

# Abilene Reporter News

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## COLUMNISTS

# Listening to a backyard symphony of cicadas, crickets and other insects

**Randy Deming** Special to the Reporter-News

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In many parts of Latin America, the parks are the place to go to if you want to listen to Mariachi music. The bands play at dusk and you can take a date, sit on a concrete bench and listen to the music.

A popular song you might ask them to play was written by Raymundo Perez y Soto “The Cicada.” It was inspired by a male cicada singing a love song until it died.

I listen to my very own Mariachi-like band from my front porch. The “musicians” are insects that “sing” love songs until they die. I used to think this band of insects was composed of only male cicadas, but they are joined by grasshoppers to make the “music” I hear during the day.

After the sun goes down, crickets and katydids take over, filling the night with their own love songs. Katydids sing their own name at night while tree crickets back them up with a high-pitched trill.

My backyard band plays different instruments. Cicadas have a drum-like organ they vibrate. Their sound is the loudest of all insects, even louder than a lawnmower. I made this discovery while mowing under an oak tree. I could still hear the cicada’s song with my mower running at full throttle. Crickets, katydids and grasshoppers use stridulation, which is similar to rubbing a paperclip over a comb.

Cicadas are large green or brown insects with bulging eyes. There are two basic types: periodical cicadas and annual cicadas.

Periodical cicadas are getting a lot of press this year because they are emerging in large numbers in the eastern United States. These cicadas are synchronized in their life cycles, emerging every 13 to 17 years. In years when they emerge, the environment is overrun by cicadas.

Most species, including those in the Abilene area, are annual cicadas. We seldom see the large numbers because our cicadas have two-to-five-year life cycles, with a new crop emerging every year.

Cicadas spend most of their lives underground. Eggs laid on a tree branch hatch after about six weeks and small nymphs drop to the ground where they burrow into the soil. Nymphs spend the next several years feeding on the sap of tree roots. After nymphs are fully developed, they emerge from the ground at night. The adult stage, where the male sings to attract a mate, only lasts five or six weeks.

The crickets that make the constant musical trill at night are not the same crickets that invade our homes. These are tree crickets and are very rarely seen. They are tiny, delicate creatures with translucent, lacy wings. Males don't just sing to their mates; they also feed them a sweet liquid which is produced by a specialized gland.

I prefer to hear the live band in my backyard, but if you want to hear individual solo performances, visit [songsofinsects.com](http://songsofinsects.com).

My backyard band has guest soloists that are not insects. At night, I might hear the hoot of an owl, the yelping of coyotes or the toy machine gun sound of a leopard frog. During the day, I might hear wild turkeys chiming in with the cicadas.

I have friends who say, "Must be awfully quiet out there in the country." They must not have heard a performance of my backyard love song band.

Spend some quiet time in your own yard listening for and watching your own wildlife. Try going out at different times of the day and evening. Be observant and attentive to your surroundings. You may be surprised at the critters that share your habitat!

*Randy Deming is a Texas Master Naturalist in the Big Country Chapter. Master Naturalists are all about the Texas outdoors — animals on land, in the air and water; plants, rocks, the land around us and the sky above us. For more information look online at [txmn.tamu.edu](http://txmn.tamu.edu) or on Facebook at BCTXMN.*

*Please stay tuned to our Facebook page for scheduling updates based on the most current information about COVID-19 concerns in the Abilene area. Monthly hikes and star parties will be dependent upon the latest infection rates and local regulations.*