



## The birds and the bees, and the dance flies

By Mike Davis

Long-Tailed Dance Fly. Darryl Gwynne notes "This female is just about to fly up and join the evening swarm. She has sucked air in through her mouthparts to greatly inflate a set of abdominal sacs (truly nature's 'inflate-a-mate')!. When flying in the swarm she holds the feathery legs around her inflated abdomen to form a flying disc shape. Males have neither of these bizarre traits." PHOTO BY HEATHER PROCTOR.

As a member of my local naturalist club for many years, I have enjoyed the wide variety of interesting topics that the speakers present. At a recent meeting I learned a fascinating story about a species of small fly that lives along the Credit River. It has a charming mating ritual that occurs near its birth place along river banks.

Darryl Gwynne, a professor of biology at the University of Toronto who has studied sexual selection in insects for more than two decades, showed photos and a drawing of the Long-Tailed Dance Fly (*Rhamphomyia longicauda*) and talked about its unique role reversal.

"June brings out the twilight mating swarms," he said. "In tree gaps along the banks of the Credit River thousands of slow-moving females take to the air while risking entanglement in nearby spider webs. This ritual display attracts flying males that bear nuptial gifts of insect prey. Competition among the females to get a meal -- they are unable to hunt -- has led to a complete reversal in the conventional mating roles because females display and males choose. In early evening each fly enhances her attractiveness by inflating her abdomen which is held aloft between a set of fancy feathered legs."

What I found impressive was the bigger the better! But in this case the bigger the female, the more attractive she is to the male, a complete reversal to what I thought should be the norm.

There are countless stories happening along the Escarpment. This is but one told at my naturalists' club. When you are out for a walk, cycle, or drive, keep an eye out for what is happening all around us in our natural world. Take some time in early June, check out a clearing along a river bank in just the right light, and you may witness this great performance.

Want to know more about nature? Link up with your local naturalist club. Some also offer Young Naturalist evening/Saturday/summer camp programs for children. Find them in your local community listings or contact Ontario Nature for one of their member groups near you at [ontarionature.org](http://ontarionature.org).

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