

WV DNR News Release

Joe Manchin III, Governor
Frank Jezioro, Director

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Hoy Murphy, Public Information Officer (304) 558-2003 ext. 365 hoy.r.murphy@wv.gov
Contact: WVDNR - Craig Stihler 304-637-0245
USFWS - Diana Weaver 413-253-8329;
Barbara Douglas 304-636-6586

West Virginia's Most Important Bat Cave Has White-Nose Syndrome

Biologists from the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources (WVDNR) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) report that white-nose syndrome (WNS) has been confirmed in a bat in Hellhole, Pendleton County, West Virginia, by the Southeastern Cooperative Wildlife Disease Study in Athens, Ga. If the effects of WNS on the bats in Hellhole are similar to those seen elsewhere, biologists expect that WNS will devastate the bat population in this cave, including endangered species.

Hellhole is the largest and most important bat cave in the state. An estimated 200,000 bats spend the winter hibernating in the cave. The cave is also important on a national level as it is designated critical habitat for two federally endangered species, the Indiana bat and the Virginia big-eared bat. Hellhole supports nearly 13,000 Indiana bats and 5,000 Virginia big-ears. The other bats in the cave are mostly the more common little brown bat. This single cave supports more than 40 percent of the world's entire hibernating population of Virginia big-eared bats. Hellhole is privately owned and is closed to the public.

WNS is a serious wildlife health crisis estimated to have caused the death of more than 1 million bats during the past three years. It is named for a white fungus that often appears on the muzzles of hibernating bats. Once a cave is infected, the fungus spreads rapidly through the bat population, and mortality may exceed 90 percent.

WNS was first seen in early 2006 in a cave near Albany, N.Y. Since then, it has spread more than 500 miles to caves in 10 states from New Hampshire to Tennessee. Last winter it was documented in four caves in Pendleton County, but not Hellhole.

WNS is spread bat-to-bat as they cluster in caves and mines. In addition, scientists have evidence that it could also be transferred from one cave to another on the footwear, clothing, and gear of humans visiting caves. Infected caves and mines may not initially show obvious signs of its presence, so cavers may be unaware that their gear is contaminated.

Bats with WNS use up their fat stores too quickly and do not have the energy reserves they require to hibernate the entire winter. The bats exhibit unusual behaviors, such as flying out of caves during the winter, even in the middle of the day. Unfortunately, few insects are available for the bats to feed on, and eventually the bats starve to death. There have been no reported human illnesses attributed to WNS, and there is no evidence to suggest that WNS is harmful to any animals other than bats.

In January 2010, bats were observed flying out of the entrance of Hellhole. Laboratory tests conducted on a little brown bat captured as it left Hellhole confirmed that the bat was carrying the WNS fungus. WVDNR and USFWS biologists, in cooperation with the National Speleological Society and Germany Valley Karst Survey, are planning to conduct a trip into Hellhole to further document the condition of the bats.

Bats play a key role in keeping insects, including as agricultural pests, mosquitoes and forest pests, under control. Between April and October, each bat can eat its body weight in insects each night. Bats provide a tremendous public service in terms of pest control. If we lose our bat populations, we will lose the tremendous ecological and economic benefits the bats provide.

The USFWS and WVDNR are working with other partners to find ways to treat WNS and slow the spread. Because people may inadvertently transport WNS, in March 2009, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recommended a moratorium on caving in states with confirmed WNS and all adjoining states. In addition, because scientists are concerned about the presence of WNS in the vicinity of the most important Virginia big-eared bat caves, last year a few of these bats were brought into captivity for the first time in an attempt to establish a healthy population that could be used to restore populations if that should become necessary.

Although it is not unusual to see an occasional bat flying on a warm day in winter, it is unusual to see large number of bats or bats flying during inclement weather. If you see bats flying during the day and feel something is "just not right," please report those sightings to: Bat Report, PO Box 67, Elkins, WV 26241. Please mention the county, location, approximate number of bats, time of day, weather conditions and your contact information.

For more information on WNS, please visit www.fws.gov/northeast/white_nose.html.

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