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WESTWORD
WEB EXCLUSIVES

Cicada onslaught hits Chicagoland

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Periodical cicadas have returned with a vengeance. The onslaught that began in late May is of the Brood XIII classification. The insects, commonly referred to as “17-year cicadas,” emerge every 17 years by the billions, according to National Public Radio’s Melissa Block.

Every 17 years in late May, periodical cicadas hatch to live for about one month. They mate at this time so periodical cicadas can return in the next 17 years, notes professor Greg Hoover of Pennsylvania State University.

Although some find cicadas fearsome, with their constant buzzing and terrifying red eyes, the truth of the matter is that cicadas really are harmless. Cicadas cannot harm humans or damage any plants because they do not have stingers or jaws, writes *Chicago Tribune* staff reporter Beth Botts.

Botts also notes that cicadas are edible and a great source of nutrition, a fact not lost on West teachers, administrators and students, who recently ate cicadas to raise money for the “Have Dreams” foundation.

“They actually taste like a very chewy chicken nugget,” joked science teacher Michael Heinz, science teacher, who ate 12 cicadas at the cicada-eating contest, covered by all local electronic and print media outlets.

One student who joined in the festivities was freshman Daniel Poretsky.

“I [have] no problem [with] them being here. They’re enjoyable to eat,” Poretsky said.

Described as “plague-like” in their prevalence by University of Connecticut ecology and evolutionary biology professor Chris Hoover, swarms can reach over 1.5 million cicadas per square mile in some areas. Their eggs are laid in and around trees, where they will lie dormant until the next emergence of cicadas in 2024.

By mid July, these red-eyed insects will be gone, and all that will be left from the billions of insects that emerged this year will be their exoskeletons.

Many think that nothing is gained from phenomenon and that it is a mere annoyance. This is actually very wrong, according to Hoover. The cicadas provide a number of benefits, including providing an almost unlimited supply of food for many insects and animals, particularly fish, and their decaying bodies enrich the soil and plants by supplying them with more nutrients.

Not all neighborhoods are infested to the same degree. City dwellers report very few cicada sightings, perhaps because of the cicadas’ fondness for nesting and laying eggs in trees. In rural and suburban neighborhoods with more—and older—trees there will most likely be much more cicadas than in neighborhoods with newer trees. This is because some of the newer trees were not around during the last cycle in 1990, so no eggs were laid, Botts said, and (notes the Reston, VA, community website) because older tree branches are easier to pierce with the females’ ovipositors, knife-like projections that bore into surfaces for the purpose of providing egg repositories,

In an area that has many older trees in it, there may be a summer full of cicadas and their distinctive mating song. Male cicadas sing a song to attract a mate with a body part called the tymbal, which is responsible for their loud buzzing, which can reach around one hundred decibels, loud enough to cause hearing damage according to University of New South Wales physics professor Joe Wolfe.

West students’ opinions on “cicadomania” differ.

“I’m excited because this only happens every 17 years, so you are only to see it once in a long while,” said sophomore Peter Lee.

Sophomore Benjamin Cormalleth agrees. “It is definitely something to talk about, but I’m disappointed that I haven’t seen too many in our area yet. In areas like Glenview they are swarming,” he said.

Not everyone enthused with the prospect of sharing summer with these red-eyed insects, however.

“I’m not really looking forward to having them around. They make a lot of noise and keep my dog up at night,” said graduating senior Candace Pladziewicz.

Regardless of one’s opinion on them, one thing is for sure: The summer of 2007 will be the summer of the periodical cicada.



Although some find their appearance frightening, cicadas are harmless and beneficial in a variety of ways. Photo courtesy www.reston.org.