

As cicadas emerge, wildlife prepare for a feast—rats included

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Annual cicada. Credit: Bruce Marlin/Wikipedia.

It was June 2004, and the elephants at the Maryland Zoo in Baltimore were getting awfully sick of Brood X cicadas, which had emerged en masse after 17 years underground.

The towering goliaths even became adept at swatting the insects out of the air with their trunks, said Mike McClure, the zoo's general curator. One elephant was particularly perturbed, since the [cicadas](#) kept getting tangled in the hair on her belly.

Another 17 years have passed, and Baltimore's people and wildlife alike are at the beginning of another siege from Brood X.

Thousands of cicada reports from the Baltimore area have made their way onto Cicada Safari, a tracking app made by researchers at Mount St. Joseph University in Ohio.

For McClure, the emergence is an opportunity to watch wildlife built for biomes across the globe encounter a uniquely North American phenomena—the burst of periodical cicadas after 17 years underground.

"It'll be interesting to see how novel it is at the beginning, you know, and how the animals are really interested, and then it'll also be interesting to see as it progresses a little bit, if they start to get tired of them," McClure said.

Chimpanzees, McClure said, might be the most wary of their winged visitors. They're easily spooked by visiting squirrels and snakes. But many of the zoo's omnivores, like badgers and skunks, will likely take keen interest, he said, and the zoo is already planning to modify the diets of their birds if they begin gorging themselves on the cicada feast, cutting down on crickets and meal worms.

There are also hypotheses that the influx of insects could spur a jump in

wildlife populations, or at least draw more out into the open. Everything from fowl to venomous copperhead snakes is likely to snack on Brood X, making sightings a little more common.

Montgomery County recently cautioned residents that Brood X could be a smorgasbord for rats.

"[Health inspectors] theorize that cicadas are a popular food source, and when the cicadas are gone, the rats continue to seek out other food sources," the department said.

The department recommended that residents secure trash bins and avoid leaving them outside overnight, place catch-trays under bird feeders and avoid keeping pet food outdoors.

In Baltimore City, there were 60% more 311 calls for rat abatement in June 2004 than June 2003, according to the city's Department of Public Works. Of course, other factors could have been to blame, but the city said it's possible the same could happen this year, thanks to the cicadas.

"The emergence of cicadas may provide an additional food source for the rat population in areas with many trees," spokesman James Bentley said in a statement. "Urban rats mainly thrive off trash and dog feces, so it is more important than ever to cut off these food sources."

Nathaniel Williams Jr., owner of Relay Pest Control, which operates in the Baltimore area, said rats will certainly take part in the cicada feast, but he's not sure if his company will receive more calls from citizens. That's partly because call volumes are already high, since many people still working from home during the pandemic, and are more likely to spot rats and other pests on their property, Williams said.

"I don't think cicadas are gonna make a huge difference," Williams said.

But Sholom Rosenbloom, service manager at Rosenbloom Pest Control in Pikesville, said he's already getting plenty of calls about the cicadas themselves. Before 9:30 Monday morning, he'd already received three or four.

Some callers ask how they can protect their young trees from cicada eggs (the egg-laying process can cause some small branches to die off), or how to stop their dogs from wolfing down dozens at a time. Others have found cicadas crawling in their basements, and want help sealing up the breach.

Mike Raupp, one of the region's foremost cicada experts, said he's hesitant to connect the Brood X emergence to a surge in rodent populations. It's been documented that birds, spurred by the veritable banquet of bugs, may have more young and lay their eggs more frequently during cicada years. But rats?

"When you have a super abundant resource like a pile of cicadas on a tree, you're gonna see the things that eat them," Raupp said "I'm watching lots of birds eat cicadas. I'm watching lots of squirrels eat cicadas. That doesn't mean there are more squirrels and birds."

But either way, Baltimore area residents might be seeing more of all kinds of creatures soon.

That's likely to be a boon for the Baltimore Bird Club, which leads bird watching trips around the Baltimore area.

Lindsay Jacks, the group's vice president, said she's set up a cicada flag in her garden, stocked the local free library box with cicada coloring sheets and even glued toy cicadas to a neighborhood welcome sign.

Her excitement is due in part to the bird watching opportunities that

come along with the emergence.

"There's going to be tons of bird activity," she said.

One Facebook comment she read said that for birds, the emergence feels like a favorite band that only tours once every seventeen years.

Jacks said she's eager to watch the birds and cicadas interact, but she won't be trying any cicada-themed dishes.

"With [climate change](#), insecticide and development, I don't know if we'll have those epic proportions that everyone talks about," she said. "I want to make sure the [birds](#) have enough."

Raupp, on the other hand, has joined in on the cicada feast, even plucking cicadas that look like they won't survive their molt right off the trees to eat.

"When you put them in a cookie and coat them with sugar, they're gonna taste like sugar," Raupp said. "If you really wanted to experience what a cicada tastes like, I would suggest that you simply snack on one."

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