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**The Dragonflies of Europe** by R. R. Askew. Harley Books, Colchester, 1988. 294pp, including 31 colour plates, 502 text figures and 116 maps. Price £49.95. ISBN 0 946589 10 0.

A beautiful book! Amongst the recent plethora of field guides to European and British Odonata, this is the best. Askew includes 114 species in a geographical area stretching from Arctic U S S R to the Near East and Morocco. Each species is illustrated in colour, usually more than once, to indicate sexual dimorphism and colour varieties (*Ischnura elegans* has six). Additional line drawings indicate the critical characters to separate closely related species. Substantial text deals with synonymy, description of adult, biology, flight period and distribution. A detailed map indicates the most up to date information on distribution (some 1987 references are cited).

Dick Askew has produced the whole of the book himself, in just over a decade. The need for a complete key became apparent in 1976 when his eldest son sent home some dragonflies from France for identification. He then began to illustrate species in a standard way as material became available. Much of the figured material has been collected by the author, although some museum specimens are also figured; notably from the Royal Museum of Scotland and the British Museum (Natural History).

Having just acquired this magnificent book, Paul Richards and myself put it to the test on a trip to the Auvergne, Ardeche and Camargue regions of France.

Firstly, there is a problem with the size of the book (290 x 212mm). This is no volume for the pocket or the rucksack, but it sat nicely on the back seat of the mini-bus, enabling us to identify netted adults with comparative ease and leisure. (In the Camargue this was totally unnecessary as hundreds of dragonflies are slaughtered on fast roads passing through the reserve.) And it really works! A large Emperor dragonfly was identified from the beautiful colour plates as a female *Anax parthenope*. A quick cross-reference to the text to check characteristics, plus a useful sketch of *Anax* occipital triangles, then from Askew's own experience we read 'Only in the Camargue have I seen *A. parthenope* abundant' next to a European distribution map. Ideal this! More difficult genera, such as *Sympetrum*, can be keyed out. We found that the dominant species was *S. fonscolombei* and the vivid red darters were *Crocothemis erythraea*. Again Askew beat us to it 'the most vividly red of all European dragonflies ..... is abundant in the Camargue, where hundreds were found as road casualties ....' And so it goes on. In the Ardeche identification of the dusk-flying *Boyeria irene* was easy; 'the species continues to fly late in the evening.' In the Auvergne, we tried working with the smaller species. The difficult genus of blue damselflies *Coenagrion*, is well keyed, and figured with additional black and white line illustrations of male body patterns.

The introduction is a good read, even for the unconverted, and could well inspire a new generation of dragonfly enthusiasts. There is detailed coverage of biology, life histories, adult behaviour, the distribution of European dragonflies, adult morphology followed by the essential checklist and key to families.

Fully-grown dragonfly larvae leave the water in which they have developed and climb supports such as the stems of emergent plants, to cast off their larval skins or exuviae. Searching for these exuviae is a standard recording technique, and Askew recognises its importance by including a key to the final-instar larvae. Larvae of most European Odonata are recognizable to genus, but identification to species can be very difficult and uncertain.

This magnificent book will undoubtedly become the standard companion for all dragonfly enthusiasts; although some may be put off by the price. Buy this book if you have European collections, identify European specimens, or undertake field trips to the continent. If your interests are entirely British, then stay with the revised edition of C. O. Hammond's *The Dragonflies of Great Britain and Ireland* (Harley Books). However if you need to look at the British fauna in its European context, buy a copy of Askew. You will not be disappointed.

The publishers, Harley Books of Colchester, are a dedicated family business, providing an invaluable service to naturalists and museum biologists. Their other masterpieces include the multi-volume *Moths and Butterflies of Great Britain*, *The Dragonflies of Great Britain and Ireland* and *The Spiders of Great Britain*. They deserve our support.

Derek Whiteley