Dragonflies are stunning and amazing insects! They are often very brightly coloured, kill for a living and have phenomenal powers of sight, flight and manoeuvrability. Some are large, though none as big as the one-metre wingspan giant Protodonata that flew some 325 million years ago. These are considered to be the ancestors of Dragonflies, which were well in evidence during the heyday of the dinosaurs. Almost 6,000 species are recognized today, but only a fraction of these have ever been seen in Great Britain or Ireland, and only 40 or so currently have breeding populations.

Dragonflies are characterized by having an aquatic larval stage, incomplete metamorphosis, two pairs of wings and large, compound eyes. The wings that have proved so important over the aeons are incredibly light and yet very strong. Powered by large muscles in the thorax, they enable larger species to travel at up to 36 km/h. They also allow all species to hover if they so wish. Their multi-faceted eyes provide excellent colour vision and acuity. Add to this a death-trap of a food-collecting 'basket' of legs and razor-sharp mandibles, and you have quite a fearsome beast! Fortunately, despite appearances, Dragonflies are harmless to humans.

Dragonfly populations throughout the world are highly dynamic and these are exciting times for the Dragonfly-watcher! Whether it is because of their brilliant colours, predatory habits, association with water, or the challenge of identification, dragonflies have grabbed the attention of an increasing army of fans.
Using this book

The term Dragonfly (with a capital 'D') is used in this book for the order Odonata, which includes both dragonflies (or Anisoptera, meaning 'unequal wings') and damselflies (Zygoptera, meaning 'equal wings'). Throughout this book blue text is used to denote damselflies (Zygoptera) and green text for dragonflies (Anisoptera).

This book aims to provide the tools for anyone interested in damselflies and dragonflies to improve their knowledge and enjoyment of these incredible insects, and to contribute towards their conservation. The focus is on the identification of both adult forms and larvae. It is illustrated throughout with carefully selected, high-quality photographs and detailed and accurate illustrations of key features. As far as possible, technical terms have been avoided, although those that are used are explained in a Glossary (page 52).

Introductory sections provide a summary of Dragonfly biology and ecology to help you better understand and interpret what you see in the field, and guidance on the habitats and locations where the species may be found. The book covers all 56 damselfly and dragonfly species that have ever been recorded in Great Britain or Ireland, as well as a few that seem most likely to turn up as vagrants and/or colonize in future.

The Dragonflies that breed or have attempted to breed in Great Britain or Ireland in recent years can be broken down into 12 broad 'types'. These are introduced on pages 35–39 and the subsequent series of charts (pages 40–51) illustrates the key identification features, showing males and females separately, where relevant. The individual species accounts that follow highlight the key identification features of adults and provide up-to-date information on the species' status, behaviour, habitat preferences, distribution and flight periods. For three particularly difficult groups, an introductory section is included that provides a direct comparison between the species and highlights the key features to look for.

Towards the back of the book is a separate, detailed section on the identification of larvae and exuviae. This has been carefully structured and illustrated with field identification in mind.

Concluding sections provide advice on where to look for Dragonflies; how to observe, photograph and record them; conservation status and legislation; and sources of further information.

English names are used throughout the text. When referring to a particular species these are shown with initial capitals (e.g. Southern Hawker); references to groups of species are shown in lower case text (e.g. hawkers). For those who prefer to use scientific names, these are included in the main species accounts. The English names are those used by the British Dragonfly Society (BDS), except for vagrants and species not yet recorded in Great Britain or Ireland, which follow those in Dijkstra and Lewington (2006); other commonly used names and, where they differ, those used by Nelson and Thompson (2004) for Ireland are provided in the main species accounts.

The term Dragonfly (with a capital 'D') is used in this book for the order Odonata, which includes both dragonflies (or Anisoptera, meaning 'unequal wings') and damselflies (Zygoptera, meaning 'equal wings'). Throughout this book blue text is used to denote damselflies (Zygoptera) and green text for dragonflies (Anisoptera).