

"This is History": SIUE Professor Explains the Dual Emergence of Cicadas

by Sydney Sinks, News Reporter
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ILLINOIS - Our annual emergence of cicadas is set to be a little louder this year.

Two broods of cicadas are expected to emerge in the coming weeks. Brood XIII emerges every 17 years, and Brood XIX emerges every 13 years. Dr. Jake Williams, chair of the Biological Sciences Department at SIUE, noted that this dual emergence only occurs every 220 years, and he encourages people to “enjoy the ride.”

“Because they alternate 17 and 13 years, they rarely come out at the same time, once every 220 years or so. So we’re lucky to experience that this year,” Williams said.

“Realize that this is history, that the last time this happened was 220 years ago, and what was going on at that time? So folks 220 years from now are going to be thinking, ‘What the heck did those guys do back in that day?’ It’s really kind of a historic event.”

Our region can already expect the annual cicadas we get every year. But these periodic cicadas will also emerge once the ground temperature reaches the low 60s. The gradual emergence will start in Southern Illinois and continue to Northern Illinois as temperatures rise.

Williams explained that Brood XIII will emerge in Northern Illinois and Wisconsin, while Brood XIX, also known as the Great Southern Brood, will stretch from Southern Illinois to the Carolinas.

While this dual emergence is historic, there won’t be much overlap between the broods in the Riverbend region, though Central Illinois and Springfield will likely see both broods at the same time. However, we can expect Brood XIX to be dense in our area.

“It can be kind of crazy,” Williams said. “They’ve been living underground for 13 or 17 years depending on which brood we’re looking at. As long as there hasn’t been a whole lot of turnover or construction or anything like that on the ground or application of insecticides, things like that, the population that comes out can be really dense. In certain areas, it’s estimated to be as many as a million per acre that will come out.”

Most people complain about the noise that cicadas make, which is their mating call. Williams said we can expect the cicadas and their noise to last “a week or two.” Cicadas then die after mating, so there will be several hundred dead insects on the ground.

Williams’s research focuses on biological and entomological evolution, and he is interested to see how animals and insects react to this new dead biomass. He noted that the dead cicadas will serve as a food source for many animals — and even a few brave humans.

“It’s such a huge biomass, you might as well get some garlic and butter and you can fry some up and try them,” Williams joked, though he said he will likely pass.