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Review of *Damselflies of Alberta: Flying Neon Toothpicks in the Grass* by John Acorn

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Damselflies of Alberta: Flying Neon Toothpicks in the Grass. By John Acorn. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2004. xi + 156 pp. Photographs, appendixes, glossary, references. \$29.95 paper.

This book is small enough to fit into a field pack or be rolled up and put in your pocket, but don't be misled by the size: it contains many compelling topics in

addition to identification and species accounts. Of special interest is the chapter on the history of damselfly study in Alberta. Settlement of many areas of the Canadian and American Plains occurred about a hundred years ago, and the pattern was similar in many places—avid amateurs or professional biologists began the study of local faunas, and the stories of their personal lives and experiences in those pioneer years enrich the study of plant and animal groups for us today. Tales told by John Acorn about past and present damselfly enthusiasts in Alberta provide a context that makes the insects all the more interesting.

While the author stresses his awareness of why scientific writing must be so dry and unemotive, he freely breaks from this style, filling the book with personality, anecdotes, and commentary (such as the perils of pointy-headed ecology as well as his own childhood experiences).

The first third of the volume covers damselfly biology, behavior, morphology, and methods of study (including using field glasses) and gives details on methods of collection, preservation, labeling, and sources of information and equipment. The rest of the book provides accounts of individual species, with nice photos and distribution maps covering North American, not just Alberta, as well as user-friendly taxonomic keys.

The individual species accounts offer the pleasures of engaging coverage and lots of take-away information. While Alberta species and where to find them are detailed here, many species are widespread. For these, sometimes informative studies have been done as far away as Kentucky, for example, and discussions on relationships among species and the impact of the ice age stimulate the imagination.

Two minor criticisms: a few full-page pictures of people and habitats might have been used for more important information; the illustrations in the picture gallery (pp. 151-56) cause me to squint (maybe because I'm aging) when I try seeing critical color patterns—they could be a bit larger with more color contrast.

Quibbles aside, this is an excellent book overall. **Dennis M. Lehmkuhl**,
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