, we found ourselves in a sunny clearing. Drew, Tony's younger brother, along more for the fun hike than dragonflies, spotted what he said looked "different". I was distracted at first, but he persisted. "Guys, what's *this* one?" So I humored him, and put my binos on it. Drew, the only one *not* obsessed with dragonflies, had just found one of the rarest species in VA – and my 1st petaltail.