

France – Cranes and Champagne

Naturetrek Tour Report

1st – 7th November 2025



Common Cranes at sunrise



Agile Frog and Porcelain Fungus



Common Crane



Goldfinch

Tour report by Jason Mitchell, photos by Jason Mitchell and Nick Dean-Webb



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour Participants: Jason Mitchell & Tony Williams (leaders) with 13 Naturetrek clients

Summary

The tour was timed to coincide with a very special ornithological experience, amid the delightful rural setting of France's Champagne country. Namely, the migration of tens of thousands of Common Cranes as they undertook their mammoth journey across the country from their northerly breeding grounds.

First, we spent a few days in the Parc Naturel Régional de la Forêt d'Orient, where we enjoyed great views of large mixed flocks of ducks, huge gatherings of Great Egrets and a majestic Black Stork, seen flying south on migration. On a walk around the Forêt du Temple, we were delighted to add the exotic-looking Fire Salamander to our sightings. However, the undoubted highlight was the sight and sound of tens of thousands of cranes streaming south one morning, many of which had arrived from Lac du Der over the previous days. We greatly enjoyed a guided tour of nearby Troyes, with its attractive historic centre and also took advantage of our location to visit the Champagne Drappier vineyard. Here we spent a pleasant afternoon exploring the cellars and winery, which was rounded off nicely by a Champagne tasting session.

Next we transferred to Giffaumont-Champaubert, on the shore of Lac du Der. In November, vast numbers of Common Cranes arrive at this huge lake to rest and feed before continuing their migration south - shortly before our arrival, the weekly census had recorded 38,000 birds! During a pre-breakfast sortie, we witnessed the spectacle of thousands of cranes leaving their overnight roost. Then, following a fruitful day's birding, we again positioned ourselves on the dyke to witness them returning to pass the night in safety far from the shore, this time in even greater numbers, as those streaming in from surrounding fields had been augmented by cranes newly arrived from central Germany - a journey of more than 220 miles in a single day! Although the Common Cranes were our main focus, we found many other exciting species, including a nine-strong flock of Glossy Ibis, several Black-necked Grebe and a lingering Common Tern. Overhead, the daily passage of Chaffinches was enlivened by the addition of Brambling, Siskin and Redpoll.

During our stay, the weather remained dry but for a brief spell of rain and we frequently enjoyed the warming winter sun on our backs. The mercury stayed in the positive, dipping to a low of 6°C early one morning, but averaged a daytime high of around 15°C.

Day 1

Saturday 1st November

Paris – Mesnil-Saint-Père

With the Eurostar arriving on time into Gare du Nord, the group undertook the short walk to Gare de l'Est, where they joined a second train to Troyes. After a smooth journey, they met with their guides, Jason and Tony, who drove them the final 30 minutes to Auberge du Lac. Here they spent three nights, enjoying the fantastic cuisine and excellent mini-spa facilities.

Day 2

Sunday 2nd November

Lac d'Orient and Lac du Temple

Following breakfast, we made our way to the Port de Mesnil-Saint-Père, spotting a Brambling amongst a flock of Chaffinch on a grassy verge, just before reaching our parking spot. Starting out along the harbour wall, we disturbed a couple of Meadow Pipits which darted over the 'rock armour' to the empty lake bottom below, joining the company of some equally active Water Pipits. The low water level made for easy fishing and masses of gulls, herons and cormorants joined in a frenzied fishing bonanza. Scanning the flocks of birds, our attention was drawn to a raptor perched on one of the many 'ancient' tree stumps, a reminder that the flooded area was forested before the lake was created in the sixties. It was quickly identified as a Peregrine Falcon and although some distance away, we all managed good views through the scopes. Elsewhere, large flocks of dabbling duck comprised of mostly Teal and Wigeon, but lesser numbers of Pintail and Gadwall were spotted within their ranks. Returning to the vehicles, we loitered to watch a Black Redstart feeding nearby.

Following a brief stop at a small bay known locally as the Anse du Bois Foucaut, we added Lapwing, Yellow-legged Gull and Greylag Goose, before moving on to the Maison du Parc, the headquarters of the Parc naturel régional (PNR) de la Forêt d'Orient. Here a Short-toed Treecreeper teased us with its persistent calls, but a confiding Nuthatch made for easier viewing. After an interesting visit and warm up in the visitor centre, we enjoyed an impromptu fungal foray along the attractive woodland sculpture trail. Here we found several mushrooms, including the delicate, translucent Porcelain Fungus. However, on closer examination we spotted an Agile Frog sheltering under its cap, like a giant umbrella – a scene straight out of a fairytale. We also carefully checked under fallen branches and logs in the hope of finding an amphibian and it wasn't long before we discovered a stunning black and yellow Fire Salamander. Then followed its five minutes of fame, with everyone capturing this spectacular creature on camera. Back at the Maison du Parc, we took advantage of some sheltered wooden tables, where we feasted on our first picnic of the week.

Replete, and with the threat of heavy rain coming our way, we headed to Lusigny-sur-Barse for a well-earned coffee. Recharged, we drove to the Anse de la Picarde, a bay on the north-west side of Lac d'Orient. Here, an aggregation of waterbirds made for impressive viewing, with a mass of white made up of many dozens of Great Egrets and a sizeable herd of Mute Swans. A large hole leading to a cavity in a willow tree was lined with the remains of Signal Crayfish, a recent and unwelcome addition to this part of France, and ironically were probably the feeding remains of another introduced species, the Raccoon! With the heavy rain giving way to sunshine, a Migrant Hawker dragonfly appeared from its resting place and was now zipping around above our heads. Out on the shoreline, a single Ruff picked at the mud alongside a pair of Shelduck.

The final group stop of the day was on the western dyke wall of Lac du Temple. Here we stretched our legs, making the mile walk to the steps of Piney, where the vehicles were waiting. Several hundred Common Cranes fed in a small bay and it was easy to pick out some 'brown-headed' juveniles in their midst. Even greater numbers passed overhead as they returned to roost and again several young birds betrayed their presence, this time by their thin, high-pitched calls. But perhaps the greatest surprise, was a Clouded Yellow butterfly, which was enjoying the unseasonally warm conditions.

With several of the group wishing to use the hotel's spa, we returned to base but not before setting down a few

of the group who wished for a final short walk. Their efforts were rewarded with views of an impressive flock of more than a hundred Great-crested Grebe and some distant immature swans that looked promising for Bewick's. A fine sunset over the lake, brought a productive day to a pleasing finish.

Day 3

Monday 3rd November

Troyes, Lac d'Orient, Lac du Temple and Lac d'Armance

After breakfast, there was just enough time for a brief visit to the main lake before heading into Troyes for a guided tour. Again, the lake was covered in birds and overhead migrants included both Brambling and Skylark.

Arriving in Troyes, we met with a local guide who gave a fascinating tour of the charming 'old town', with its half-timbered houses and beautiful town squares. Situated on the River Seine, the city was the capital of the ancient Province of Champagne in the 12th and 13th centuries, and great trading fairs took place here. The prosperity of the city has left a rich heritage, including ten churches with exceptional stained-glass windows, fine Renaissance statuary, some of which was admired during our visit.

After the city tour, we returned to Lac d'Orient for lunch, followed by coffee in Lusigny-sur-Barse. We then drove to the north of Lac du Temple, reaching the village of Brévonnes where four Short-eared Owls had been reported the previous day. Our search was in vain, but the area proved interesting none-the-less. A covey of Red-legged Partridge was disturbed along a farm track, and our passage was soon halted by the sight of four Red Kites or 'Royal Kites' as they're called in French. Alighting from the vehicles, we then enjoyed the spectacle of a large swirling mass of Lapwing, which included several Golden Plover. With the afternoon advancing, they were soon joined in the air by endless skeins of cranes returning to their roost on Lac du Temple.

We then drove the short distance to the last and smallest of the lakes, Lac d'Armance. Here a footpath led to a tower hide overlooking the northern section of the lake. Wildfowl were most obvious and dominated by hundreds of both Teal and Pintail, with a few Gadwall also present. On an exposed mud bank, Curlew were seen in double figures, as were Dunlin, along with several Ruff. All picked at the mud in search of their invertebrate food, while a Kingfisher zig-zagged back and forth, before finally disappearing from view. In the reeds several Water Pipits and Reed Buntings dropped in to roost.

With the sun setting we headed for home, where a number of the group took to the spa once more.

Day 4

Tuesday 4th November

Lac d'Orient, Forêt du Temple and Champagne Drappier tour

After a successful visit there on the first morning, we decided to return to the Port de Mesnil-Saint-Père, but this time there was no threat of rain just a clear blue sky. Again both Meadow Pipits and Water Pipits were noticeable as they flitted to and fro calling excitedly, this time joined by a number of White Wagtails. We had thought there were large numbers of cranes during our first visit, but now the sky was full of the distinctive sight and sound of their stunning v-formations, as many thousands continued their lengthy migration south. But suddenly our attention was drawn to a Black Stork pointed out by Guy, as it made steady progress across the lake, following the

same southerly route taken by the cranes. These impressive birds have been extending their range across France in recent years. Again, masses of dabbling duck occupied any open water, and harboured lesser numbers of Shoveler and Gadwall. A nervous flock of several hundred Lapwing suddenly lifted from the mud, allowing better views of the Golden Plover and Dunlin that mingled within the huge flock.

We then headed to the expansive Forêt du Temple, where we followed a circular trail through broad-leaved woodland. Setting out, a Middle Spotted Woodpecker was heard calling close-by but refused to show. Soon after, a Short-toed Treecreeper 'moused' its way up a moss-covered trunk and a Goldcrest called from a small copse of Douglas Fir. And every once in a while, the forest echoed with the evocative calls of cranes as yet another flock passed low over the tree tops heading south.

Lunch was again 'al fresco', in the delightful autumnal setting of the forest, before we headed east for the Côte des Bar region. Arriving in Urville, we met with our knowledgeable guide Laury, for a visit to Champagne Drappier; a celebrated, family-run champagne producer. Our guide explained in fascinating detail the natural methods of cultivation and production which underpin the award winning Drappier Champagne. The visit started in the magnificent 12th century vaulted cellars, originally built by Cistercian monks. We then continued to the winery where we saw the grape press, huge fermentation vats and the wooden ageing barrels, as well as the disgorging and labelling lines. A fascinating visit was nicely rounded off with a tasting of several of the Drappier cuvées, before leaving and heading north to our next hotel on the shore of Lac du Der.

Day 5

Wednesday 5th November

Lac du Der, Etang des Landres, Etang du Grand Coulon

The day started with a visit to perhaps the best-known birding site of Lac du Der, namely the Port de Chantecoq. As with the other lakes visited during the first days of the tour, the level was very low and typical for the season. Any standing water was a magnet for dabbling ducks, particularly Teal, and some close birds were beautifully illuminated by the low winter sun. Scanning the Île de Chatecoq, a large raised section of land in the middle of the lake, and with some direction from a friendly fellow birder, we located a magnificent White-tailed Eagle. At first only its head and huge bill were visible. However it soon changed position and we could then view it in its full splendour, and to our great excitement it was joined by a second bird. Both were immature, not showing the brilliant white tail of the adult bird, but we were thrilled none-the-less.

Crossing the road we walked the short distance to the bird hide at Etang des Landres. Here, we were rewarded with good views of hundreds of Mallard, Common Pochard and Teal, with a single Tufted Duck found amongst them. Leaving the hide, we were treated to excellent views of a hyper-active Firecrest foraging for insects in surrounding willows. A short walk took us to another hide overlooking Etang du Grand Coulon, where several Great Crested Grebe were accompanied by a single Little Grebe. Returning to the vehicles, a Hawfinch was spotted flying over the tree tops calling loudly.

Following a visit to the LPO (Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux) visitor centre, we had our picnic next to the lake, followed by a warming coffee in the Petit Pari in Arrigny. We then headed to Saint-Marie-du-Lac-Nuisement, positioned on the northern shore. Although conditions were fine, the wind had picked up making it rather chilly. As seemingly everywhere else, wildfowl, herons and cormorants were abundant. Scanning the flocks, a few

Common Snipe were a welcome addition to our bird list, with other waders including Dunlin and Curlew. From mid-afternoon, cranes started returning to the roost site and it soon became evident that there were far more birds than had left the roost in the morning. We looked on in awe, as masses of Common Cranes returned from the surrounding fields, but high-flying flocks were certainly newly arrived migrants from further north.

Returning to the vehicles, we drove the short distance to Presqu'île de Larzicourt, where we relocated to a more sheltered vantage point. With light levels starting to dip, we were once more absorbed in the sight and sound of thousands of cranes streaming overhead set against a stunning fiery sunset, before then dropping into their roost far out on the lake. A fitting end to our first day in Champagne.

Day 6

Thursday 6th November

Etang du Grand Coulon, Etang de la Horre and Lac du Der

The day started with a pre-breakfast sortie to watch the cranes leave their island roost in the middle of the lake. As we walked along the dyke, a Common Sandpiper called from the darkness and could just be picked out as it flickered away over the water. After the departing crane flocks had abated, we marvelled at the impressive flights of Cormorant moving around the lake. Back at the hotel, we delighted in excellent views of three Redpoll feeding in a large Birch in the car park! We then enjoyed breakfast and an opportunity to warm up before heading out once more.

Having visited the northern hide the previous day, we decided on a look at the southern section of Etang du Grand Coulon. On arrival, we heard a Water Rail giving its distinctive 'stuck pig' squealing call, and after a patient wait we eventually enjoyed brief views of a single bird. Elsewhere on the lake, a few Pintail showed well and we discussed the handsome chocolate-brown head pattern of the male, marked by a brilliant white pinstripe.

Next we made our way to the home of internationally acclaimed wildlife artist, Jean Chevallier. En route we made a brief stop in search of the pocket-sized Little Owl but without success. Then in the comfort of Jean's living room, we admired many of his stunning wildlife paintings and sketches. From here, we drove ten minutes to Etang de la Horre. On arrival a flyover Siskin called before making a very brief pause in the top of an Alder tree. The lake was dominated by herons, with Great White Egret and Grey Heron present in large numbers. From the woodland edge, a Firecrest called but refused to show.

With lunch on our minds, we made our way to nearby Lentilles, where a picnic bench is conveniently located next to a beautiful 16th century half-timbered church. Fed and watered, and with a now established routine of a café stop after lunch, we headed to Montier-en-Der for liquid refreshment. Outside the café, we were entertained by a cheeky Jackdaw dropping a Walnut from height onto the pavement to crack the shell and access the reward within.

Returning to Lac du Der, we visited the Presqu'île de Champeubert and its impressive church, the only building saved when the lake was created. Here a memorial plaque reminded us of the three villages that disappeared under water, when this huge artificial lake was created in 1974. Firstly we visited a hide where nine Glossy Ibis graced our vista, sweeping the shore with their impressively long curved bills.

Relocating to a lookout next to the church, we gained excellent views over the lake and of habitat more reminiscent

of an estuary. This was further emphasised by the large number of gulls present, along with more than one hundred Curlew and half a dozen Greenshank. In the main channel, several Black-necked Grebe swam with their larger Great Crested cousins, and the sight of a Common Tern perched on a buoy was a real surprise – by now this elegant 'sea swallow' is usually residing much further south for the winter. With light levels starting to drop, the first cranes began returning to their lake roost, and after enjoying the spectacle of thousands of birds streaming past, we headed back towards the car park. But as we did, we were rewarded with several *Myotis* bats wheeling low over our heads, having just left their roost in the church.

We then returned to the hotel for the final time, where we enjoyed a sumptuous last dinner together.

Day 7

Friday 7th November

Giffaumont-Champaubert – Paris

Before breakfast, a few of the group walked to the lake to marvel one last time at the cranes leaving their roost. However, that wasn't the only species doing so, with a huge roost of a hundred Magpies seen leaving a lakeside copse! Following breakfast, we loaded the minibuses as passing Siskins called overhead. We then made our way back to Troyes, where Jason and Tony bid the group “au revoir”, following what had been an excellent week full of wonderful wildlife and good humour. From here, the clients took the train to Paris, arriving at Gare de l'Est in plenty of time, before continuing on Eurostar from Gare du Nord back to the UK.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

		November 2025					
Common name	Scientific name	2	3	4	5	6	7
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	✓					
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>				✓	✓	
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Red-crested Pochard	<i>Netta rufina</i>				✓		
Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>				✓	✓	
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>					✓	
Common Pheasant - I	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>					✓	
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>		✓				
Feral Rock Dove - I	<i>Columba livia 'domestica'</i>		✓				✓
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	✓	✓				
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>					✓	
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>				✓		
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>				✓		
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>			1			
Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>				✓	✓	
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>					6	
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>					9	
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	2					
European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		✓		✓		
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		✓		✓	✓	
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓			✓		
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>					✓	
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>				✓	✓	
Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>	✓	✓				
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓	✓	✓		
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus michahellis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>					1	
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>					✓	
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>		4		6	1	

		November 2025					
Common name	Scientific name	2	3	4	5	6	7
White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>				2		
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	✓					
Western Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>				✓		
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>		✓		✓		
Middle Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocoptes medius</i>				✓	✓	
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	
European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>			✓	✓	✓	
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	1					
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓		✓		✓
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓
Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	✓		✓		✓	
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	✓				✓	✓
Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>	✓			✓	✓	
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓				
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>				✓	✓	
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>	✓	✓	✓			
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>			✓		✓	
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	✓					
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓					
Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>	✓	✓			✓	
Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>				✓	✓	
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		✓	✓	✓		
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>				✓		
Lesser Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea cabaret</i>					✓	
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓		✓	✓		
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>						✓

Others

Common name	Scientific name
Mammals	
Coypu - I	<i>Myocastor coypus</i>
Eurasian Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>
Western Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>
Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>
Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>
Pipistrelle sp.	<i>Pipistrellus sp</i>
Myotis sp.	<i>Myotis sp</i>
Reptiles & Amphibians	
Fire Salamander	<i>Salamandra salamandra</i>
Agile Frog	<i>Rana dalmatina</i>
Butterflies	
Clouded Yellow	<i>Colias croceus</i>
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>
Damselflies & Dragons	
Migrant Hawker	<i>Aeshna mixta</i>
Common Darter	<i>Sympetrum striolatum</i>