

Book Review

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Demoiselle Damselflies Winged Jewels of Silvery Streams (Neidonkorennot – Solisevien vetten lentävät jalokivet)

Text: Sami Karjalainen and Matti Hämäläinen

Photos: Sami Karjalainen

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Demoiselle Damselflies, winged jewels of silvery streams; this evocatively titled book presents an extraordinary fusion of art and science. With breathtaking photographic images and a concise, lucid text it depicts and summarizes the behaviour, ecology and global diversity of that most beautiful of odonate groups – the family Calopterygidae *sensu stricto*. However before proceeding further I must declare interest. It was my privilege and my pleasure to edit the original English text and occasionally, as editors do, to make suggestions on content. Never before have I worked on such an exquisitely conceived or well constructed book. It is a splendid example of the book as a work of art. But can I now write an unbiased review? Of that the reader must be the judge.

I will begin with the text. Firstly, apart from the title itself, the book was originally written in English, edited, then translated into Finnish, the authors' mother tongue. This is the exact reverse of what normally happens in bilingual books, and the result is most successful, with a genuinely authoritative and informative text. Too often in bilingual books we see a token and inept English text which does not do justice to the original language (I speak especially of cases where I can read both languages). In this case I can guarantee at least that the English text is a very good read.

The first part of the book, written by Sami Karjalainen, deals with habitats, adult structure, flight, egg, larva, emergence, adult life, feeding, territoriality, courtship, copulation and sperm competition, oviposition, predators and parasites and variation. These topics have been dealt with by other authors but the text here is especially concise and informative, and each topic is lavishly illustrated with photographic examples, showing mostly European species but also the exotic Oriental Metalwings, *Mnais* and others. The second and slightly longer part, which follows seamlessly from the first, was written by Matti Hämäläinen and covers the faunistics and taxonomy of European species, giants of the east (*Archineura*), Demoiselle genera worldwide, close relatives (Hetaeriniidae, Chlorocyphidae and Euphaeidae) and a comprehensive checklist of the 112 known Demoiselle (Calopterygidae) species. It is worth noting that after Selys, the author whose name appears most frequently in this list is Hämäläinen, followed by Fraser and Lieftinck. Much of the information on the numerous tropical genera has never before been assembled and summarized, and it is expertly done, with close attention to detail married with a very succinct text. Genera of the world is almost a misnomer – virtually every species is mentioned. In some cases, where it has general interest, the etymology of generic names is explained (e.g. *Echo* and *Phaon*, characters from Greek mythology). A world map shows geographic patterns of species richness, with 53 species being found in tropical and subtropical Asia excluding Sundaland, the heartland of Demoiselles.

Finally, just when we think we have reached the end of the book, beyond the checklist, we find two short chapters which are together much more than an epilogue – 'Demoiselles in history and culture' and



'Disappearing beauty', both authored by Matti Hämäläinen. The first gives us the merest glimpse into a large topic. We learn a recognizable Demoiselle was figured in Europe as early as 1320 – and provides evidence for global cooling. Eastern and particularly Japanese attitudes to Odonata are discussed and the chapter concludes with three charming Haiku about Demoiselles. 'Disappearing beauty' is arguably the finest chapter in the book – the inexorable destruction of the earth's habitats is discussed with a note of black comedy (should we be called *Homo ambulocalamitas* – walking disaster man?), which nevertheless accentuates its sombre note – we are creating a world fit only for vermin. The photograph accompanying this page shows the hind view of a demoiselle in silhouette, retreating into a disintegrating background.

The book is illustrated throughout with photographs, and they are, in the main, of exceptional quality and mostly taken by Sami Karjalainen. There is a good selection of striking action shots, showing demoiselles on the wing in courtship or combat. Others portray them in their environment, often lending them an almost surreal quality. In some cases it is the backgrounds which exhibit the greatest appeal, but never at the expense of the main subject. At no stage could the reader doubt that this is a book about demoiselle damselflies. However, many readers will connect first with the subliminally familiar background, then see the demoiselle. This is surely the way to seduce readers into looking at that which they might never before have noticed. We see a glowing red jewel set in silver (134-135), or submerging wings mingling with the colours of Monet's water lilies (99). Others (37, 40-41) capture the frenzy of activity around a breeding site, or the calm silhouette of *Matrona* (150-151) perched on a blade of grass, recalling a Chinese brush and ink drawing.

In any illustrated work of natural history it is important to constantly stimulate the reader with images which vary in their perspective, background mood and scale. The reader should experience a dynamic interaction with the book – the visual senses should be constantly engaged and even slightly challenged. The book achieves this result very skilfully. Some are natural history masterpieces, capturing seldom witnessed but commonplace dramas of the lives of demoiselles. Many are pure art photos. Some are serene and contemplative – others are action packed – almost all are technically brilliant. However not all images are entirely successful. The close up photos of *Vestalis melania* wings (32, 33) are visually interesting in a purely abstract way but scarcely do justice to the range of beauty to be found in such subjects; moreover they lack proper explanation. One can understand how these images were achieved technically, but in my opinion they do not do justice either to demoiselles or to the rest of the book.

The layout and overall structure of the book is outstanding. There is everywhere exquisite attention to detail, so that Finnish and English texts balance almost exactly, or any imbalance is compensated by the skilful placement of figure legends. The text is everywhere very well founded. There are 169 scholarly citations, discretely referenced in the text by small numbers. The format of the book is perfect. It sits easily in the hand and invites reading. It is likely the most resistant of readers, seduced by the gorgeous images, will have read and learned a good deal more science than he or she intended, before putting it down.

This book is not aimed primarily at the specialist. It is not a monograph, but nor is it a picture book – it is a book for anyone with an eye for beauty in nature and with an ordinary level of scientific curiosity – but every odonatologist will surely wish to own a copy and will find it both a thing of beauty and a valuable reference work.

