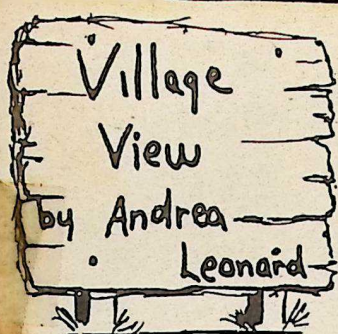




Twice before in my memory and that of most who must now confess to being middle-aged, the emergence of the seventeen-year locust has occurred.

This year, I'm told, it will happen again.

The first time, I was a pre-teener, and still young enough to be curious about and interested in bugs. When I was first told of the expected coming of these particular bugs, I was fascinated.

I awaited their appearance with an anticipation similar to that usually experienced only at such occasions as Christmas and my birthday. Couldn't wait!

And, finally, they came. They came by the thousands. They came, probably, by the millions.

Again, this summer, they will come.

Although not a pretty beastly, it's relatively harmless. As far as people are concerned, it's completely harmless. To many of the trees and shrubs, the locust may do some minor damage, but nothing of any real importance, nothing most won't survive.

They may even benefit from Nature's pruning.

First of all, the Seventeen-year Locust isn't a locust at all. It's Latin name is *Cicada spetendecim*, and it's one of seventy-five or more species of the Cicada family.

This one is unique in having the longest period of "adolescence" of all known insects, for it spends the first seventeen years of its life underground as a larvae.

Almost everyone has heard the Cicada's voice, even if they may not have seen one. On hot August days there's a high-pitched whine-buzz that breaks the stillness for several seconds at a time.

You usually hear it around noon, or from then til the hottest part of the day is over, three or four in the afternoon. You may have called the sound a "heat bug's song", or perhaps you thought it was some sort of bird call.

Not so. That's the cicada. It may be a mating call.

Maybe you saw a cicada last summer; you could have. Although they mature only once every seventeen years, there are usually a few early-birds the year before, and there are always a few stragglers the year after the big crop such as that due this summer. Every year there are some that mature.

Maybe you've seen the larvae's shell. It's a tissue-thin hollow exo-skeleton of the larvae stage. You could have found it on a tree trunk, on a shingle of your house, perhaps, or under an eave.

You may have wondered at it, for it's unusual. Just an empty case, perfectly formed in the shape of a beetle, and split down the back, it's obvious whatever once lived inside it has departed, like the soul.

Pale beige in color, it's readily dislodged from whatever it's attached to, holding it in your hand, its perfection of detail is entrancing. Each tiny leg, each segment of abdomen, even the bulging eyes, are marvelously complete...remarkably vacant.



From this shell has emerged the flying adult Cicada. In the larvae stage, the insect molts several times before coming to the surface of the ground.

The final molt produces the adult. It, too, is easily recognized. The large wings are always veined in red. The body is brownish, blackish, and sometimes iridescent. The eyes bulge like those of the housefly.

When closed, the wings fit snugly to the body, extending far beyond it's posterior tip. It looks rather like a huge housefly, and is usually almost two inches in length.

Here the resemblance stops. The Cicada is a

"crackly" sort of a bug. It makes a crackly noise when it flies, not a buzzing sound. It lumbers through the air without the grace, speed, or agility of the familiar fly.

Cicada carry no diseases, are incapable of stinging you, and attempt only to avoid all contact with people.

The flying adult spends but a few weeks in the sun and air. During this short period in its relatively long life, it mates and shortly thereafter dies.

Before her demise, the female slits wings of various trees and in the gash, she deposits her eggs.

The cut twigs -- you'll see them on oaks late this summer -- drop to the ground. The eggs hatch in about six weeks, and the young larvae burrow their way down into the earth and begin the long wait of seventeen years before they reach maturity.

During these years the larvae feed on humus and the juices of grass and plant roots, tunneling through the subterranean soils, all oblivious to the wondrous things going on above their heads.

Some things going on above their heads, of course, mean disaster to these creatures. Every square foot of road or concrete prevents a dozen or more of the larvae from ever surfacing.

When their long exile from sunshine and fresh air is finally complete, they struggle upward only to meet the immovable object; the bottom of the macadam road, the garage or cellar floor, the underside of the swimming pool. They cannot emerge.

For this reason those of you who are city-bred may never have seen the locust or, more properly, the Cicada. It's visits are spaced far apart, and it thrives only where woodland is undisturbed.

A locust it's not, however; the true locust strips bare all vegetation and is well-known from Biblical times on through history to be the scourge of mankind, destroying field after field of harvest, bringing famine to the land.

No such devastation will result this summer from the visitation of the Cicada.

Some twigs and branches will split, break and die back. They will fall to the ground in an autumn storm. The eggs will hatch. The larvae will disappear beneath the surface of the ground. That's all.

For another seventeen years.