

Magical Media Faux Pas, linguistic advice for journalists.

Phrases in **bold** taken from published media articles.

“swarm” They don’t swarm—i.e., They don't fly around in large groups.

“invasion” They don’t invade. They have been there the whole time, quietly feeding on roots underground.

“plague” They are NOT a plague like migratory grasshoppers (locusts) that come in and eat everything--they don’t chew leaves. They suck xylem fluid. The only damage they do is by laying eggs in small tree branches. However, if tree branches die, the cicada eggs also die, so natural selection favors cicadas that lay eggs in less crowded situations.

“overrun” implies that they are imposing us when in fact we are much more of an imposition on them--clearing their trees and building asphalt parking lots on top of them.

“menacing” suggests danger. Periodical cicadas are not dangerous. They can kill very small trees, but they cause only minor damage to large trees when too many egg nests are laid in a single branch. However, when the branch dies, the cicada eggs also die, so this behavior is not selected for. It is the result of humans cutting down so many trees that there are not enough left for cicadas.

“alarming” Periodical cicadas are harmless to humans. Rather than thinking of them as alarming, think of having a “David Attenborough special” in your own back yard as my colleague Gene Kritsky likes to say.

“lurking underground” They are not lurking or threatening, they are innocently feeding on tree roots.

“sleeping underground” They are not sleeping underground, they are actively growing and passing through five juvenile stages (instars); they shed their skin between instars so that they can grow larger.

“hatching out of the ground” They don’t hatch out of the ground, they hatched from eggs in tree branches 17 years ago. They emerge from the ground after digging holes to the surface.

Make sure the cicada in your photos have red eyes with a black body and orange wing veins! Media articles often publish photos of the wrong genus of cicadas. Periodical cicadas are red-eyed (other colors occur as rare mutations.) Avoid Getty images, I have found numerous instances of them supplying photos of the wrong cicada species.

Use the word “hypothesis” rather than **“theory”**. A hypothesis is a testable conjecture. A theory is a former conjecture that has been supported by data so many times that it becomes accepted, like the theory of evolution or the theory of gravity. The media often makes this mistake in many science stories!