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News

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Pendleton bats suspected of carrying fungal disease

By **Rick Steelhammer**
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CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- Bats suspected to be carrying white-nose syndrome, the fungal disease that has killed thousands of bats in the Northeast, have been found in four Pendleton County caves, according to the state Division of Natural Resources.

The National Wildlife Health Laboratory in Madison, Wis., is culturing fungi taken from bats collected for testing by DNR personnel.

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

The West Virginia bats being tested in Wisconsin were collected from Hamilton Cave and Trout Cave, part of the National Speleological Society's John Guilday Cave Preserve in Pendleton County. DNR and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologists, along with cavers from the NSS, visited three caves in the preserve after cavers photographed two fungus-bearing little brown bats in Hamilton Cave in January.

The biologists and cavers found dead bats on the trail even before reaching the entrances to the caves. Specimens were taken from Hamilton and Trout caves, where bats suspected of carrying WNS were seen by the investigative team.

On Feb. 5, DNR biologists found signs of WNS in Cave Mountain Cave near Upper Tract and Kee Cave near Franklin.

Earlier in the winter, personnel from the DNR Wildlife Diversity Unit monitored populations of hibernating bats in Randolph and Tucker counties but found no evidence of WNS.

DNR biologists believe WNS could be present but undetected elsewhere in the state.

White-nose syndrome was first observed in a cave near Albany, N.Y., in 2006. The following year, biologists found the condition present in four Upstate New York caves, but with no mortality.

But by early 2008, thousands of dead bats were seen at those caves, and the syndrome had spread into Massachusetts, Connecticut and Vermont. Earlier this winter, WNS was confirmed in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, and is suspected in New Hampshire as well as West Virginia.

At some caves where WNS has been confirmed, more than 90 percent of the bats present have died.

How WNS is spread has not been determined, but biologists think it probably moves with bats from cave to cave, and humans who visit caves may carry the fungus on clothing and gear.

Wildlife biologists ask cavers to clean and disinfect all gear between caving trips both within a state or across

state lines. Guidelines on how to properly disinfect gear are on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Web site at www.fws.gov/northeast/white_nose.html.

"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," said Stihler. "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 syndrome is named for the white fungus that is often seen on the noses of affected bats and also grows on their wings and ears. Researchers are not sure whether the fungus itself is the cause of WNS, or whether the syndrome is caused by a secondary infection of bats stressed by other factors.

Bats affected by WNS use up their fat reserves too quickly, and by mid-winter, they begin to starve, often flying out of their hibernation caves in freezing temperatures in a futile effort to find insects to feed on.

Fungi associated with WNS grow well in cool, moist caves where many bats spend the winter.

The federally endangered Indiana bat is among species affected by WNS in caves where it has been confirmed. If the Pendleton County caves are positively determined to have been affected by the syndrome, the endangered Virginia big-eared bat would also be further threatened.

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