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Cicadas celebrate sweet 17 with a noisy party in much of WNC

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The 17-year cicadas continue to generate a lot of buzz about town.

They've invaded, but despite their big red eyes, they don't hail from another planet. Every 17 years, this noisy lot emerges from our backyards for a brief residency to mate and die, all while providing a distinctive humming soundtrack.

Thousands have set up in the maple tree in front of April Nance's East Asheville home. There are so many that when they crawl, the throng produces a sound like rainfall, she said. The exoskeletons blanket the tree's base, and bunches are squished on the sidewalk.

"We can definitely hear them throughout the day," Nance said. "It's a nice conversation piece. It's not really causing any problems."

For Mark Ward, who lives near Beaver Lake, the noise is "like a space ship hovering in the distance. It's a whirling sound that peaks in the evening."

But as for Chris Ulrey, of Weaverville, these bugs, well, bug him. "We just don't go outside as much," he said. "The noise, it gives you a headache."

Ulrey, who is a plant ecologist for the Blue Ridge Parkway, dabbles in bug studies. He said the females are laying eggs and the males are dying, so he guesses the insects are going to be around for one to two more weeks.

Cicadas may be a bother but certainly are not harmful. If anything, their carcasses provide a snack for birds, dogs and cats. Despite the fact that they're littering sidewalks along Kimberly Avenue and other spots around town, the city has no plans for any orchestrated cleanup.

Kimberly Gentry, a fourth-grade teacher at Ira B. Jones Elementary, turned her children's curiosity about the crazy noise into a lesson. The school is on Kimberly Avenue, which along with the Reems Creek area and Biltmore Forest, is a cicada hot spot.

On Tuesday, Gentry's students took pictures of the critters populating the school grounds.

"This was a great way to end the year," Gentry said. "There was no pressure from testing, so we could chose a topic we wanted to."

But it's not just the young folks — who weren't alive the last time these cicadas infested Western North Carolina — who are curious by their loud presence. Bill Bryant, a ranger who works at the information desk at the Folk Art Center, said inquiries about the buzzing is a top visitor question.

"I actually hear a light hum in the building," Bryant said of the Folk Art Center on the Blue Ridge Parkway. "At noon, you feel like you're in a science fiction movie."

