

What's all the Buzz?

by Mel Grosvenor, Greene County Parks Naturalist

Cicadas have a way of making their presence known. Whether it is by their large size or the buzzing call of the males, they are hard to miss. There are over 150 species of cicada that occur in the United States and Canada. They all start out living underground as a nymph that sucks juices from plant roots. They then emerge from the ground, shed their skins and (if they're males) begin to make a lot of noise.

Most of us are familiar with at least two species: the annual and periodical cicadas. The annual or "dog-day" cicada is the larger of the two. It is dark green and comes out during the hot summer months. Many people don't realize that the annual cicadas actually have a 2 to 5 year life cycle but their broods overlap so some appear every summer. The periodical cicada is the one that comes out in droves every 17 years. They are smaller with reddish-orange eyes, legs and wing veins. Early settlers mistook a brood of periodical cicadas to be "locusts" and to this day, many people still call them that. A locust is actually a type of grasshopper.



The last emergence of periodical cicadas in Greene County occurred in 2004. You don't have to be great at math to know that that wasn't 17 years ago. So why are they back already? There are actually several broods of periodical cicadas. Greene County is home to two of them and their emergence years don't match. "Brood X" was in the northern parts of the county in 2004. "Brood XIV" is the one we're finding in the southern parts of the county this year. Different broods emerge somewhere in the eastern United States almost every spring. This massive brood emergence is believed to overwhelm predators and ensure that enough survivors will be left behind to reproduce.

These insects may look dangerous, but they are not. They do not bite or sting. Many people fear that they will kill their trees. The females lay eggs in small tree branches. In larger, established trees, this "pruning" can create new growth. Young trees can easily be protected by covering them with a loose cheesecloth bag tied securely at the base.

Birds and other animals relish the feast provided by these insects just in time to feed their hungry babies. They only hang around for a couple of weeks and then you will not see them again in the same area for another 17 years. It's hard to imagine biding your time underground in the dark for that length of time and then one day coming into the world of light with a new set of wings. Cicadas truly are amazing.