



Cicada



On a hot summer day, cicada calls fill the air amplified by, and amplifying, the heat. A young cicada crawls up a craggy tree trunk. Its shell, still powdered with the dusty earth, is tight and uncomfortable. The nymph grabs the tree bark and begins to push. A crack forms in the back of its shell, and it climbs out. Slowly, it pulses open its wrinkled wings. After few minutes, the wings are ready; the cicada flexes them a few times and flies away.

The “annual cicada” most commonly heard in summer around RI actually has a life cycle of 2-3 years, and only seems annual due to overlapping generations. Young nymphs fall down from eggs laid in twigs, and then live underground. They spend 2-3 years feeding on tree roots, and molt several times before they emerge. After they crawl out of the earth, they continue up the nearest tree (or fence post, etc.) and go through their final molt, emerging with a set of wings that they slowly unfold. Adults feed on the sap of plants above ground, and their primary interest is mating. The loud buzzing sound that male cicadas make to attract mates is generated in a special structure consisting of tymbals that produce the initial sound, and hollow areas with openings that will resonate at the desired frequency- in the same way that a bottle will make a loud tone when you blow across the top of it.

