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Brood VI 17-year cicadas are emerging in parts of Western North Carolina. The females deposit their eggs in trees.

# Catch the buzz: Cicadas have arrived

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The cicadas are here, and more are buzzing and dive-bombing in right behind them.

The periodic emergence of the 17-year Brood VI cicadas — the large, red-eyed, raucous, flying bugs that bring dread to some and intrigue to others — is now well underway in Western North Carolina.

"When they're flying around they are completely harmless, unless you're squeamish of large scary insects," said Paul Merten, entomologist with the U.S. Forest Service in Asheville. "They don't bite and they don't have stingers."

The insects, which should not be confused as locusts or grasshoppers, can grow to about 2 inches long, have black bodies, bulging red eyes and orange wing veins. Most emerge in May and June and can darken the skies in millions per acre, making a loud, ominous buzzing sound as they dive-bomb into faces, ears and hair.

They're not doing it to attack people, Merten said, they're just clumsy at flying.

Alison Arnold, agriculture extension agent with the N.C. Cooperative Extension office in Buncombe County, said she has been getting calls about cicada sightings over the past week

People are asking what these insects are, and how to control them, she said.

"We aren't recommending pesticide treatments because it's going to be impractical and dangerous for dogs and cats that will eat them," Arnold said.

"They will emerge throughout May. It will be more intense in some places than in others. They are more common in woodland areas and neighborhoods and rural areas, and less in developed areas where there is more pavement."

## Wonders of nature

Merten said people shouldn't fear the cicadas but rather appreciate them as an ecological wonder. Cicadas — of the genus *Magicicada* — occur nowhere else in the world except the Eastern United States.

There are cicadas emerge every year, but Brood VI emerges every 17 years. Female cicadas make an incision in the live twigs and branches of hardwood trees, especially oaks, where they lay their eggs with an ovipositor. They move along, making a series of little egg cradles, Merten said.

The branch will usually die and fall to the ground, where the eggs hatch. The nymphs burrow into the ground and feed on sap from the tree roots for 17 years. There is sufficient air in the soil for them to live nearly two decades underground. They are not hibernating but actively feeding.

"It's fascinating, really," Merten said.

They typically don't harm trees, he said, although young, newly planted trees and ornamentals are more susceptible to long-term damage and should be wrapped in wire mesh to protect the bark during cicada emergences.

When adult male cicadas emerge, they make an overwhelming, rhythmic, spaceship-like buzzing sound to attract females to mate and reproduce, Merten said. The adult lifecycle is relatively short. They will die after two-three weeks.

Spotty cicada sightings have from the South Asheville and Morganton areas, but this is just the beginning, said John Cooley, a researcher in the department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the University of Connecticut who coordinates the periodical cicada project, with emergence calendars and reports of sightings at [magicicada.org](http://magicicada.org).

"A cool and wet spring will slow things down but it will really get going all at once," Cooley said.

Depending on one's point of view, cicadas will be at their worst — or their finest — south of I-40 in the South Asheville and Biltmore Forest area, but they will cross the interstate, and will come out in force from Marion to Lenoir, and will be especially dense around Lake James, Cooley said.

"If you're driving on I-40 in these areas, you probably will get a lot of bugs on your windshield," he said.

Other than being a nuisance and dredging up images of biblical plagues, Cooley said cicada emergences are actually an important part of the ecological life cycle. For one, they are hard and crunchy and provide a good springtime food source for birds, wildlife and even dogs and cats.

Cicadas can offer other important functions, he said. The underground tunnels of nymphs aerate the soil, which most likely enhances soil ecology and tree growth. The damage to trees caused by egg deposits can act as a natural pruning for some trees, which stimulates future growth.