

OWLFLIES

SCIENTIFIC NAME: **Ascalaphidae**

SPECIES: **Libelloides coccajus**

CONSERVATION STATUS: **Unknown - Not Evaluated**

FACT FILE

- PHYLUM: ARTHROPODA
- CLASS: INSECTA
- ORDER: NEUROPTERA
- FAMILY: ASCALAPHIDAE
- GENUS: LIBELLOIDES
- QUITE COMMON THROUGHOUT THE PACA REGION
- CARNIVOROUS CROSS BETWEEN A BUTTERFLY & DRAGONFLY
- LARVAE THE STUFF OF NIGHTMARES WITH ITS HUGE CHOMPING MANDIBLES

During the mercury rising heat of early June, is when many insects decide to emerge. Butterflies, dragonflies, grasshoppers, cicadas are well-known to us, but others are less familiar. A small agile insect that looks like a cross between a butterfly and a dragonfly can cause some confusion as it darts busily back and forth around you. Only once this fluorescent yellow flash finally decides to settle and land, can you get an opportunity to scrutinise and admire this astonishing creature.

Eggs and Young

The adult female lays the eggs on a stem and neatly disposes them in two parallel rows. Their preference for this process is on vegetation in undisturbed meadows lacking in herbivores. Hatching starts around 30 days later. As soon as they hatch, the newborns will disperse and hide.

The larvae are ambush assassins with a varied diet that seize prey with their mandibles, immobilise them with a salivary secretion and then suck up the contents. Newborn larvae have a certain capacity to resist starvation, but once they reach adulthood they are virtually insatiable. In readiness for its metamorphosis to the aerial form, the larvae weaves a cocoon that is camouflaged with grains of earth or other local debris. It is within this silky mass that the magic takes place. The cells rearrange and transform the squat, ugly ambush-predator into a beautiful lemon-coloured flying jewel. It is now well equipped to satiate its voracious appetite and sets about the task of devouring small prey such as flies, gnats and mosquitoes.



Description

The head, thorax are black with some yellow patches. The abdomen is also black and hairy. The males have hooked shaped cerci at the tip of their abdomen. This allows them to grasp females in flight. Their wingspan is 45 to 55 mm and these are a beautiful fluorescent yellow. The triangular hind wings have a black patch that runs parallel to the abdomen.

Life-cycle

Not a great deal is known about the ecology of Owlflies because they are difficult to breed in captivity and therefore no real studies have been conducted on their life-cycle. There are 3 defined segments to their development. The larval stage where they fatten up and overwinter, the chrysalis stage, where it transforms in the spring to the winged insect and adult airborne stage that starts in May-June where the reproduction cycle begins with an aerial ballet and then copulation which completes the circle.

Habitat

Owlflies frequent light, grassy environments and favour arid conditions they usually occur between altitudes of 300-1500 meters. The adults are very skilful aerial predators just like dragonflies. They are also endowed with all the corresponding hunting assets: fast flight, legs with powerful claws, large eyes and robust chewing apparatus. They are territorial and hunt from elevated perches with a good vantage point over their surroundings. Their long club-like antennae helps separate them at a glance from dragonflies. Although they can be often be mistaken as butterflies.

Diurnal hunters

These day flying predators are intriguing insects that are quite visible between May and July and deserve a bit of attention if encountered. The more we partake in citizen science by transmitting observations to relevant organisations the better our understanding will become and hopefully help with their assessment and protection classifications.

Owlflies seem to be fairly widespread within our region and **Libelloides Coccajus** are just one of ten species that are present in France. Most are found in the south below a Bordeaux-Geneva line so whatever department you are in see if you can spot one.

