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News

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Bat disease spread feared inevitable in W.Va.

By **Rick Steelhammer**
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CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- After finding suspected evidence of white-nose syndrome in four Pendleton County caves earlier this month, state Division of Natural Resources biologists turned up no signs of the bat-killing illness in surveys last week of three nearby caves.

Surveys of caves in Grant and Hardy counties turned up good concentrations of hibernating bats and no evidence of white-nose syndrome, according to DNR wildlife biologist Craig Stihler.

On Wednesday, a DNR survey team visited another Pendleton County cave, the third-largest hibernation cave in the world for the federally endangered Virginia big-eared bat.

"All the bats looked healthy and there was no sign of white-nose syndrome," said Stihler. "Needless to say, I was pleased to see that."

But he fears that the syndrome's spread across West Virginia may be inevitable, since many bats travel from cave to cave and can probably spread the fungus-borne disease from colony to colony.

"I don't think there's any way to stop it," said Stihler. "But if we can somehow slow it down until researchers learn exactly how it kills bats and how its spread can be prevented, hopefully we'll have a good representation of bats left here to rebound."

One way to slow down the spread of WNS is to prevent humans from being carriers of the fungus. Caving organizations are urging cavers to thoroughly clean and disinfect their clothing and gear between caving trips.

"We're wearing rubber boots and helmets that have been soaked in a bleach solution and Tyvek coveralls that we strip off and throw into a garbage bag and throw away when we finish a cave survey," said Stihler.

"I only carry single sheets of paper into the caves instead of notebooks, and throw away the paper after I transcribe notes. It takes two or three times longer to do a cave survey now, but I sure don't want to be responsible for spreading white-nose."

Caves in Pendleton, Grant and Tucker counties contain the world's largest concentration of Virginia big-eared bats, named for their pointed, narrow ears that are about one-fourth as long as their body length.

So far, Virginia big-eared bats have not apparently been affected by WNS, since the bats live at their northernmost range in West Virginia and are not known to exist in the Northeast, where the syndrome has been confirmed in six states. Another federally endangered species, the Indiana bat, has suffered losses because of WNS.

The fungus-related disease was first detected in 2006 in upstate New York, and since then has spread into Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Death rates for bats at some of the New York caves where it was first detected have exceeded 90 percent.

Scientists believe the disease may have spread to caves in New Hampshire, in addition to Hamilton, Trout, Cave Mountain and Kee caves in Pendleton County, but laboratory analyses to confirm the newest suspected outbreaks are not yet complete.

The syndrome, named for a white fungus that often appears on the muzzles of affected animals, somehow causes hibernating bats to become active much earlier than normal and use up stored body fat before winter's end, causing them to starve. Affected bats are often seen flying in or near cave entrances, sometimes in freezing temperatures, in a futile effort to feed on insects.

In West Virginia, suspected WNS has so far been found on only three species - little brown bats, eastern pipistrelles and northern long-eared bats. In the Northeast, those three species have been affected, as well as the small-footed bat and the federally endangered Indiana bat. West Virginia is a major hibernation site for Indiana bats, as well as for endangered Virginia big-eared bats.

"We're going to keep looking at other caves to see if [WNS] turns up," said Stihler. "We're also involved in a study in which temperature loggers have been placed on little brown bats to monitor them through the winter. We hope to learn what it is about WNS that makes bats burn up fat and starve. One thought is that it may be an irritant that causes bats to wake up early and groom themselves, causing them to burn up calories. We know the bats are coming into the caves in good shape."

"It's pretty scary what WNS may do to bats," said Stihler. "If the tons of insects they're eating now are out in the environment, it could have an effect on agriculture, forestry and health."

After people-blocking gates were installed during the past 20 years to prevent disruption in prime hibernation and nursery caves, and caves known to harbor endangered bat species, West Virginia's bat numbers are approaching an all-time high.

"They've responded well to cave protection," said Stihler. "Our population is the best it's been since the mid-1980s. But, unfortunately, cave gates don't keep out fungus."

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