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Know your Cicadas

in Sabah's Rainforests

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(Black & Yellow Cicada, Huechys fusca)

Know your Cicadas in Sabah's Rainforests

"One can experience 'shower of blessing' from their watery excreta (urine) when standing beneath that tree!"

Text & photos by Arthur Y.C. Chung

Cicadas belong to the superfamily Cicadoidea, within the order Hemiptera (true bugs). More than 3,000 species were described from around the world and over 80 cicada species have been described from Sabah, Malaysian Borneo.

In Malay, they are known as 'riang-riang' while in Dusun, they are called 'tengir' or 'taviu'. Cicada body size varies, ranging from 15 mm to 70 mm. Their presence is often felt in the rainforests because of their 'singing orchestra'.

Cicadas produce an exceptionally loud song by vibrating drum-like tymbals rapidly. The sound-producing organs are found only in the males, located ventrally at the base of the abdomen, to attract the females as well as for territorial purposes. Different species prefer to 'sing' at different time of the day.

In Sabah, the largest cicada, *Megapomponia merula*, with a body length of 70 mm and a wingspan of 190 mm, is known as the 6 o'clock Cicada because it is often heard in the forest at this time in the evening. In Peninsular Malaysia, *Megapomponia imperatoria* (slightly bigger than *M. merula*) is known as the 7 o'clock Cicada because it gets darker later in this part of the country.

Cicadas have two prominent eyes, a pair of short antennae and 3 small ocelli located on top of the head in a triangle between the 2 large eyes; this distinguishes cicadas from other members of the Hemiptera. They typically live in trees, feeding on watery sap from xylem tissue and laying their eggs in a slit in the bark.



A Giant Cicada, *Megapomponia merula*, with its wings opened horizontally



Another view of the Giant Cicada, *Megapomponia merula*, which is the largest cicada in Borneo



The drum-like tymbals (arrows in blue) at the abdomen of the male cicada



Close-up of the head of a cicada



The Green Cicada, *Dundubia vaginata*



A cicada mud tower on the forest floor



An exuvium or nymphal skin of a cicada on a tree trunk



Cicada nymphal skins are used in traditional Chinese folk medicine to remove heatiness



Stir-fried green cicadas that turned yellow, as a source of protein by some local communities in the interior of Sabah. Cicadas are sometimes taken as food when they are in high abundance



Forest Cicada, *Platylomia nr spinosa*



Side view of the Batwing Cicada, *Cryptotympana aquila*



Batwing Cicada, with its bat-like wings opened horizontally

The mouthparts form a long sharp rostrum that they insert into the plant to feed. During the 'cicada season', hundreds or thousands of cicadas can be found on a single host tree and at times, one can experience 'shower of blessing' from their watery excreta (urine) when standing beneath that tree!

In wet habitats, cicada nymphs construct mud towers above ground in order to aerate their burrows. In the final nymphal instar, they construct an exit tunnel to the surface and emerge.

Cicadas shed their skins on a nearby plant for the last time and emerge as adults. The exuviae or nymphal skins are normally left clinging to the bark of the tree.

Cicada nymphal skins are used in Chinese folk medicine. They are boiled with some herbs, known as 'Ngau Lai Cha', and are taken to remove heatiness. The green cicadas are eaten by some local people in Sabah, as a source of protein.

With their wings removed, they are stir-fried and the green cicadas will turn yellow. Sometimes, they are known as 'Shrimps of the Land'.

Although we do not have the American periodical cicadas which emerge in large numbers every 17 years, the cicadas found in Sabah are equally interesting and fascinating. Featured here are some of them, which form the 'singing orchestra' of Sabah's rainforests.



Yellow-banded Cicada, *Tacua speciosa*



The Green-banded Cicada, is also the same species, *Tacua speciosa*



Green & White-banded Cicada, *Tosena fasciata*



Mangrove Cicada, *Purana*



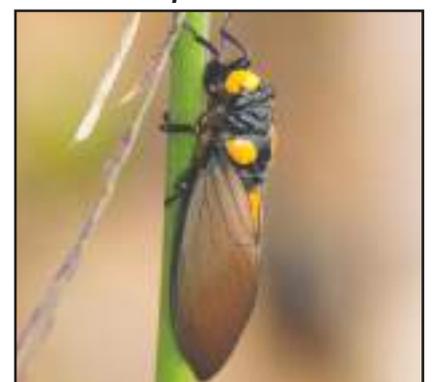
Black & Orange Cicada, *Scieroptera splendidula*



Little Variegated Cicada, *Platycleura nobilis*



Forest Cicada, *Orientopsaltria padda*



Black & Yellow Cicada, *Huechys fusca*