

Dragonfly hunter

Written by CAROL POMEDAY
Wednesday, 21 August 2013 16:12

Freda van den Broek has made it her mission to capture the insect's ethereal beauty with her camera.

When a dragonfly perched on a twig in the yard of her Port Washington home last summer, Freda van den Broek was intrigued by its fragile beauty and the way the sun shone on it.

She wanted to photograph it, but her camera was in the house.

Figuring it would fly away if she got up, she decided to be content to observe it.



After what seemed a long time but probably was only a minute or two, van den Broek slowly walked away to get her camera.

To her surprise, the dragonfly was still there when she returned and seemed to pose as she snapped away.

“There was something magical about the way the light was filtering and shimmering on it,” she said. “I never saw one up that close before, and I had never seen one in our yard before. I called her Eve for some silly reason.”

Van den Broek added, “Sometimes something opens your eyes to something you’ve seen, but never really saw before.”

Dragonfly hunter

Written by CAROL POMEDAY
Wednesday, 21 August 2013 16:12

That's what the dragonfly did for her. It eventually led to a book, "A Dragonfly Summer," that features her photographs and prose plus quotes from William Yeats, William Wordsworth, Aldo Leopold and others. Her narrative includes the history and life cycle of dragonflies, including the mating rituals she observed aimed at guaranteeing the survival of the fittest.

These are very limited-edition books. Van den Broek makes each one of the hand-bound books herself, refining the text and process with each one.

"I think I've made six so far," van den Broek said. "The first one was a birthday gift for my mother-in-law. The second one I made for my dad in South Africa, but it got lost en route. I plan to take him one."

The books are covered with cloth and have ribbon bookmarks. A different dragonfly photograph is on the cover of each book.

So far, the books are only made as gifts, but van den Broek said she may seek a publisher.

She has photographed several new dragonflies this summer and is thinking about a second volume.

The project, which started out to satisfy her curiosity, became a labor of love and a tribute to her mother, who died in November 2011 in South Africa, where van den Broek was born and raised.

Her husband Gertjan — who is developing a housing and commercial complex in downtown Port Washington that will encompass the Harry's Restaurant and former M&I Bank buildings and the empty lot between them — also grew up in South Africa and his parents still live there.

Her mother's sudden death was a shock to van den Broek, who was struggling to find peace and regain her balance when the dragonfly landed in front of her.

The creature was so unusual that she went on the Internet to see what kind it was, only to discover there are hundreds of species of dragonflies — actually almost 2,700 species worldwide and 460 in North America — and each has its unique characteristics.

Van den Broek saw two more dragonflies within a short time — a blue chalk-fronted corporal at the Cedarburg Bog and a Halloween pennant with red marks on the tips of its wings at Forest Beach Migratory Preserve in the Town the Belgium — and she was hooked.

The more she learned about the creatures, the more fascinated she became.

She found the pictures of dragonflies in most scientific guidebooks were too small to capture the insect's beauty and the details she could see through her camera lens.

"By enlarging the photographs, you could see what beautiful creatures they are," she said. "Some people who are scientists catch them, but I don't. I'm not harmful to them in any way."

Dragonfly hunter

Written by CAROL POMEDAY
Wednesday, 21 August 2013 16:12

She decided to photograph and identify as many dragonflies as she could in Ozaukee County, taking her camera almost every day last summer to Forest Beach, Harrington Beach State Park and the Cedarburg Bog.

“You can’t say I’m going to photograph dragonflies, and they’ll show up,” van den Broek said. “You have to satisfy yourself with birds, flowers and damselflies.”



Dragonflies perch with their wings outstretched, while damselflies tuck in their wings, she noted. She’s only photographed dragonflies.

By observing nature, van den Broek said, she started to heal.

“Being outdoors and watching nature’s transitions, it brings your own transitions into another perspective,” she said.

“Dragonflies as a whole are interesting because they’ve probably been around for 300 million years, the time of the dinosaurs. Whatever that extinction event was, the dragonfly survived. I think it’s because they have an underwater life as larvae.

“They have inspired poets and writers for years.”

Van den Broek learned dragonflies lay their eggs underwater either by tapping their tails on the surface of the water, depositing 20 to 30 eggs with each tap, or cutting a slit in a plant below the water and depositing the eggs there.

The common green darner, which grows to three inches long and doesn’t perch, is one of her favorites. She managed to photograph several of them in flight.

Dragonfly hunter

Written by CAROL POMEDAY
Wednesday, 21 August 2013 16:12

“They’re so curious,” she said. “They come close and hover, then fly away and come back again as if to say, ‘Woman, if you want to take a picture, take it now. How many times do I have to do this?’”

Van den Broek found plenty of folklore about dragonflies.

“In some areas, they are associated with the devil and mothers warn their children that dragonflies could sew their mouths shut,” she said.

“In Japan, it’s good luck to see a dragonfly. Some consider them visitors of the spirit world. It is a charming idea to contemplate (her mother’s spirit visiting her through the dragonfly). If anything like that did exist, I couldn’t imagine a more appropriate creature.”

Van den Broek and her husband returned to South Africa to be with her father and siblings on the anniversary of her’s mother death and visited her mother’s grave.

“I came back feeling I had to do something with these photographs on my computer,” van den Broek said. “I started writing for my mom. It seemed a shame it should stay in a computer and not be seen.

“Section by section, the book came together. I’m not trained as a writer or photographer.”

Although her husband offered to help, she wanted to do it herself. She learned how to create the pages on the computer and to bind and cover the books.

Her husband didn’t see the book until she completed the first one for his mother.

“I think he was surprised when he saw the book,” she said. “Sometimes, I am, too. I look at this and think, ‘Did I do that?’”