

West Virginia Division of Natural Resources

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Bats From West Virginia Caves Being Tested For White-nose Syndrome

Bats from Pendleton County are being tested for a fungal disease known as white-nose syndrome (WNS), a condition that has killed thousands of cave bats in several species in the Northeast, according to Craig Stihler, wildlife biologist for the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources (WVDNR). The National Wildlife Health Laboratory in Madison, Wisconsin, is culturing fungi from bat specimens submitted for testing by WVDNR.

“Culturing this fungus is a time-consuming process, and the official results of the analyses will not be available for another two weeks. However, our biologists note that everything observed in the field suggests these bats were affected by WNS,” said Stihler.

The bats were collected from two caves near Franklin in Pendleton County on Jan. 30, 2009. Since then, biologists have discovered affected bats in a cave near Upper Tract. In addition, cavers have reported the condition in an additional cave near Franklin.

“Although little is known about this condition, what is known suggests that large numbers of bats in West Virginia are likely to be affected and die within the next couple years,” Stihler said. “The void in the night skies created by the absence of thousands of bats could affect all West Virginians because bats prey on a variety of insect pests.”

The cause of white-nose syndrome, named for the white fungus which is often observed on the muzzles of affected bats, is not known. The fungus also grows on the bat’s wings and ears. This fungus may be the actual cause of WNS, or it may be a secondary infection of bats that are stressed by some other factor. The fungus associated with WNS belongs to a group of fungi that often dwell in the soil. This particular species grows well in the cool, moist caves where many bats spend the winter.

Scientists are not sure exactly how WNS affects the bats, but they do know that bats with the disease use up their fat reserves too quickly, and by mid-winter, the fat reserves needed to survive the long winter are depleted. Although the insects the bats

feed on are not available during the winter, starving bats often fly out of their hibernation sites during freezing temperatures in a futile attempt to find food.

No one knows how WNS is spread, but it is probably spread by multiple means. It seems likely that bats move the condition from cave to cave, but people who visit caves may also spread WNS on contaminated clothing and gear. DNR biologists ask cavers to clean and disinfect all gear between caving trips both within the state and between states. Guidelines for disinfecting gear, and additional information on white-nose syndrome, can be found on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Web site: www.fws.gov/northeast/white_nose.html.

White-nose syndrome was first observed near Albany, New York in 2006. In 2007, biologists in New York documented the condition in four caves in the Albany area, but no dead bats were observed at that time. In early 2008, however, thousands of dead bats were seen in these caves. At some sites, more than 90 percent of the bats had died. By the end of last winter, this problem had spread to Connecticut, Massachusetts and Vermont. Earlier this winter, white-nose syndrome had been confirmed in two additional states: Pennsylvania and New Jersey, and had been suspected in New Hampshire. White-nose syndrome affects several species of bats, including the federally endangered Indiana bat. If WNS is confirmed in Pendleton County, a second endangered species, the Virginia big-eared bat, could be impacted.

Biologists with the DNR Wildlife Diversity Unit have been monitoring populations of hibernating bats in the state's caves and did not note any evidence of WNS during surveys conducted in Randolph and Tucker counties earlier this winter. In January 2009, photographs of two little brown bats with fungus on them were taken by cavers visiting Hamilton Cave on the John Guilday Cave Preserve.

DNR and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologists, along with cavers with the National Speleological Society, the owner of the cave preserve, visited three caves on the preserve to conduct winter bat counts and to look for evidence of white-nose syndrome. Even before reaching the caves, dead bats were found on the trail leading to the caves. Bats suspected of having WNS were seen in Hamilton and Trout caves, and specimens were collected for analysis. On February 5th, DNR biologists discovered signs of WNS in Cave Mountain Cave near Upper Tract. About the same time, cavers reported possible WNS-affected bats in Kee Cave near Franklin. The four suspected sites are in Pendleton County, but this condition may be present, but so far undetected, in other counties of the state.

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