

Local volunteer aids in dragonfly study

By Ron Scopelliti

As summer ends, so do the short lives of the area's dragonflies, and their smaller cousins, the damselflies. While the dragonflies are in the air, volunteers around the state are collecting specimens as part of a scientific study of the dragonflies and their habitats.

Among these is 75-year-old Flo Butler, a 20-year resident of Smithfield. Mrs. Butler has spent much of this summer scouring Smithfield's ponds, bogs, and streams where the flies live and breed.

A retired research chemist, Mrs. Butler says she has no formal background in studying insects, but her affinity toward nature has drawn her to this and other volunteer projects.

"I've had a very long interest in nature," says Mrs. Butler. "As a kid I collected insects, and studied wildflowers and birds."

She says that when she heard about the need for volunteers, the year before last, she declined because of a heavy travel schedule. This year, however, she found the time to take part.

The study that she is involved with is run by the Nature Conservancy, an international non-profit organization.

According to Ginger Brown, Director of Science and Stewardship for the Conservancy's Rhode Island

office, the group is dedicated to protecting land and water by direct acquisition. The group currently owns over 12 million acres in the United States.

Mrs. Brown says that the diversity of the dragonfly population in a given area offers important information about an area's environmental well-being. A diverse population generally

means a healthy environment.

Currently in its fourth year, the study is scheduled to continue for one more year. Mrs. Butler says that she plans to come back next year.

So far she has collected 260 dragonflies and damselflies, mostly by paddling out into Smithfield's waterways in a small fiberglass kayak, which she transports to the sites in her minivan.

"I do most of my collecting just going down to the ponds, and paddling around the edges, she says, "I'll spend three hours some days doing that." She says the project has fit in well with her love of paddling. "I just work it into my wanderings."

When she spots a specimen, she then attempts to snare it in a net that she made herself.

"I wasn't going to spend \$30 for a net out of a catalog," she says.

After snaring the dragonfly in her net, Mrs. Butler removes it, gently folds its wings flat, and places it in a specimen envelope while still alive. She records the site where it was captured, the date, and the time.

The specimens then have to be prepared. They are soaked in acetone, which kills the specimen and helps preserve it.

Although the standard procedure is just to let the dragonflies dry by air, Mrs. Butler has been drying them in a

container of silica gel, a desiccant, to compensate for the recent humidity.

She then drops the specimens off at the Nature Conservancy's Providence office, where they are identified and catalogued.

Although the final identification is made by the Conservancy, Mrs. Butler says she can identify many of the common



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species herself. Stripes on the thorax, markings on the abdomens, the color of the wings and the eyes all figure into the identification.

She says that dragonflies can generally be distinguished from damselflies by their smaller size, and their behavior. While dragonflies at rest will generally keep their wings spread, most damselfly species fold their wings upon landing.

"I don't think people know how beneficial dragonflies are," Mrs. Butler says. She says that they are "voracious eaters of pest insects." So voracious, that she

says the town of York, Maine has been buying them for pest control.

She also adds, that despite an abdomen that looks like it could bear a stinger, dragonflies don't sting or bite.

Mrs. Butler says she visited each pond three to four times during the summer, "to get some kind of picture of how the

population changes over the season."

In addition to collecting dragonflies for the Nature Conservancy, Mrs. Butler also does volunteer work with the Audubon Society.

"I do a lot of carpentry work," she says, including book cases, special items for the society's educational efforts.

Her latest project is renovating the information kiosk outside the society's Smithfield headquarters. She has also done carpentry work for the Nature Conservancy, building nesting platforms for ospreys.

Mrs. Butler says her summer collecting dragonflies has been pleasant

"I haven't had any problems," she says, "I haven't even tipped over my kayak."

"I've been getting acquainted with people and areas that I had not explored," she says. "It's been fun."



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