

Flora & Fauna in Spain

The sound of the Cicada



Enjoying a glass of cold beer under the shade of the terrace our conversation was interrupted by the loudest high pitched drone I had heard. The sound reminded me of a noise emitted from an electricity pylon but louder. As the afternoon wore on the pitch got higher and louder and conversation was impossible. I walked in the direction of the sound and instantly you could cut the silence with a knife. It took some time for me to identify the creatures making all the racket as they were well camouflaged on the tree bark.

So, what are Cicadas, well they look a bit like a locust, however they are not related to the locust family, with large eyes wide apart on the head and normally transparent, veined wings. There are around 2,500 species all over the globe, and many of them are unclassified. They live in tropical climates, and are recognised because of the sound they make. In many parts they are known as "jar flies" and in the USA as "dry flies", because of the dry shell they leave behind.

Cicadas do not sting or bite, unlike those "flying teeth" and mossies; they are not considered a pest - unless they keep you awake! However in certain parts of the world they are eaten, so if you are in northern China, watch what comes up on a skewer off the BBQ! They are also used in traditional Chinese Medicine.

The male makes the noise (logical if you think about it). They have what's called "timbales" on the sides of the abdomen, and by contracting and relaxing the muscles makes this loud resounding noise. They can moderate the noise by wiggling their abdomens towards the tree or whatever they are on, or away from it. Every species has its own song. Some cicadas produce sounds of up to 120 dB and some are so high pitched humans cannot hear it. During mating season the pitch can get louder and higher as the male gets excited.

Most cicadas go through a life cycle that lasts between two to five years, others have longer, and the Magi cicada has a 13 to 17 year life cycle. Most of this time is spent underground as nymphs feeding on root juice. Cicadas are preyed upon mainly by birds and the odd northern Chinese Restaurant!