

Kelly's Corner

BY JAN KELLY



THE SONGS OF SUMMER'S END

Every day, all around you, is evidence of the changing seasons. Like that day in July when you are passing through a side street, not open fields or deep woods, and you hear a cricket call. You know then that summer is on its way. A simple thought passing over and through all the small errands you perform. You continue, the sound fades and you are back in full summer. Weeks of bright sun, but by then the melodies of the songbirds have faded. May was alive with these courting, coax-



The late-mating Goldfinch sings its songs of courtship throughout July

ing songs; June nesting silences them, not to draw attention to the young who must be fed and fledged quickly. By mid July the shorebirds have started south. Their populations on the flats thin out, cries are less. Already in middle of summer, the world is preparing itself for the coming cold.

Your ears wait. The goldfinch chirps, as undulating as its flight, filling its nest with milkweed thistledown. The goldfinch is the last to mate, awaiting the ripeness of the milkweed. They get to play through much of the summer, too late to have several broods and so they seem forever young and pretty and gold.



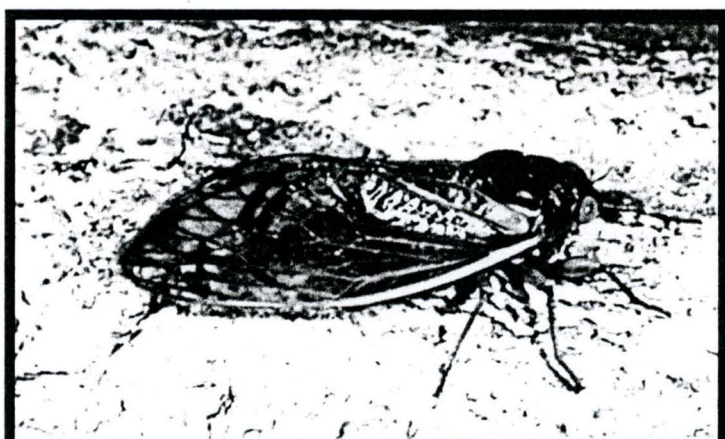
Chicory, one of midsummer's heartier blooms.

July is our greenest month. The day lillies bloom and fade. Spiderwort and chicory thrive in the barest of spots, the most meager of soils, the former closing at the first shadow of dark, abandoning its purple and showing only green knobs suspended by arachnid-like leaves. The chicory, with stick figure stem and branching, supports the simplest of blue petaled flowers. The leaves of July's trees are at their thickest and greenest this month and give way to the coarser, more leathery leaves of August. The Rose of Sharon brings out her bashful funnel. Life blossoms reddish, pink, white or blue, depending on which color the bush is decided. These hearty plants can sustain hurricanes.

And your ear waits. It waits for the cicada. Some days you are even impatient for the call and yet it always surprises you when it comes. It does not quite delight you but interests you and demands attention. It's the signal that summer and childlike leisure will go and be replaced by chill, hibernation and even some death. Cicadas have an unusual life cycle. After 17 years under the bark of trees, they emerge briefly to propagate, their calls sound the urgency. Even the may fly has a better chance. It only has one day a year, but at least one day annually. It must be glorious to be a cicada—glorious and devastating. The cicada finally

sings, its melody like electric wires humming. Though the cicada is often linked with grasshoppers and crickets it has its own order, homoptera, which designates their uniform membranous wings, one of the reason they are not considered true bugs. The melancholy whining of the call, ascending and descending the scale, puts your mind to other worlds. You watch the tupelo tree turn its leaves to beautiful reds from cranberry to mahogany, the bracken fern turns brown, the poison ivy leaves glisten darkly, all green forgotten, the goldenrod droops on the dunes, the sea lavender stands upright on the salt marsh. The cicada sings, "Tithonus, tithonus. We come and you must be ready for us."

We have been fascinated with the cicada since ancient times. In Roman mythology, the goddess Aurora climbed into her chariot at the end of each night and rode forth to announce the dawn. Horses, chariot, wheels, crown and curls of her hair changed from silver to gold to red as they moved into the light of day. The constant vigor gave her a lusty appetite for coupling. She had many lovers, one too many perhaps, as she lured Venus' favorite. Aurora was cursed with an insatiable appetite for younger men and she had many of those. But one pleased her more than all others, Tithonus. So fair was he that she would return to him and craving him she asked the gods to grant him immortality. They did. Aurora was pleased until her beautiful boy began to



A sign of the times: The Cicada sings the summers' end

age and became a chattering old man who taxed her patience. In her greed and haste Aurora had asked for immortality for Tithonus but neglected to ask for eternal youth.

Tithonus himself wanted, even longed to die. In Tennyson's poem about the myth the line reads, "After many a summer dies the swan. Me only cruel immortality consumes. I wither slowly in thine arms."

He continues viewing the earth from the mystical pre-dawn world "of happy men who have the power to die." As Aurora renews the beauty of the golden dawn each day, she must return to her misty East; horses, chariot, crown and her hair turning from gold to silver until the next day break. And always there is the decaying chattering of Tithonus to upset her. In exasperation she turned him into a cicada. And so, he lives around us each August, Tithonus, to warn us that summer ends and cooler climes put us into more serious modes. Listen, you'll hear Tithonus chattering unmusically, rather a complaining sound. But despite his efforts, he never stopped the dawn.