

It's About to Get Really Noisy

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

In certain wooded locations around the area, it is about to get pretty noisy for the next couple of weeks. The periodical cicadas, also known as the 17 year cicadas or locusts (they are not true locusts, which are a type of grasshopper), are starting to emerge. As the weather continues to warm more and more of these wild eyed critters will be emerging and the males will start to call to attract mates. Unlike the annual cicadas, that we see and hear every summer, that are well spaced out and become a fairly common background sound of summer, periodical cicadas come out all at frequently in large numbers. The cacophony of calls can be almost painful!

Annual cicadas, and there are more than one species, are small to large with varying shades of greens and browns.) Periodical cicadas are small to medium in size (about 1½ inches long) with a black body, orange veined clear wings and wild looking red eyes. Just like their annual cousins, they emerge from the ground where they'll climb vegetation to shed their old skin and get ready to start making noise.

The males make noise with a membrane on the side of their body. They do this to attract the females; the females are silent. Male cicadas tend to gather in groups known as choruses. Due to the concentration of singing males, the noise can be quite loud. In 1998, the last time we experienced the periodical cicadas, I measured the noise level at 90 decibels. This is about as loud as most lawnmowers. In fact, if you were going to be working around an area with a lot of periodical cicadas, you should probably wear hearing protection!

Once a male has successfully attracted a female and they mate, the female is ready to go off and lay eggs. Eggs are laid on small twigs of trees and shrubs. The female has an ovipositor (egg laying device) that allows her to make slits on the bark of the twigs and lay eggs in these slits. While the damage will be visible and may cause some twig tips to die, it really isn't serious for most landscape trees.

Both males and females feed on tree sap. They have a long stout piercing/sucking mouthpart that they inset under the thin bark of small branches or twigs. Like egg laying, this feeding damage can cause branch tips to die. While unsightly, it generally doesn't do any serious damage to the tree, especially when you consider that it only happens once every 17 years! While both males and females may fly at you if startled, they are not poisonous and are not a threat to you or your pets. Many wildlife species, and sometimes pets, will eat the cicadas, especially since there can be so many of them.

After a few weeks of chorusing and feeding the adults start to die. They are often gone well before the annual cicadas start emerging. The eggs will hatch and the tiny larvae, which will be about the size of an ant, will drop to the ground. They will burrow under ground, find a cozy location next to a tree root, and start to feed on the sap from the tree root. Over then next 17 years they will go through five juvenile stages, always staying next to the food source of that tree root. Then, in 2032, the whole cycle will start over again.

While periodical cicadas started emerging about ten days ago in eastern Kansas, I think the cooler weather has slowed emergence locally. But based on the numbers I saw in 1998, there will be plenty of buzzing going on in the timber in the very near future!