

From Second Nature, August 2009

## Singing Insect Safari

August marks a transition in nature's chorus; as summer progresses the music of the birds fades, and the buzzes, chirps and rattles of the insects begin their crescendo. Getting to know these late-summer music makers can be a fun family adventure.

Most of these noisy insects create their sounds by rubbing of a hard scraper over a ridged surface. In katydids and crickets, the scraper is located on the lower inside edge of one wing, and the bar of ridges is located on the inside edge of the opposite wing. The insects raise their wings and vibrate the scraper across the ridges to make sound. Some of our local grasshoppers also make sounds. They rub ridges on their hind legs against their wings. Grasshoppers and cicadas usually prefer daylight for their concerts, while katydids and some of the crickets make their music after dark.

There are two types of singing safaris you can try. The first is a *listening safari*. All you need are your ears. Here are a few insects to listen for:

Field crickets make the familiar trilling chirps from the ground.

Katydid's argue in raspy voices about whether or not Katy did something. "Ka-ty-did." "Katy-did-nt. "Ka-ty-did . . ." They will be loudest on warm nights.

Snowy tree crickets keep up a constant, steady chirping from up in the trees. This is the cricket that can be used to tell the temperature. Count the chirps for 13 seconds, add 40, and the number you get will approximate the temperature in Fahrenheit.

For a bigger adventure, go on a *watching safari*. These insects can be shy and will hide if you barge right toward them. You'll need to use stealth. Try to figure out exactly where they are from some distance away. Here's where teamwork comes in. When you hear an insect you'd like to find, position yourselves at least fifteen feet apart and point (with flashlights if it's dark) to where you hear the sound coming from. The noise-maker will be where your pointing intersects. Move forward slowly and carefully. As you get closer the insect might stop singing. Once you spot the insect, watch quietly for a while and it might begin singing again.

If you'd like to learn more, find a copy of *The Songs of Insects*, by Lang Elliot and Wil Hershberger (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007). This book includes beautiful close-up photographs, descriptions, and range maps for the common musical insects east of the Great Plains. Best of all, it comes with a compact disc of their songs. The book and compact disc are very reasonably priced (\$19.95). You can also visit the authors' website (google "songs of

insects”). Here you will find an introduction to twenty common insect songs, and photo and audio galleries. It also groups the sounds that might be confusing so you can hear them consecutively.

Enjoy the many delights of nature in August, and good luck on your singing insect safari!