

The Cicadas are Coming!!!

A 3 part series by Jay Sheppard

Special reprint of excerpts from October, November and February *Conservationists* 2020-2021.

Part 1

Every 17 years Maryland and other states see the mass emergence of the periodic cicadas. Brood X (Ten) of *Magicicada* (genus) periodical cicadas is distributed over portions of DE, GA, IL, IN, KY, MD, MI, NC, NJ, NY, OH, PA, TN, VA, WV, and Washington DC. This is the largest emergence of the 17-year cicada broods, covering large patches of the eastern US. In our immediate area, they range from eastern Garrett County east to the Bay, and from Long Island through Philadelphia south to northern VA. Emergence typically starts about May 15, and they are all dead before the end of June.

Numbers in the hundreds of millions per square mile are possible. To place those number in perspective that is over 3,000 tons of insects emerging from the ground per square mile of suitable forest. That is a lot of protein and every predator from fish to fowl to furry tries to take advantage of this flush of food. They only have about 5 or 6 weeks to make a small dent in the huge numbers of cicadas. There are three species of 17-yr cicadas within each brood. There are subtle differences in coloration and size; the main differences are in the male's song. All have black and orange bodies, orange flash in the wings and large fire orange eyes. The smallest are about 0.75" and the largest are about 1.125". However, none of these slight differences are of any importance to the fly fisher or the fish. This means no matching the sizes like we have to do with sulfurs every year.



Fly fishers need to be prepared, too. Some of the most amazing days fly fishing I have ever had were during this emergence. In the 1987 emergence I used black poppers on the upper Patuxent and caught a fair number of nice trout. When the 2004 emergence came around, I wanted to have a more durable and realistic pattern. The result was a fly that is very durable and is readily taken by all fish that see it and not already stuffed. This durability is a major consideration. The extra several minutes needed to provide this durability will add dozens more fish that can be expected to be landed on that one fly—who likes taking time to change flies?

I have a small personal rule of effort vs. reward in tying and fishing. For every minute I spend tying a fly, I expect at least two fish landed before it falls apart. Some flies only take a minute and that is perfectly fine if I only catch a few fish, but a fly that takes a lot of effort, like this cicada, I want to be rewarded by a lot of fish. A 10-minute fly needs to yield 20 or more fish. Durability is number one in this regard. We are given a finite number of hours to fish in our lives, why waste any of that time changing leaders, tippets and flies while standing in the middle of a stream!!

This is the first part of a series of articles in the *Conservationist* over the next few months about the 2021 emergence of cicadas. The first goal is acquire all the ingredients to construct this cicada fly; some are not typically found in a fly tyer's 'morass' of tying materials. In future parts in this series, I will give the detailed tying instructions and later some tips on where to go and how to fish this fly. We have until May 2021 to assemble and tie up a batch of these flies and to plan our vacation time well.

Jay's 17-yr Cicada ver. 2021

List of needed materials:

- Streamer hook, size 6 or 8, max. total length 1.125" eye to bend
- Orange (or black) Monochord or other 210-Denier tying thread
- Black rubber foam ~3 mm or 1/8"
- Orange rubber legs, ~1 mm dia
- Amber, pearl, orange or similar crystal flash
- Black chenille or yarn, medium or large
- Orange chenille or yarn, medium or large
- Super glue or Loctite black contact adhesive
- Red or orange model paint or nail polish



I have a large selection of mostly Mustad hooks. #8 Mustad 79580 or #6 Mustad 9672 are perfect sizes. They are also forged hooks for extra strength—important for both durability and landing big carp and other fish. I do not have their equivalents in other brands. They are both about 1" long from eye to bend.

Orange tying thread of Monochord or similar heavy denier is most recommended. One could even use rod winding thread. Orange is preferred, but if not available, black will certainly work, too.

The rubber foam needs to be strong so the thread does not cut down through it. A thickness of 1/8" or 3 mm is perfect. Thicker foam will make for too bulky a fly, and a thinner foam will be too weak against the thread and fish. I tried one sheet of foam from Michael's that had an adhesive back. It was too thin, and the adhesive did not adhere to itself as strongly as desired. The fly is of a shellback design where the foam is used for the body and then pulled back over all the wings and body. The only way to make this work is for the shellback to be glued to the tail tab that juts out from the body. I have found only two satisfactory adhesives to work: super glue and black contact adhesive (Loctite). The first needs to be held in place for a minute with a small clamp (e.g., hemostats), and the second needs about 10 minutes for both surfaces of the foam to dry before they are attached to each other. I like the contact cement as it is for rubber and can also be applied to parts of the body for increased durability. (As a side note now, when you are tying a batch, just let them sit before applying the contact adhesive to all of them at the same time.)

The crystal flash for the wings can be pearl, amber, or even orange. The natural wings of the cicada have orange overtones and a bright orange leading edge. To mimic the wings' leading edges I add a round orange rubber leg of at least 1 mm diameter. Thinner rubber legs might work but will not be as durable and will not stick out in a rigid fashion. They are too flimsy and squiggly.

The interior portion of the body is made of the foam covered with alternating orange and black bands. Chenille is the easiest material to use, but yarns (poly, Antron, etc.) can also be used. Medium chenilles are ideal. I have used ice chenille in the past but simple yarns or chenille will do just fine.

The cicada eyes are made with model paint or nail polish. The natural color is a deep fiery orange red, but plain red will do just fine.

Those are all the items one will need to tie this pattern. So order what you need now and have them all ready to go by the November issue. There I will give the details on how to tie or construct the cicada fly that will last and last on all those big trout, bass, carp and other game fish you are

going to catch next year. You will then have almost 7 months to tie up a large batch of flies. Be a good scout and be prepared for this big event. If you are not a tier, I suspect more than a few members might be willing to sell some flies. Who knows, there might even be a few shops who will have them available, too.

Part 2

In Part 1, I discussed some of the general biology of the periodic cicadas and materials needed to construct or tie an effective and durable pattern. The emergence of Brood X (Ten) of the 17-year cicadas will start about May 20 and end at the end of June. This will happen in Maryland from the west side of the Bay to Garrett County and north well into PA and even onto Long Island. This month I will describe how to create this cicada fly. Part 3 in this series will describe some specific waters to find cicadas and how to fish them; this will come out early next year in a future issue of the Conservationist. I hope you were able to locate all the materials listed in Part 2? Hooks, rubber legs, crystal flash, etc.?

The precise measurements outlined below are only guidelines; we only want to create something that looks like a cicada floating on the water. On the other hand, we do not want giant or mini cicadas that do not approximate the actual insects. The naturals are about 1" long and ½" wide.

Cut the foam sheet into ½" wide strips. Cut each strip into 2½" lengths (i.e., approx. ½" x 2½"). Starting a ½" from one end cut out a quarter of the width on each side; the remaining middle half will be lashed to the hook shank. (See Fig. 1.) The length of this body is not to exceed about ~90% the length of the hook shank. It is very critical that no cuts leave any nicks in the remaining foam; I try to make small turns at the two interior corners with the scissors with one continuous cut. Shape the ½" tail tab into a triangle. The foam now has three distinct sections: small triangular tail tab, middle narrow body, and the head-shellback. The first two sections combined are shorter than the third. (See Fig. 1) The point where the body meets the tail tab is the weakest point of the pattern and is critical to its durability. This weak point is shown in Fig. 1 as a hashed white line across the juncture of the two segments. All complete fly failures have happened when the tail snaps off at this point, which leaves the shellback flapping. Steps will be taken to help reinforce this weak point.

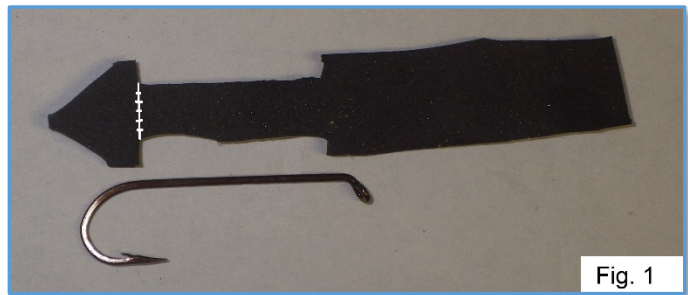
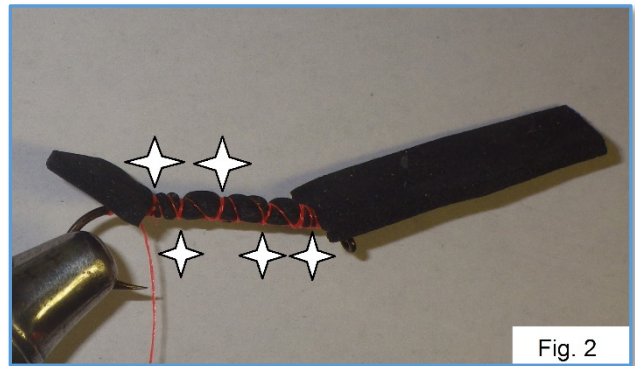


Fig. 1

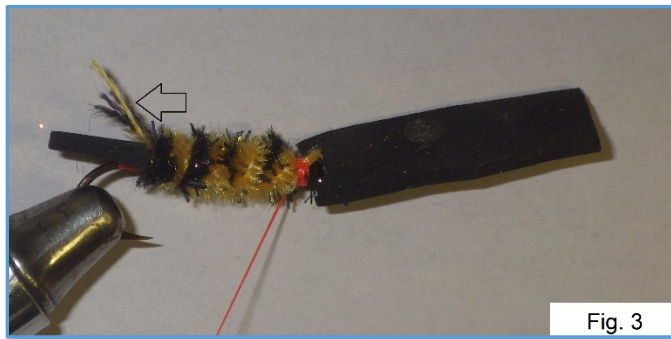
Flatten the barb and insert hook into vise. Tie in the thread and wrap the shank fully a couple of times ending at the rear. Lash the narrowed foam onto the hook at this point so that the rear of the body section matches up with the rear of the shank or slightly forward of that point. The tail tab should just extend beyond the bend about half of its length and no more (we will do a final trim at the very end). Lift the tail tab of the foam and take several winds around just the shank before returning to wrapping around the foam and shank. This process locks the material and keeps it from later rotating around the shank. Lash forward repeating the locking wraps on just the shank at several points on the shank. At the front again employ the locking windings onto the shank for several turns before resuming lashing the foam. Return to the rear starting point. (See Fig 2—the five stars point to the lock wraps on this fly body.)

Strip about ½” of both chenilles’ ends leaving only the core threads exposed. Tie in both chenilles with the thread ends trailing back over the top of the tail tab. If using yarns vs. chenilles, extend the tag end of one of the yarns out onto the middle of the tail.

Now wrap the thread up to the front of the body and lock it a second time with several wraps on the shank and then back over the foam with another 4-5 turns of thread. Be careful in wrapping that the thread does not cut into the foam at any point. The body should not be totally compressed against the hook shank when finished. As it is compressed onto the hook, it will naturally grab hold of the shank, further reducing body rotation when it gets wet later. We want some floatation from this section. (See Fig 2.)



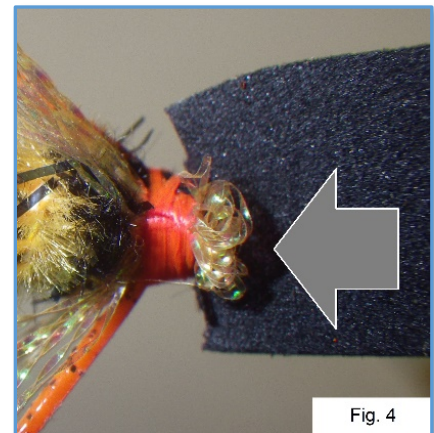
Take both chenilles or yarns and wrap them around the whole body section so that they give alternating bands of black and orange. It makes no difference if more orange than black shows or vice versa—the cicadas vary greatly in this coloration. (See Fig 3—note arrow pointing to the chenille threads.) Tie down and then cut off the chenilles or yarns.



Take 12–16 strands of crystal flash and tie down at front end of body so that almost 1.25” extends back on one side of the body. Tie down with 4-5 turns and then fold the crystal flash over and lash the other wing down on the other side. The trick on ‘folding’ is to take 2 turns over the second wing with a large portion of the crystal flash twisted and laying down on the shellback. Then pull the second wing

through those couple wraps until a small fold appears. (See Fig. 4 and the large arrow pointing to the folded crystal flash.) Finish tying down that wing. Both wings should angle out at about 45° from the rear of the body.

Take a single orange rubber leg and complete the winging on each side so that the leg lays along the front edge of the crystal flash. (See Fig. 4.) Allow each rubber leg to extend forward of the eye to serve as forelegs of about ¼”. Tie off the thread and apply head cement. Trim the wing material on each side so that they barely extend to the tail tip, and, most importantly, they are both of exactly equal length. (Unequal wings may cause the fly to spin during casting, which twists the tippet!).



I like Super Glue, but now I much prefer the contact adhesive. The latter can be used to apply to the top of the yarn/chenille body to provide added reinforcement to the weak tail tab. If using the rubber contact adhesive, apply a THIN coat to both the tail tab and the matching side of the shellback. (See Fig. 5 and arrow pointing to adhesive on top of chenille.) Include the rear portion of the top of the body, making sure not to entangle any of the winging materials. Be sure you are embedding the tags of the yarns or chenilles in the tail. Allow to dry for 7-10 minutes and then align the two parts before pressing together.

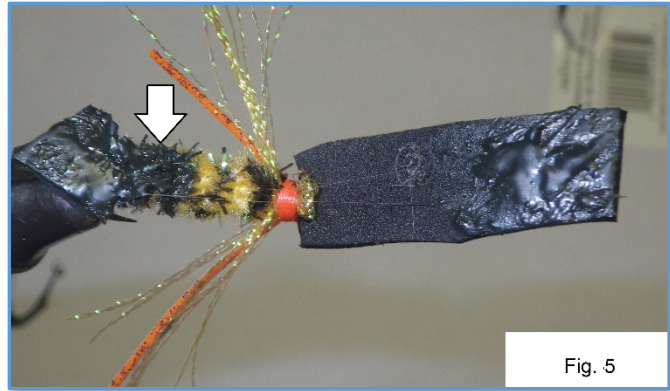


Fig. 5

For those using the Super Glue apply to the tail tab ensuring the tags of the yarn or chenille threads are centered and then pull the head tab over the back. Clamp the shellback onto the tail tab. (I use small alligator clips, but hemostats work well, too.) Allow to dry. Remove clamp.

Trim shellback to match the tail, maybe trimming both to a little smaller taper will not hurt. A large tail may thwart hookups! Add a small drop of red or orange nail polish or paint for eyes on corners of the fold of the foam. (See Fig. 6.) Let dry. Ready!



Fig. 6

I cannot over emphasize that we are only creating the impression of a cicada. These are not supposed to be works of art. None of these will be framed and mounted as major trophies. One can spend many minutes trimming or adjusting this construction. The fish do not have the time to count legs, measure wings and body, or other checks before they grab this concoction! This may, at first reading, seem like a very difficult fly to build. The main issue is that this does not use many of the typical fly tying techniques we use. After the second cicada fly, you should really get the hang of tying these up.

Here are a few additional notes to make this easier. Crystal flash usually comes with a small tie wrap binding it in the middle. I pull the tie wrap down to one end of the whole bunch. Then I select 12–16 strands and tie a thin yarn or string around those selected strands. I simply work on those strands until they get too short and then count out another batch and repeat with the yarn or string marking them. An equal mix of more than one color is fine: pearl and orange, pearl and amber. I tie in the free ends on each fly and work back using a few inches until I run out of crystal flash. If using orange crystal flash, the rubber legs are not necessary.

Another trick, especially when using the contact adhesive, is to glue them all in one final step...a dozen or more at a time. As mentioned in the Part 1 in the October issue, durability is one

of my prime considerations. If you want to take shortcuts and make simpler flies, feel free to do so, but understand you may need to spend more time using more hooks and materials to tie more flies to catch the same number of fish this recipe can produce. Plus you will also spend more time standing in the water changing flies while fish are gulping the naturals that are dropping all around you. Full fish are harder to catch.

In Part 3 on cicadas, I will suggest both where to fish (some specific waters) and how to fish these big flies. If you run into questions on building these bugs, drop me a line: jaymsheppard95@gmail.com. Do not try to contact me after the middle of May next year!!! I will be fishing somewhere almost every day possible and my phone and computer will be unplugged! In July you can find me in divorce court most likely—this will be my last real chance to fish this Brood X, even if I am still able to hold a rod the next time they come around. This 2021 event is near the very top of my bucket list! I hope you have a great time, and this will not be your last cicada rodeo!

I might mention: save any leftover cicada flies for the next emergence. If you are a big traveler, there are emergences nearly every year somewhere in Eastern US; some are very local in their distribution. Until the flies get lost on a tree or totally destroyed by the 100th fish, the flies will be ready to go in 2038! I had two survivors of my 2004 flies to start this next season with! I truly hope most of the readership is able to fish that 2038 emergence of this amazing insect. After you fish this coming event you will place the next emergence near the top of your bucket list! This will be a great time to introduce kids and significant others to fly fishing! Delicate or accurate casts NOT desired or needed.



Fig. 8 Columbia, MD
© Richard Orr

Part 3

In the November issue, I described a durable fly pattern for imitating the 17-year cicadas that will be popping out of the ground about May 20 this spring in our area. This article provides a little more information about the bug and the fly, as well as fishing tips.

In the first week of the emergence many predators are still learning what this insect is! There are very few predators who live more than 17 years, so they all have to learn if the bugs are edible (some insects taste terrible!) and how to handle them. It does not take long. Then every predator will try to eat them. Dogs, birds, snakes, fish and many more will try to consume them. This is why the cicadas emerge in such prodigious numbers—billions and billions! They simply are too numerous for all the predators to have any significant effect on the cicada numbers.



Fishing this hatch is about as easy as sitting in a chair. First, these are very large bugs and trout smaller than about 11” will be totally full after only a few bugs have been inhaled. Medium

sized trout and bass might be able to consume four or five each day. Only larger fish (trout, bass, carp, catfish, etc.) will be able to gorge themselves on more than a half dozen in one day. If the stream has a lot of forest out of the flood plain next to it, then literally hundreds of cicadas might float past in an hour. The bugs do not get really active until midmorning. Simply put, by Noon, most trout in our waters are going to be stuffed! Fishing later in the day will still produce fish, but they will be mostly the few larger fish that still have room in their stomachs for more bugs. Fishermen who get on the water at first light and plan to stop for a long rest about Noon will do much better than a fly fisher working the water in the afternoons. The latter might catch a few large fish, but the former fishing in the early AM may catch all sizes and have 50–75 fish to hand before noon. The early bird gets the worm! Late risers get leftovers.

Fishing with a cicada fly is about as simple as it gets. There is no careful planning on where to cast it. No fine tippets on super long leaders. No delicate presentation, careful dead drift or special retrieve. Just plop the fly in the water and hold on. This is probably the very best opportunity to get beginning fly fishers into the sport. Please try to encourage any young person to come out and try fly fishing in its most basic form. Any farm pond, reservoir, river and stream should be fished with a beginning fly fisher. Plan now!

I recommend no lighter than a 4X tippet for trout, and definitely 2X for where bass, carp and other less wary gamefish might lurk. We did not have snakeheads here in 2004; I suspect they will take one of these flies like any other predator. The main reasons for heavy tippet is not so much the large fish as simply getting your fly back when it finds itself (accidentally, of course) in a tree or the grass nearby. Check your hook point regularly. One morning in 2004, I fished a cicada fly for almost 30 minutes on the lower Savage. After a dozen takes and no hookups, it dawned on me to check the fly. It was a pointless exercise in futility!



The distribution of the cicadas in Maryland and nearby states is filled with a few gaps that are mostly the result of the loss of trees in the past several decades. As mentioned earlier, flood plains may not produce many, if any. The nymphs can withstand brief floods but not extended ones. One will know by midmorning if he is fishing a water body with cicadas singing nearby. The din can be easily heard for a mile or more. Cicadas readily fly a mile or more from where they emerged from the ground. So flood plains will gain a chorus of cicadas over a short time. In turn, many will flutter to the water during the day.

Brood X(Ten) emerges from the western shore of the Bay west to the eastern Continental Divide in Garrett County. I am not sure if they go all the way south to Point Lookout. They can be found across much of the southern half of Pennsylvania east of that Continental Divide and nearby portions of northernmost Virginia. The northeast quarter of West Virginia also has this brood, as does the middle Ohio Valley of southern Ohio and Indiana. Any reservoir, pond, river, or stream in this area will likely have some cicadas nearby—some more than others. Alert any friends or relatives in nearby areas to not miss this great fishing opportunity. One might live only a few miles from where they are emerging and not know.

Many have had a hard time finding some of the odd materials I listed in the October and November Conservationists. Rubber legs need to be sturdy. They are not flimsy, wiggly rubber legs like we often use on nymphs. These represent the stiff, front main vein of the cicada's wing. About a 1 mm diameter leg is perfect. The only ones I have found locally are within the skirts for bass lures. One gets the skirts in bundles that have a mix of colors. I got a brown and orange bundle; former for hopper legs, latter for cicadas. One can get two cicada flies out of one leg; one

bundle will make a couple dozen cicadas. Here is the link of the skirt bundle I have been using: <https://www.basspro.com/shop/en/star-flash-fine-strand-skirts>, the color: Brown/Orange/Orange Glitter. The other item folks are having a tough time finding is the 3 mm (1/8") black foam rubber sheet. Sheets of 2 mm are everywhere. They will work but I expect them to be far less durable than 3 mm foam. If you use the 2 mm foam, plan on tying twice as many flies. Nick Weber had reported that he found the 3 mm foam sheets on line at the J Stockard website: <https://www.jsflyfishing.com/hareline-fly-foam-3mm>



The two small sheets will make 16 flies. This should allow everyone to gather up the needed materials—crystal flash, orange and black chenille, orange heavy tying thread and some airplane dope. I wish that I had a more viable alternative to the contact adhesive I suggested. Undoubtedly, there are numerous alternatives out there, but I have not been able to find one.

In March, we plan to have a virtual demo of tying this cicada pattern by Matt O’Neal. He has both the tying talent and the video equipment to make a great presentation. Please stay tuned for the announcement of this online event. Matt will also record a video of tying this pattern that will then be available on the web for folks to refer to as we get closer to May.

Our outing chair, Lou Reichel, has reserved the Monroe Run pavilion in [Big Run State Park](#) on the upper end of the Savage Reservoir for a whole week! The reservation starts Memorial Day night through the following weekend (May 31–June 6). This will be a prime time for fishing the Savage and the North Branch. The Casselman and Yough are not in the range of this emergence—no cicadas. Further details on the costs and how to make a reservation to use this group campsite will be made later this spring. The number of campers will be limited. There are certainly many alternative camp sites and motels in the area.

I would like to thank Pete Yarrington for his comments and welcomed suggestion to earlier drafts on this article.



I hope the readership is juiced up awaiting this major event that is 17 years in the making!

Be ready!

Do not miss these 6 weeks this year!!

No family events allowed!

Fishing only!!!