

Copperheads and Cicadas

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With the emergence of the 17-year Periodical Cicada in our region many questions have emerged about whether there is a relationship with the nymphs emerging from the ground and Copperheads. Copperheads are one of two species of venomous snakes native to Maryland. The other is the Timber Rattle snake. Both are “pit vipers” referring to the heat-sensing pits between their eye and nostril. This is used to help them find warm blooded prey.

Copperheads are found mostly in rural areas but occasionally are found in stream areas that run through suburban areas. They are a very secretive snake whose first “defense” from harm is to stay still, well camouflaged or hide in rocky crevices. Snakes never chase or “attack” unless it is food. Not people!

It is important to know that ALL snakes including our two venomous species are protected under Maryland Wildlife Laws. It is illegal to harm or possess them. Although venomous snake bites are rare, those that do occur are often associated with a person killing or trying to capture the snake. Copperheads have a distinctive pattern and color. But there are a few non-venomous (harmless) snakes that to the inexperienced person appear similar. These include Water snakes, juvenile Black Rat snakes, Milk snakes and Corn snakes.

So what do Copperheads have to do with cicadas? Most snakes feed on rodents, frogs, some eat other snakes but the Copperhead in addition

to these prey will also eat cicada nymphs. In past years it's reported that Copperheads can be seen under trees where the nymphs are emerging to feed on the tasty morsels! Feeding on nymphs occurs mostly at night.

If you should experience this in your landscapes the best thing is to not disturb them, but mark the area to keep people away. The snakes should only be there for a week or two. The emerging cicadas will not "attract" more copperheads than already live in a given area. In other words if you see copperheads feeding on the cicada nymphs it means that Copperheads have always been there and were not "drawn in" from distant habitats.

If Copperheads have to be relocated, you should contact a licensed wildlife rescue/removal service who will relocate them following the regulations/permits of the Md. Dept. of Natural Resources. Do not attempt to capture them yourself.

Please remember that all snakes in Maryland are protected by law and are beneficial to our ecosystem.