

## Common Clubtail Dragonfly

*Gomphus vulgatissimus*

The Common Clubtail is a distinctive and extremely local insect, although in suitable habitats it can be found in large numbers. The main threats to the species are pollution, excessive dredging, vegetation removal, silt deposition, river improvement schemes and recreational use of rivers.

### Habitat

The species relies upon large, slow to medium flow, meandering rivers with high quality water. The species avoids high velocity areas and requires a silty river bed to burrow into.

Adult pairing occurs around trees, such as woods, orchards and hedgerows. The female returns alone to the river to lay eggs. It is difficult to see adults in the trees so sightings are usually of emerging or newly emerged adults near the river. Very few other dragonflies live in the same habitat as the Common Clubtail making it easier to identify.



Surveyors searching for the Common Clubtail on the River Severn.

### Identification of Larvae/ Exuviae



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Size: 27-32mm

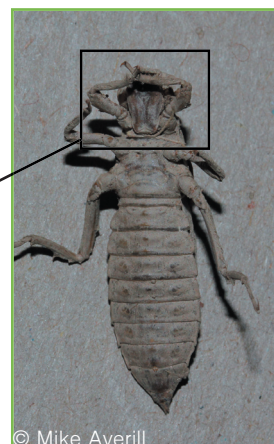
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A newly emerged Common Clubtail with exuvia (top) and a Clubtail exuvia showing the distinctive triangular head shape.

When dragonflies are ready to become adults, they climb out of the water and the adult body bursts out of the larval skin. This is called emergence. The larval skin is left behind and this is called an exuvia. The larvae/exuviae of the Common Clubtail are very distinctive. Unlike any other dragonfly larvae, the species has short, bulbous antennae. These come together at the front of the head, giving the exuviae their unmistakable triangular head shape. The majority of dragonfly larvae emerge on supports (such as reeds) in an upright, vertical position. The Common Clubtail dragonfly is unique. Due to its habit of emerging on bankside vegetation, mud or rocks, the species often emerges in a horizontal position. This can be a useful clue when looking for Common Clubtail exuviae. Common Clubtail larvae/ exuviae have a squat body shape without any large and distinctive spines on the sides or top of the abdomen. The labial mask is short and flat compared to other dragonfly species. The exuviae are often covered in dry mud, due to the species' habit of burrowing, making them distinctively pale.



The 'labial mask' of the Common Clubtail



© Mike Averill



# Identification of Adult

The Common Clubtail is a medium sized dragonfly. The species is distinctive for several reasons. This is the only UK dragonfly with eyes which do not meet on the top of the head. The predominantly black body colour with yellow or green markings also gives the species its iconic appearance.

## Identification of Male



The male Common Clubtail has greenish eyes and a predominantly black body. The newly emerged adult has yellow markings which gradually turn green with maturity.

The body shape shows a distinct waist at the top of the abdomen (the long, thin body part). The 'tail' of the abdomen is noticeably clubbed, giving the species its name.

The rear margin of the hind wing of the male is acutely angled.

## Identification of Female



The female Common Clubtail has greenish eyes and a predominantly black body. The yellow markings are slightly different to the male and do not turn green with maturity.

The body shape can appear more robust, as in the photo left, however waisted individuals, similar to the male, also occur.

The rear margin of the hind wing is not acutely angled. This difference between the male and female can be a conclusive and useful aid in telling them apart.

## Confusion Species

There are very few species which could be confused with the Common Clubtail. The Golden-ringed Dragonfly also has a black body with yellow markings and green eyes. However, it is a much bigger species with horizontal rather than vertical markings. It is found on acidic streams and rivers, usually on heathland. The female Black-tailed Skimmer has two black stripes down a wide, golden body. This is found around open water, favouring lakes, slow rivers and ponds.



Black-tailed Skimmer larva showing rectangular head shape.

The larvae/ exuviae of the Golden-ringed Dragonfly and Black-tailed Skimmer are both broad and squat, featuring the rectangular head shape seen in all other dragonfly larvae except the Common Clubtail.



Golden-ringed Dragonfly (top)  
Female Black-tailed Skimmer (bottom)