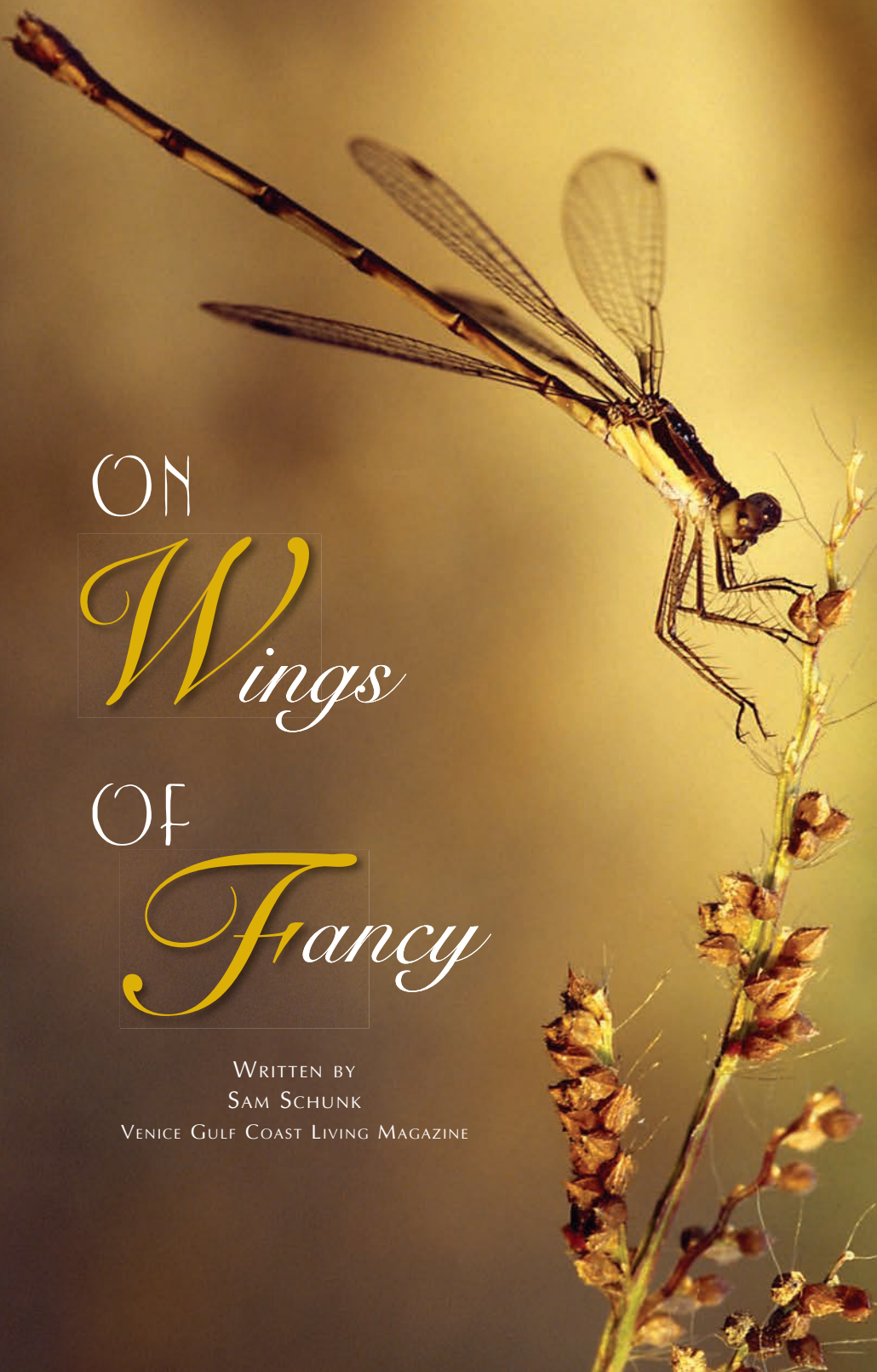


ON Wings Of Fancy

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Whether engaged in flight or at rest with wings outstretched, dragonflies simply captivate the imagination. Look upon their iridescent bodies and gossamer-like wings, and you will soon discover why experts say that dragonflies have come to rival birds in wingspan, color, and gregariousness.

Historically, these enchanting insects are said to have taken to the air long before the dinosaurs walked the earth. According to the fossil records, their earlier ancestors, the griffenflies, gigantic insects with wingspans ranging from 45 to 71 centimeters, flew through the skies during the Carboniferous period, or over 300 million years ago.

Over the last centuries as they interacted with humans, dragonflies inspired more than their share of folklore. For instance, these insects owe their very name, dragonfly, to a myth that they were once the fire-breathing creatures of old. Also, dragonflies were once called the devil's darning needles: superstition had it that they would stitch up the eyes, lips and ears of children who told lies and adults who cursed or scolded. Another name, horse's stinger, came from the misperception that dragonflies were biting horses; however, experts say it is far more likely that these flying creatures were preying upon the nuisance insects such as horseflies that were, in fact, irritating the horses. It is believed that these stories originated to dissuade folks from getting near dragonflies out of a concern that these insects might bite, sting or otherwise harm humans. In truth, however, these beneficial insects pose no such risk to people and, in fact, help us by keeping mosquitoes at bay.

Around the globe, these remarkable flyers have also come to be associated with a number of positive meanings. Throughout the world, dragonflies symbolize change. It's also not surprising that these winged creatures represent power and poise since they can fly at speeds of up to 30 miles per hour. Additionally, dragonflies are capable of moving each of their four wings independently, giving them the



agility to hover and to fly in any direction, including backwards. What may be even more astounding, however, is that it completes these aerial acrobatics while only flapping its wings 30 times per minute, as opposed to insects like houseflies that beat their wings 60 to 100 times in this same interval.

Dragonflies are also associated with living in the moment. During their life cycle, these aquatic insects spend the majority of their time as a nymph (or naiad) or immature dragonfly, hunting through the water for other invertebrates. Larger species may eat the occasional small fish and tadpoles. After molting anywhere from 9 to 17 times, the dragonfly nymph is finally ready for adulthood. It then crawls out of the water, climbs upon a rock or plant stem, and molts for a final time. Afterward, it can take as long as an hour for the adult to be able to expand its body. For the next few days, the newly emerged dragonfly, called a teneral adult, is soft-bodied, pale and highly vulnerable to predators since it cannot fly until its body hardens. It is estimated that as many as ninety percent of these young adult dragonflies do not survive. Adulthood, the stage during which they hunt for prey, find a mate, and give birth to another generation of dragonflies, only lasts for a span of a few months.

The amazing eyes of the dragonfly make it a powerful symbol of seeing clearly. Given that this insect devotes about 80 percent of its brain capacity to processing visual information, its vision is extraordinarily good compared to other insects.



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Additionally, dragonflies are believed to see a wider spectrum of colors than humans. With a head that almost entirely consists of two large compound eyes, each containing nearly 30,000 lenses, the dragonfly has nearly 360-degree vision. This winged wonder possesses remarkable vision that helps them not only to detect the movement of other insects, but also to avoid midair collisions with other objects in their environment.

If you are inspired to search for these winged wonders, you will be delighted to find that, according to the University of Florida (UF), the Sunshine State is home to six families of dragonflies: *Aeshnidae*, known as darners for

their needle-like abdomens; *Cordulegastridae*, or spiketails; *Corduliidae*, emerald dragonflies or green-eyed skimmers; *Gomphidae*, or clubtails; *Libellulidae*, skimmers or perchers; and *Petaluridae*, or petaltails, which are probably the oldest living dragonfly family. The experts at UF advise that the best places to look for these captivating creatures are near any body of water or running stream, where they may be observed sitting in sunspots, breaking through the forest canopy along a river or pond, or patrolling the water's edge. Also, some species can be found in open fields far away from water while searching for prey or migrating. Happy dragonfly sighting!

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