

Finding Love at 17, Staten Island Cicadas Come of Age



Michael Nagle for The New York Times

Cicada casings hung from the leaves in Clove Lakes Park on Staten Island Wednesday. Millions more cicadas will climb from the ground in which they have spent the better part of two decades.

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There they were, finally, stuck on the undersides of fresh green leaves, on the trunks of trees and on the sides of fence posts in [Clove Lakes Park](#) on Staten Island.

After weeks of anticipation, Staten Island has seen some of the first of a brood of cicadas that has matured underground for 17 years, and which will be continuing to emerge in the coming days to begin the last, amorous and clamorous stage of its life cycle.

Soon, millions more will climb from the ground in which they have spent nearly two decades, morph from wingless to winged, and take to the trees for their famously noisy courtship. Then, after the eggs are laid, they will swiftly die.

“Like Romeo and Juliet, they die right away,” said Henryk Behnke, the director of communications for the Staten Island Museum, which is hosting an exhibit on the creatures, “and before a midsummer night’s dream, it’s over.”

In some areas of Staten Island and elsewhere around the Northeast, the early risers have already awakened, to be followed by their fellows when the soil sustains a temperature of around 64 degrees. In patches of parkland near a lake, the empty husks of the nymph-stage bugs are everywhere, left behind wherever a creature squeezed out of a gap in its shell like an extraterrestrial in a Ridley Scott movie.

Not everyone has noticed. “Haven’t seen any,” said Jerry and Marilyn Lloyd, almost in unison, as they sat on a bench sunning themselves. Just behind them were several cicadas on a fence post. Noticing them, the couple jumped.

The bugs don’t bite, and though their plague-like hordes are frequently compared to locusts, they barely eat a thing during their time above ground. But it is their extraordinary life cycle that some people find compelling. “It’s a wonder of the world!” said Abdul Jan, 79. “It’s a gift.”

Perhaps defying convention, the [Staten Island Museum](#) will be feting the bugs. There is an insect-themed singles dance party planned for May 31, the centerpiece of which is the cicada-shaped “Love Motel,” a glowing sculpture by the artist Brandon Ballengée.

Richard Pacio, 52, who was on a stroll in Clove Lakes Park on Wednesday, did not find the bugs’ single-mindedness romantic. “If that’s all they live for, they’re prostitutes,” he said.

And as they have for countless generations before them, this brood of cicadas is already proving irresistible to dogs, one of the many species that gorge on them, and boys, who are more interested in squishing them. “White goo comes out,” said Ferit Yildiz, 15, who said that so many cicadas were in front of his house on Wednesday morning that he could not help but smash them.

For Robert Twitty, 56, a parks groundskeeper who had never heard of a cicada until Wednesday afternoon, the emergence was a revelation of sorts. “It’s like a sign that the worst is about to happen,” he said, tongue held firmly in cheek. “I was going to sit home and watch TV, but now I am going to go outside, call more people up. I got to get ready, do things I wanted to do. This world isn’t going to last forever, I’m going to make the best of it.” Suddenly he caught sight of his first cicada, a tawny shape on a fence post.

“Oh, my God,” he said, “It’s the end of the world.”