

Umber Shadowdragon
(female)



Umber Shadowdragon (*Neurocordulia obsoleta*) – 1.8", 43-48 mm

Flight Record:
(5/22-7/23)
Peaks
in June.

Uncommon
(hard to
know, due to
nocturnal
habits)

Habitat:
Rivers and
large, sunny
streams w/
rocks & good
current

First Glance:
Medium,
brown. Fast,
fluttery flight
close to
water's
surface –
almost
touching the
water.
Sometimes
flies up into
nearby trees.
Flies after
8PM.

Compare:
Fawn Darner,
Stygian
Shadow-
dragon



Huge eyes
(red to yellow-brown)
for evening patrols

Rows of
small golden dots
along wing edge -
Stygians *lack* dots.

Dark patch
at **base** of
each wing

Males
(not pictured)
have similar
markings, but
thinner
abdomens



Notes from the field – Umber Shadowdragon:

The name alone creates images of a shadowy creature, mysterious and unique. It also sent me to a dictionary to look up “umber”. It turns out to be a clay pigment containing iron oxides that have an attractive red to golden brown coloring, originally found in the hills of Umbria, Italy. Even better, “umber” comes from the Latin word *umbra*, which means *shadow*. So the name means, Shadow Shadowdragon.

This species certainly lives up to its enigmatic name – it does in fact only show itself among shadows, waiting to leave its high, leafy haunts until after 8PM on summer evenings. It can even be as late as 8:30 before they start their river patrols. Listen for that brief period when the day-singing cicada and night-time katydids are *both* calling; the changing of the guard between light and dark. That’s when shadowdragons make their appearance and will often fly into early night, cruising fast and low, just above the river’s surface.

Look for clean sections of rocky rivers and wide, rocky streams with areas of swift current. Sections of Goose Creek in Loudoun County appear to have what they need, as do cleaner parts of the Potomac River. They may actually be a fairly common species – their evening habits make it hard to judge.



The first time I saw an Umber Shadowdragon was on a cloudy afternoon while wandering through a tall grass meadow along the Potomac River. I saw what I thought was a female Common Whitetail – brownish and about the right size. I absentmindedly swept it up in my net as I walked by and peered in to watch her fly up and out. “Wait a minute, that’s no White-tail... what are all those funky gold spots?!” When I realized what it was, and that I had a female Shadowdragon in my hand (even harder to find than the already elusive male), I think my hands actually shook a little. The sign of a true dragonfly geek ☺ She’d probably just emerged from the river that morning - I set her on a leaf, out of harms way... to wait for the night.

Notes from the field – Umber Shadowdragon:

This bizarre behavior of going against the dragonfly grain and actually shunning the sun, allows them to fill an empty niche. Dusk is often when many species of aquatic insects that spend their larval lives underwater emerge into the evening air as adults. There are very few, if any other species of dragonflies hunting this late in the day. So, shadowdragons have thousands of midges, mayflies, stoneflies and other aquatic insects to feast on, without much competition from other odonates. They instead fly with early-rising bats and nighthawks.

Another dragonfly that hunts almost as late is the Fawn Darner, also possessing unusually large eyes for dusky patrols. I find the best way to tell these two species apart has to do with *how* and *where* they fly. Fawns usually stick pretty close to the shoreline, and investigate every nook and cranny, circling, looping and doubling back to explore each branch and rock. Their flight is slower and weaker than shadowdragons, who often fly right down the middle of the stream or river, with much faster, straighter, longer patrols. In addition, 8:30PM seems to be a line that not many Fawns will cross. Certainly by 8:45, Shadowdragons are alone and own the water.



If you're prepared to wade out into the current, and stumble back, wet and usually a little sore from rocky missteps, you may be treated to one of the most unusual behavior displays in the dragonfly world. Good luck in finding *your* first shadowdragon experience!

Stygian Shadowdragon – I have yet to ID a Stygian, but adults and larvae have been documented in Fairfax County, and are seen every year along the Potomac River at Riverbend Park. Stygians are very similar to Umbers in appearance and behavior. Stygians are said to fly **even later in the day** than Umbers, may **prefer rivers** over streams, and **lack** the golden, or umber, wing dots of Umber Shadowdragons. Look for them after 8:30pm, May-July, in shallow, wide, rocky, clean sections of river.