Help from Cavers Needed for White-Nose Syndrome Research Project

Researchers studying the environmental prevalence of the recently-discovered *Geomyces spp*. fungus associated with White-Nose Syndrome (WNS), which has devastated bat populations in the northeastern U.S., are requesting the help of cavers to assist with the collection of soil samples this winter from caves and mines occupied by bats.

Specifically, we are looking for small soil samples from 4-6 caves or mines in each state east of the Mississippi River, plus the states that border the Mississippi on the west, roughly 120-150 total sites (e.g. 6 in Missouri, 5 in Arkansas, 4 in New Hampshire).

We are looking for cavers who are willing to collect samples from sites in their immediate area. To minimize the potential for spreading the fungus, we do not want people to travel from state to state to collect samples.

Participants will be provided collection materials, protocols for sampling, and pre-paid mailers. Volunteers will be asked to adhere to the cleaning and decontamination procedures for WNS that have been widely circulated and that are posted on the USFWS web site (http://www.fws.gov/northeast/whitenosemessage.html).

Collection will take place the last two weeks of January, through February. You may choose your own sites, but they should be geographically diverse within your local area (i.e. don't choose three caves in proximity to one another).

You will be provided exam gloves, sterile tongue depressors for collecting organic material (e.g. soil or guano under or near where bats hibernate), and small collection bags. Each sample of organic matter should be the approximate volume of a marble.

Before leaving a cave or mine, you must place all samples into coolers with frozen gel packs to prevent exposure of samples to warm or freezing temperatures. Samples must then be maintained at refrigerator temperature until shipment by overnight courier to the laboratory for analysis.

We are recruiting volunteers from across our study region. Sample collection should not take very much time, but the samples you collect are critical for our project to determine the distribution of the WNS-associated fungus is in the environment.

If you are willing to commit to this project, including following the specific protocols – which help ensure scientific integrity and bat safety – please respond to Mike Warner (fungalsamples@speleobooks.com).

Deadline for initial responses is December 15. Please provide contact information (name, address, phone number, e-mail) and what sites you plan to visit for sample collection (locale in each state – so we can ensure geographic diversity).

IMPORTANT: You must be willing and able to complete requested tasks in the defined timeframe, and according to the protocols and procedures outlined above.

Materials and instructions will be shipped to you shortly after the first of the year.

This is an excellent opportunity for your conservancy or grotto to be directly involved in the most critical current research involving cave bats in recent memory. Again, please reply to fungalsamples@speleobooks.com by December 15, 2008.

Thank you,

Dr. David Blehert, USGS National Wildlife Health Center, Madison, WI;
Dr. Thomas Kunz, Center for Ecology and Conservation Biology, Boston University
Al Hicks, Mammal Specialist, Endangered Species Unit, NY Department of Environmental Conservation
Peter Youngbaer, WNS Liaison, National Speleological Society