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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Saturday, June 12, 1937

Subject: "NEWS NOTES FROM WASHINGTON." Information from the Bureau of Entomology and Plant Quarantine, U. S. Department of Agriculture.

--ooOoo--

Listeners, our letter from Washington today reports news from the Bureau of Entomology and Plant Quarantine of the U. S. Department of Agriculture.

Writes our correspondent: "The entomologists are not in the habit of informing me of musical news, but they have just been telling me of the great outdoor concert now beginning all through the Mississippi and lower Ohio River valleys -- a free concert such as people in that area have not heard for 13 years. This great spring music-festival is the shrill piping of an enormous number of insects and the theme is a love-song -- the same that we heard here in Washington and other parts of the Northeast last year.

"Mr. J. A. Hyslop who is in charge of the Department's Insect Pest Survey tells me that this concert is being given by Brood 23 of the periodical cicada. You may have heard the cicada called the '17-year locust.' But that name is wrong on 2 counts. In the first place, the insect is not a locust; in the second place, it does not always appear at 17-year intervals. The present brood seems to consider 13 its lucky number in years. At all events, it comes out regularly every 13 years as do other broods in the South. Brood 10, which was out last year, belongs to the northern cicadas which appear every 17 years.

"This curious insect spends most of its life -- those long 13 or 17 years -- underground, sucking at small roots of trees and shrubs. When it finally reaches its adult winged stage and pokes its way out of the earth, it lives for only about a month -- usually the month of June -- in the sunlight and open air. Do you wonder that it celebrates this heyday by making plenty of noise? Its shrill piping only ends when its time on earth is done. The male insect is the musician and the din he makes is a love-song coming from the vibration of 2 tough little drums of cartilage beneath the wings. The sound is continuous because the noises of all these individuals overlap. One insect is always ready to carry on when another pauses. The female does not take part in this concert. But she makes an impression on the landscape in another way. The signs of her presence are the tips of branches of trees, shrubs, and plants that are injured and turn brown. Actually, she is cutting slits in twigs to lay her eggs in and this results in a general pruning. This does no special harm to large forest trees, but is hard on fruit trees and disastrous to young trees and nursery stock.



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"Every year in some parts of the country these outbreaks of the periodical cicada occur, some larger than others. Brood 23 happens to be the largest of the 13-year race.

"What makes such an outbreak spectacular is not only the noise but the suddenness with which the cicadas appear and also their enormous numbers. Overnight the ground will be riddled by millions of holes through which they have crawled. Very odd-looking creatures they are, too, as they appear in the air and light for the first time. These so-called nymphs crawl up trees and shrubs, split open and out walks the full-grown cicada. At first they are rather soft, milky-white creatures with red eyes. Their legs and the principal veins of their wings appear a bright orange color. Near the center end of the front wing is a distinct black marking which looks like the letter 'W'. This mark is the reason for the old myth that the coming of the periodical cicada is an omen of war.

"By mid-June the adults start to die -- first the males and then the females, so that the ground soon becomes littered with wings and bodies. Presently the larvae hatching from the eggs laid in trees and shrubs, fall to the ground, burrow in, and start to feed on some nourishing root, not to appear above ground for another 13 or 17 years.

"Mr. Hyslop tells me that 30 separate broods of these cicadas are on record and that the records show that each brood keeps to a regular coming-out period of 13 years in the South and 17 in the North. He also says that probably the broods originally were more evenly distributed, but that a catastrophe like a forest-fire may have started the periodical broods in the various regions. Important broods like Brood 23 and Brood 10 are known to have appeared at regular intervals for a long time -- in one case for more than 200 years.

"The cicada is never dangerous to human beings. Mr. Hyslop says that though its long sucking beak should be able to sting, it never does. In fact, this insect seems pathetically non-resistant to its enemies. It puts up no fight when picked up by birds or animals or even when handled by a man. So it has suffered heavy losses in numbers down through the years. Some broods have been entirely wiped out, first by weakening from the destruction of forest and then by attacks of birds during their brief period in the world above ground. Only when a brood numbers more cicadas than the birds can eat will it survive."

That concludes the letter from our Department-of-Agriculture correspondent in Washington, D. C.

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