

Periodical Cicadas Are in the News

By Susan Camp

Articles, videos and projection maps related to the Spring 2024 emergence of not one, but two broods of periodical cicadas abound on the internet. This event last occurred in 1803 when Thomas Jefferson was President. You can sift through a lot of information and wind up more befuddled than you were when you first googled the term “cicada.”

“What are cicadas?” is a good first question to ask, because several species of cicada exist, and to make identification even more difficult, cicadas are often confused with another insect.

Cicadas are members of the order Hemiptera and are true bugs. All cicadas have stocky bodies, prominent eyes, and clear, lacy wings held tent-like above the body. The front wings are larger than the rear. A straw-like proboscis allows cicadas to feed on tree sap. Cicadas do not chew leaves and flowers, nor do they decimate farm fields.

On summer nights, from June through August, we hear the sounds of annual or dog day cicadas (*Neotibicen* spp.). Annual cicadas are green or brown with black and white markings, and you may not notice them because they don’t emerge from underground in large numbers or form broods.

Periodical cicadas (*Magicicada* spp.), on the other hand, form large broods underground and emerge in either 13 or 17 years. Three broods of 13-year cicadas and 12 broods of 17-year cicadas exist in the United States. Each brood consists of several species, so you can imagine that entomologists are kept busy following the various broods and their years of emergence. Slightly smaller than annual cicadas, these bugs have black bodies, orange wing veins, and striking red eyes. Periodical cicadas don’t swarm.

Cicadas are often confused with locusts, which are simply large adult grasshoppers that sometimes swarm. Locusts (*Acridoidea* spp.) belong to the order Orthoptera and can fold their wings over their abdomens at rest. Instead of a proboscis, a locust has a mandible and feeds by chewing on leaves and soft plant tissue. A swarm of locusts can cause devastating damage to crops.

Cicadas, both periodical and annual, emerge from below ground for the sole purpose of mating. The various species of male cicadas produce sounds that include buzzing, clicking, and wailing reminiscent of a spaceship in a 1950s sci-fi film. After mating, the females join the males in song. The sounds can reach 100 decibels when thousands of cicadas sing together.

Females will deposit 20 to 30 eggs in tiny slits they create in pencil-sized twigs. Males and females die soon after mating, and the eggs hatch in about 6 weeks. The newly-born nymphs drop to the ground and burrow into the soil, where they feed on tree root sap for the next 13 or 17 years, undergoing four molts, before they tunnel to the surface to begin the process again.

Cicadas do not bite or sting. Even though they don't eat crops, females can damage immature trees and shrubs by making slits for their eggs in green twigs. Fine netting or cheesecloth is recommended to protect young shrubs and trees.

Please do not spray toxic chemicals on cicadas. These insects provide nutritious, protein-rich food for birds and many species of small mammals, including raccoons, foxes, skunks, and opossums. Dogs and cats can enjoy an occasional cicada treat, but do not permit them to overindulge, as too many cicadas can cause an upset stomach.

Brood XIX, also called the Great Southern Brood and consisting of four species of 13-year cicadas, has already begun to emerge along the Mid-Atlantic Coast and will continue to appear for several weeks across parts of the southern states into Southern Illinois. Brood XIII, the Northern Illinois Brood of three species of 17-year cicadas, will emerge in a few weeks.

Will we see and hear cicadas on the Middle Peninsula? Some experts say yes; some say no. Read VCE Publication 444-276 (ENTO-455NP) "Periodical Cicada" and University of Maryland Extension "Cicadas in Maryland" for more information.