



BROOD X IS BACK: 17-YEAR CICADAS REEMERGE

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Not since most members of this year's graduating class were wee ones have the cicadas been around in such numbers – but they're back. Billions of the insects are emerging from the ground in a 15-state area from New York to Michigan to Georgia.

Known scientifically as *Magicicade septendecim*, the cicadas were last seen in 1987. They make up Brood X, or group ten under a federal naming system. Although there are broods that come out every year, this one is the largest in nearly two decades.

“If you figure 100 per square yard and look at all the land involved, I have estimated 5 billion just for southwestern Ohio,” Gene Kritsky, professor of biology at the College of Mount St. Joseph in Cincinnati, told The New York Times. “For everywhere, it would be enormous. I’ve heard people talk about billions, but that may be low.”

The cicada's lifecycle

This insect phenomenon will be as brief as it will be spectacular. Cicadas spend 99 percent of their lives underground. After spring rains, when earth that has remained undisturbed has softened up and reached 64 degrees Fahrenheit, the creatures begin crawling out of self-created tunnels.

Starting out as nymphs, they crawl to nearby posts, trees or just about any vertical surface where they can shed their tan outer shells. They emerge as adults with black bodies, translucent orange wings and red eyes. They wait in the warm sun before they begin to mate. About 20 days later they die.

“If you work with them very much you can't help the conclusion that they're robots and that they have a couple of simple goals. One is to not be killed. Two is to find a mate. And three, for the females, is to put the eggs somewhere,” John Cooley, a postdoctoral fellow who studies periodical cicadas, told The Washington Post.

Although they may seem like an invading army, cicadas are generally harmless. At worst they crash picnics and outdoor parties, as well as clog pool filters. Dogs and cats that overindulge may get sick to their stomachs. According to the University of Michigan cicada Web site, they'll only bite you if they “mistake you for a tree branch and try to feed” – a result of holding one in your hand too long.

Mating call

It is the mating of the cicada that draws so much attention. The males, using sound organs with ribbed membranes known as tymbals, make a noise that when multiplied by the thousands has been likened to an approaching train, a lawn mover, a whirling spaceship, a jet engine. It is their love song.

The males, who mate several times, gather in large groups or “choruses” in tall sunlit branches. They “sing” from morning to nightfall to attract the females, who respond positively with a flick of their wings. Once they’ve mated, the females, who only mate once, deposit their eggs in the thin branches of trees. The adults die, the eggs hatch and the larvae fall to the ground, starting the next 17-year cycle.

Cicadomania

Brood X’s arrival has inspired cicadomania in folks all over. For some it’s insect themed parties, T-shirts, contests, poems and music.

Composer David Kane has been commissioned to write a musical piece, entitled “Emergence: A Cicada Serenade”, that will be performed in Maryland.

“I want it to reflect the insectlike character of our lives ... this vast rush to get things done before we vanish,” Kane said of his work.

Others see the millions of insects as a healthy high-protein, low-carbohydrate edible treat. Jenna Jadin, an entomology student at the University of Maryland, was inspired to create a culinary how-to-guide, “Cicada-Licious: Cooking and Enjoying Periodical Cicada.”

She notes that the cicada is not so different from crawfish, lobster or shrimp, with which they share a biological phylum. "Popping a big juicy beetle, cricket, or cicada into your mouth is only a step away," Jadin writes.

For the more squeamish diner the posh Ritz Carlton Georgetown hotel in Washington, D.C. serves up chocolate disks with the shape of the cicada pressed into them.

"One lady called and ordered 200 for her wedding," general manager Jennifer Brown said in The Washington Post. "A schoolteacher asked for 1,000 of them. The funny thing is, I've only seen one actual cicada so far."

By Annie Schleicher, NewsHour Extra

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