

Cicada Confusion

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Recent popular press articles, and even an article in the Daily Union, has led to many questions and some confusion about cicadas. So let's clear the air about cicadas. What are they, where are they and when can we expect them to be here?

Cicadas are insects of the order Homoptera which includes other insects like aphids and leaf hoppers. There are many species of cicadas. At least five species are well known to Kansas. There are annual cicadas like the dog day cicadas that serenade us from late June through September. There are also periodical cicadas, sometimes known as 17 year cicadas or 17 year locusts, which are making the news right now.

All cicadas have piercing sucking mouthparts. Eggs are laid on woody plants. Upon hatching the nymphs fall to the ground, burrow into the soil and feed on roots of trees and shrubs. When they mature they crawl out of the ground and up onto trees or other support and molt out of their skins leaving the well known hollow shell behind. The males have well developed sound producing organs that they use to attract mates.

As their name implies, annual cicadas are around every year. The dog days cicada, bush cicada and small prairie cicada are present every year. The periodical cicadas are split into the 17 year cicadas and the 13 year cicadas. While many people have historically called them locusts, this is incorrect as locusts are actually grasshoppers and are in a totally different order.

The periodical cicadas are separated into geographically distinct groups or broods. There are 12 different broods of the 17 year cicadas and 3 broods of the 13 year cicadas. Kansas and the eastern Great Plains, are about as far west as any of the periodical cicadas go, probably because they feed on tree roots. While we can expect about the same number of annual cicadas every year, those numbers are dwarfed by the number of periodical cicadas that emerge during a brood year.

The brood currently getting ready to emerge is Brood II. Brood II is limited to northern North Carolina up through southeastern New York and Connecticut. It is hundreds of miles away from here. So let's clear that bit of confusion up right now. Everything that you are reading about the periodical cicadas simply isn't going to occur here. All we'll be dealing with this year is our good old regular annual cicadas. But hang on, because our turn is coming in just two years and I'm excited about that!

What we have here is Brood IV. Brood IV last emerged in 1998 and will emerge again in 2015. Some entomologists feel that the 13 year broods don't get this far west. Brood XIX of the 13 year cicadas also emerged in 1998 so it was difficult to differentiate between them and Brood IV. If we did have Brood XIX here it would have showed up again in 2011 and we simply didn't see any around.

Periodical cicadas emerge in May and early June, earlier than annual cicadas. They are smaller and bizarre looking with orangish coloration and wild red eyes. They tend to occur in very high numbers and they are LOUD. I measured them at 90 decibels which can cause hearing damage with prolonged exposure.

So, we do have periodical cicadas, but we won't have them this year. I'll be talking about them in 2015 and encouraging you to go out and look at them. When they do occur, their time is short, so you need to act fast to get out and enjoy this once every 17 year phenomenon! Stay tuned! If you're interested, I'll even organize a field trip so you can go out and experience them!