

Think You Had a Bad Day?

By Maurice Carter in The Covington News – July 1, 2012

If you've spent many summers in the southern US, chances are you've seen them. I'm referring to those huge, wasp-like insects that show up this time of year. They have colors, markings, and a body shape kind of like a hornet, only closer in size to a 747 than a Cessna.

I first encountered these frightening behemoths in my teenage years, while toiling in the hot sun, spreading blistering white sand in traps around the greens and fairways of the golf course where I worked my summers. These bees would emerge from burrowed tunnels in the exposed dirt lips of the bunkers and hover over me in the scorching sun as though looking for something. The first time I saw one, I figured it was delirium from a heat stroke. No bee could be that large. I did appreciate the shade, though.

Eventually, I figured out it wasn't me they were after, but I never was quite sure what they were. I didn't know if they would sting or not. But, considering their size, I was extra careful to make sure I never found out. I raked very gently around certain areas.

A couple of years ago, a swarm of these big devils began showing up this time of year on the western side of our house. They were everywhere. You could hardly walk without stepping on one or having it bump against your body. (I shudder to imagine hitting one at full speed while riding my bike. It would probably break a bone. Mine.) Still, I got used to walking among them, and they showed no signs of attacking.

Last year, they were back again. So, I finally asked our pest control guy (known affectionately to us as "Bug Man") just what these varmints were.

"They're cicada killer wasps," he said. Nothing like a nice, clear, descriptive name! Kind of makes you wonder what the other animals call humans? But, I digress.

Thanks to the internet, I learned more than I ever wanted to know about cicada killer wasps. Google it; you'll see. But, before we go there, consider, for a moment, the plight of the already hapless cicada.

No one spends even just one summer night in the South without knowing the cicada. Each evening, from June to August, you can hear at least one – and usually dozens – singing from the tree tops.

In case you don't know, that cicada singing in that tree spent up to 17 years living in the ground, in nymph form, waiting for his shining moment to emerge into daylight, shed that dirty brown skin, spread those lacy wings, soar into the sky, sing a love song, find a mate... and... well...

Die.

Seventeen years in the dirt and one day of fun. You just hope that one night of partying was all the cicada dreamt it would be during those long years of darkness buried underground. I've always wondered what a sense of humor the Creator must have had to dream up the cicada. What a story line!

And, that was before I found out about *Sphecius speciosus* – the cicada killer wasp. As the common name suggests, this particular wasp is not the best of friends to Mr. and Ms. Cicada.

What the female of the species does (while the males flitter about waiting to mate) is fly around in search of some defenseless cicada emerging from its underground burrow. When the cicada sheds its skin and takes flight, the female wasp swoops down, strikes the unsuspecting cicada, and drives it into the ground where the wasp lays the eggs that will become the next generation of party crashers the following year.

C-R-U-E-L!

Sure, it's a dog-eat-dog (and wasp-eat-cicada) world. But, come on now. Seventeen years of waiting for that one special day to cut loose. And, then... SPLAT!

This new insight into the cruel workings of Mother Nature is kind of creepy. But, it has taught me one thing: when I think I'm having a bad day, I'll think of the poor cicadas who met their destiny with a wasp that day.

I was working in the side yard this weekend, and I saw my first huge wasp of the season. It's only a matter of days before the swarm emerges. So, if you hear a male cicada singing proudly in the trees tonight, searching for a mate, sound the alarm. Tell him to HURRY!!!

The cicada killers are coming... To amore! To amore!

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