

THE STRANGE LIFE CYCLE OF THE CICADA



Have you ever heard a weird buzzing from the trees in the spring or summer? The noise might be loud and annoying. What is making that noise? The buzzing is coming from flying insects called cicadas. These insects are found throughout the world. They are about the length of a paper clip. And they have one of the strangest life cycles of any living insect.

EGG

Female cicadas lay between 400 and 600 eggs in different places on trees. The eggs may rest on branches or twigs. Each egg looks like a small grain of rice. The eggs take six to ten weeks to hatch.

FUN FACT

Some cicada nymphs only come out of the ground when the soil is “just right.” This means the soil temperature is 65°F.

NYMPH

When cicada eggs hatch, they are called nymphs. Nymphs fall off of trees. They land on the ground. The nymphs dig into the ground. There, they eat the sap from trees and drink liquid from plant roots. The nymphs grow over time. The shell around their body gets weaker. The nymphs are almost ready to begin life as adults. But first, they must dig out of the ground! How long do they spend underground? Most cicada nymphs live underground for two to five years. Some stay underground for 17 years!

WHY DO CICADAS MAKE BUZZING SOUNDS?

Only adult male cicadas make a buzzing sound. They use this sound to find a mate. The sound can be louder than a train. Cicada males may all sound alike to humans. To a female cicada, each male sounds different.

ADULT

Nymphs lose their shells after they come out of the ground. The cicadas now have wings. These wings fill with fluid. A cicada's body becomes hard when it is ready to fly. Cicadas spend most of their adult lives looking for mates and laying eggs. But, the adults don't live long. Most adult cicadas only live for four to six weeks.

SPECIAL CICADAS

Scientists are very interested in a kind of cicada that lives in the eastern United States. These cicadas come out of the ground every 13 or 17 years. Why do they spend so much time in the ground? Scientists aren't sure, but they track these cicadas to try to find out more about them. They call groups of these cicadas “broods.” Scientists can predict when broods will appear again. Suppose a 17-year brood appears this year. New adults will show up again in 17 years. There are 12 broods of 17-year cicadas and 3 broods of 13-year cicadas in the United States.

