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Cave owners asked to help halt bat disease

By **Rick Steelhammer**
Staff writer

A mysterious and fast-spreading disease that has killed tens of thousands of hibernating bats in caves in New York, Vermont and Massachusetts has prompted wildlife officials in West Virginia to ask the owners of 41 caves known to harbor bat colonies to close them to cavers.

Meanwhile, the Friends of Blackwater Canyon has joined with the Vermont-based Center for Biological Diversity and the conservation group Heartwood in petitioning the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to close bat hibernation sites to the public in light of the spread of white nose syndrome.

Their petition also calls for pulling permits for federal projects like road-building, controlled burns and logging operations that could harm endangered bats.

White nose syndrome is named for a ring of fungus found on the nasal area of bats that have died from the malady. Whether the fungus is the cause of the disease or a symptom remains unknown.

"The fungus that appears on their muzzles may or may not be the main problem," said Jack Wallace, an environmental resource specialist with the state Division of Natural Resource's Wildlife Diversity Program. "It doesn't appear to get into their lungs. It could be something that shows up when the animals are in a weakened state. But whatever the cause, if it continues to spread, the results could be devastating."

It is unknown whether the disease is spread from bat to bat, is viral in nature, or involves a bacterial pathogen or an endocrine disruptor.

"We don't know what's causing it, how to treat it, or how to stop its spread," said Wallace.

"It's possible that soil on the clothing and gear of cavers visiting infected caves could carry pathogens or bacteria into other caves," and inadvertently spread the disease, Wallace said.

"That's why cavers are being asked to avoid certain caves, and to clean all their clothing and gear after visiting a cave before traveling to additional caves."

It's also why the Wildlife Diversity Program is seeking landowner cooperation in closing 41 known bat hibernation caves to spelunkers. When wildlife officials hear back from the landowners, they will post a list of closed caves.

"We're trying to be proactive because so much is at stake," said Wallace. "Hopefully, it will turn out that we're being more conservative than necessary."

At least seven West Virginia caves have already been closed by their owners or managers because of the white nose syndrome threat, and have been posted on a National Speleological Society closed cave list. The closed caves include Elkhorn Mountain Cave in Grant County; Boar Hole and The Portal in Greenbrier County; and Trout Cave, New Trout Cave, Hamilton Cave and Sinnitt-Thorn Mountain Cave, all in Pendleton County.

"Cavers have been instrumental in spreading the word about the disease, and in the north, identifying sites where the disease has spread," said Wallace.

The DNR's Wildlife Diversity staff has nearly completed its annual survey of bat hibernation caves within the state, and has turned up no evidence of the presence of white nose syndrome here.

"So far, it apparently hasn't spread south of New York," Wallace said.

The disease was first detected in January 2007 in a cave near Albany, N.Y., and later that winter, in three additional caves within a 150-mile radius. By last March, New York wildlife officials estimated that 11,000 bats had died from the disease, with the mortality rate reaching as high as 97 percent in some caves.

The disease was found in the same caves again this year, as well as in virtually every known bat hibernation cave in New York. Earlier this month, the disease was found at abandoned mines and hibernation caves in Vermont and Massachusetts.

While all bat species appear to be prone to the disease, wildlife officials are particularly worried about the vulnerability of endangered and threatened bat species.

"The New York state biologist who does their bat surveys came one step short of saying that all of their [endangered] Indiana bat caves are now affected by white nose syndrome," said Wallace.

Hellhole Cave in Pendleton County is the hibernation spot used by 95 percent of the world's population of endangered Virginia big-eared bats. Should white nose syndrome spread to it, that species could face possible extinction.

"If the disease continues to spread, it will be devastating not only to bats, but to agriculture," Wallace said. "Bats control insects like moths. Some of them can eat their weight in insects every night."

"We think the government should take immediate action not only to find the cause and cure for this mysterious disease, but consult with federal agencies like the Forest Service to negotiate additional protections for these bats," said Judith Rodd, director of the Friends of Blackwater.

"We think incidental take permits that allow activity in areas where endangered species are found should be revisited," Rodd said. "The rules need to be beefed up, because the endangered bat populations are going down, with the spread of this disease and the development of wind projects on our high mountain ridges."

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