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Cicadas Brought a Welcome Buzz to Childhood Explorers [FINAL Edition]

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It is almost absurd how much I'm looking forward to this summer's return of Brood X, the population of periodical cicadas that's scheduled to swarm the Washington metropolitan area in coming weeks. The nearly two-inch-long black insects with red eyes and yellow-veined wings will likely show up by the billions in Eastern states. I feel like they're childhood friends finally coming back to town after too many years. In fact, they've been gone for 17. In the meantime, I had forgotten about them, and forgotten about the summer of 1987 when they thronged into my life.

I was 11, and my friends and I were the engineers of our world. We built elaborate societies, dams and forts and dismantled them recklessly or gently as we saw fit. Out the back door of my parents' Rockville home, we tromped across the neighbor's wooden bridge over the part of the creek that ran shallow and tame in concrete banks. We followed the trail that snaked among the towering, gray trunks of tulip poplars to where the man-made embankment gave way to a wild, silty channel. On humid summer afternoons, we went to work on the creek. We would dam sections of it with rocks and sticks, changing the flow to suit our whims. We chased minnows with buckets and turned over every rock within reach in search of crawfish.

By midsummer, the water in the creek ran warm, and we sought to extend our sovereignty. We explored downstream for hours, sometimes in as deep as our chests. We patrolled for small gray fish that darted in the shade of deep pools. We traversed the culvert that ran under the road to our school, our voices echoing off its metal walls.

On the few days we didn't fling ourselves out of doors, we baked cakes fearlessly without recipes, enjoying the semi-raw, semi-gelatinous, overly chocolate results. We turned trash into robots nearly as tall as ourselves, with paper towel rolls for arms and shoeboxes for heads. We transformed the basement of my house into a tropical paradise with butcher paper palm trees, yellow paint sand and calypso music lilting from the record player. Nothing seemed impossible; we could make anything then and everything felt like it was ours.

That summer was the first in my family's new house in Tilden Woods, a 1960s neighborhood of sidewalks, good schools and streets plotted to curve pleasantly and end gently in cul-de-sacs that circled beds of hardy shrubs. It was my first time living along a creek, which would metamorphose from a clear-running trickle to a muddy torrent after the area's characteristically short and violent summer thunderstorms. It wasn't a vast wilderness my friends and I were laying claim to, just a strip of woods 100 feet wide that ran between my back yard and the soccer field of the school I had attended since kindergarten. But in our summer domain, we were far away from the worlds of boys, grammar lessons and school dances that launched us into uncertainty and disappointment.

Early that summer, what seemed like billions of cicadas took over our lives. The empty brown skins of their immature bodies appeared suddenly, abandoned on tree trunks, screen doors, the legs of picnic tables and the undersides of leaves. More often than not, the winged adults had already flown

off in search of more important things, like mates. Their buzzing roared through the woods and didn't let up until sundown.

My friends and I weren't fazed by the invasion -- in places 100,000 insects per acre thick. The cicadas' metallic drone became the soundtrack to our adventures and we were happy to have something new to play with, to trap and tame. We harvested the empty skins off trees, collecting piles of dry shells as delicate as blossoms. We flipped over the clumsy insects and abandoned them to buzz helplessly on their backs. Neighborhood dogs gorged on them and then threw them back up. Enterprising locals encased cicadas in clear plastic resin and sold them as paper weights at nearby stores. Their empty shells and clumsy bodies crunched incessantly beneath our feet.

This summer's appearance of billions of periodical cicadas will annoy many people from Georgia to New York to Illinois. In the Washington area, the wingless immature cicadas, who've spent the last 17 years underground sucking on tree roots, will probably emerge in a few weeks. They'll quickly shed their juvenile skins and begin their adult lives as fumbling flyers looking for mates.

Bicyclists are being urged to ride with their mouths closed. Groups of males will call to females from the high branches of trees. This choral racket will rage through the day like heavy traffic and leave people's ears ringing. Once they mate, females will lay hundreds of eggs in furrows scratched in pencil-thin branches, leaving scars like an arboreal Morse code to confound and exasperate horticulturalists. Cicadas will crash otherwise picturesque outdoor weddings and leave pets with belly aches.

But I'm looking forward to Brood X as a tangible flashback to the summer my friends and I roamed the woods and claimed the creek as ours. Back then, we wrote the maps for our adventures; we charted buried treasure chests and knew all the good shortcuts through other people's yards. We knew the best place to catch tadpoles and that, if we took our shoes off, we could glide along the bottom of the creek's concrete embankment, slipping as gracefully as ice skaters on a thin layer of algae.

We could count on the woods to supply all the raw materials we needed for our most elaborate afternoon constructions and we relied on the creek to be a place we could disappear in. Brood X will remind me of the time when the only tools that seemed necessary for calling a stretch of woods home were a bunch of old buckets and jars, and a few good sticks.

Miranda Weiss has fond memories of the last time Brood X cicadas descended on the Washington area. It was 1987, and she was 11, growing up in Rockville's Tilden Woods neighborhood. Weiss, 28, a graduate student in creative writing at Columbia University, writes about her memories of that summer when the cicadas came.

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