

EDUCATING NEW YORK'S FINGERLAKES VISITORS TO TACHOPTERYX

John and Sue Gregoire
Kestrel Haven Avian Migration Observatory

The Watkins Glen, NY gorge and other such attractions are visited by hundreds of thousands of tourists each year. Eleven venues in the Finger Lakes Parks system are home to adult Tachopteryx thoreyii, the Gray Petaltail.

During our many visits to the Glen gorge, we've seen and heard tales of big dragonflies in a plethora of languages. Most, if not all, were in the form of dire warnings of what those "darning" or "sewing" needles would do to ones lips, nose, ears and other assorted body parts, not to mention all the "stinger" anecdotes.

Unfortunately, Tachopteryx is a gregarious soul and truly enjoys perching in easy reach on safety walls, gorge shale and people! Who knows how many have been swatted and dispatched over the years - certainly more than are collected as collecting in NY's state parks require specific permit.

A few years ago we proposed and then helped design educational placards with the area staff of the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP). This spring, and just in time for the petaltail flight season, these colorful signs (see photo) have been installed at several locations within each of the parks known to host Tachopteryx.

We may thus save a few and keep our gorge species going long enough to discover its breeding habitat preferences while also educating thousands of people internationally. All our science has to date is a single anecdotal report of a female laying eggs in a seep feeding a gorge. This despite seasonal searches by a number of paid and volunteer researchers.

#30

Please Protect the Gray Petaltail Dragonfly

Enjoying the cool, damp gorge? So is the gray petaltail dragonfly.

This gorge is one of a few places around New York that provides the conditions the gray petaltail needs to survive. In June and July, look for these remarkable creatures perched on tree trunks or flying over the creek. By nature, they are friendly and tame, and may even land on you. These delicate dragonflies need our protection, so please do not harm them.

Where can you see them?
You are most likely to spot an adult gray petaltail during mating season in June and July. Males will perch or fly up and down tree trunks in sunny openings searching for females. They will then fly high in the tree canopy to mate.

What do they look like?
The gray petaltail, black and gray in color, is easy to identify because it is substantially larger than the other dragonflies that live in this area. Adult gray petaltails are also distinguished by well-separated dark brown and gray eyes and a long, parallel-sided stigma on the wings. Females look similar to males, but have well-developed, blade-like ovipositors, the mechanism for laying eggs.

Why do they need your protection?
Gray petaltails live in forests where the ground is wet from constant seeps of clean water. As of 2006, this gorge is one of only 11 confirmed locations in New York where gray petaltails have been found. Because of limited habitat, the gray petaltail is listed as a Species of Special Concern in New York and several other states.

How can you protect them?
The gray petaltail's friendly nature is a threat to its survival. These harmless giants often land on people. Because of their size, however, our instinct is likely to swat at them. Please do not injure or kill a gray petaltail if it flies near, or lands on you. Encourage others to protect them as well. If you see one of these unique insects, please let park staff know so they can keep track of their sightings.

Life-size image of adult common white-tailed dragonfly.

Life-size image of adult common white-tailed dragonfly.

Thousands of people like the gorge each summer, and many encounter this dragonfly.

Compare the size of this common white-tailed dragonfly to the gray petaltail to its left. Both resemble the common white-tailed female on mosquitoes and other small flying insects. Gray petaltails are larger insects, including butterflies, moths, other dragonflies, and bees. Look for both dragonflies in the gorge during the summer.

Drawings of size petaltail nymph.

You are less likely to see the gray petaltail as a nymph, before a nymph grows wings and transforms into an adult. It lives on the forest floor among wet mud and leaves, feeding on passing insects.

The gray petaltail (*Tachopteryx thoreyii*) is one of about 5,000 species of dragonflies worldwide. Dragonflies are insects with two pairs of net-veined wings and large compound eyes.

Photo courtesy of John and Sue Gregoire.

You can help protect all park wildlife! If you see, hear or find signs of any animal or plant in the park you feel is worth noting, visit the park office to fill out a short reporting form.

[Kestrel Haven Avian Migration Observatory](http://www.kestrelhaven.org)
John and Sue Gregoire
5373 Fitzgerald Road
Burdett, NY 14818-9626
khmo@att.net