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# White-Nose Syndrome Confirmed in Illinois Bats

## Illinois becomes 20th state in U.S. to confirm deadly disease in bats

Springfield, IL - The Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) today confirmed the presence of White-Nose Syndrome (WNS), a disease fatal to several bat species, in four Illinois counties.

The University of Illinois- Illinois Natural History Survey (INHS), the United States Forest Service (USFS)-Shawnee National Forest, the University of Illinois' Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory (UIVDL), and the USGS National Wildlife Health Center-Madison, WI (NWHC) assisted in the discovery of WNS which was detected in LaSalle County in north-central Illinois, Monroe County in southwestern Illinois, and Hardin and Pope Counties in extreme southern Illinois.

Little brown bats and northern long-eared bats from these counties were submitted to the UIVDL and NWHC in early-to-mid February 2013. Both of these laboratories confirmed the disease, while the fungal pathogen was isolated directly from a LaSalle County bat and a Monroe County bat at the INHS.

With confirmation of WNS in Illinois, a total of 20 states, mostly in the eastern U.S., and five Canadian Provinces have now been confirmed infected. Currently seven hibernating bat species are affected by WNS: little brown bat, big brown bat, northern long-eared bat, tri-colored bat, eastern small-footed bat, the endangered Indiana bat, and the endangered gray bat. The disease continues to spread rapidly and has the potential to infect at least half of the bat species found in North America.

White-nose syndrome is not known to affect people, pets, or livestock but is harmful or lethal to hibernating bats, killing 90 percent or more of some species of bats in caves where the fungus has lasted for a year or longer, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. WNS is known to be transmitted primarily from bat to bat, but spores of *Geomyces destructans*, the non-native, cold-loving fungus that causes white-nose syndrome, may be inadvertently carried between caves and abandoned mines by humans on clothing, footwear, and caving gear. The name of the disease refers to the white fungal growth often found on the noses of infected bats.

White-nose syndrome was first detected in New York State in 2006 and has killed more than 5.7 million cave-dwelling bats in the eastern third of North America as it has spread south and west across the landscape. A map of the current spread of white-nose syndrome can be found at http://whitenosesyndrome.org/resources/map.

Research has shown that WNS-infected bats are awaking from hibernation as often as every three to four days as opposed to the normal every 10-20 days. The fungus damages the connective tissues, muscles and skin of the bats while also disrupting their physiological functions. The bats wake up dehydrated and hungry during the cold winters when there are no insects to eat.

"Although its arrival was anticipated, the documented spread of WNS into Illinois is discouraging news, mainly because there is no known way to prevent or stop this disease in its tracks," said Joe Kath, Endangered Species Manager for the IDNR.
"Pest-control services provided by insect-eating bats in the United States likely save the U.S. agricultural industry several billion dollars a year, and yet insectivorous bats are among the most overlooked, economically important, non-domesticated animals in North America."

"Isolating the fungal pathogen directly from a bat is the 'gold standard' for confirming this disease, and the Bat WNS team at the University of Illinois was able to do this in our laboratory," said Andrew Miller, Mycologist at INHS.

"We are saddened by the discovery of WNS in Illinois," said National WNS Coordinator Jeremy Coleman of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "We will continue to work with our partners to address this devastating disease and work towards conservation of bat species in North America."

Because Illinois and several other Midwestern states are home to many federally endangered bat species, as well as some of the largest hibernating bat populations in the country, the complete closure of all IDNR-owned and/or managed caves within the State of Illinois was enacted in 2010. In addition, all caves within the Shawnee National Forest, managed by the USFS, have been formally closed since 2009. Both the IDNR and USFS will be evaluating these caves on an annual basis and the closure orders will remain in effect for the benefits of bat conservation until further notice. Unfortunately, research indicates that the fungus that causes WNS remains in caves where bats hibernate even when bats are not present and the IDNR remains concerned that people may inadvertently carry WNS out of the caves with them.

"The IDNR recognizes that continued cave closures will require patience from the caving community and other citizens. However, the observed devastation to bat populations and the evidence for human-assisted spread justifies that we exercise an abundance of caution in managing activities that impact caves and bats," Kath added. "We understand these measures will not be a cure for WNS, but they are necessary to help slow the spread of this affliction and to reduce the risks to surviving bat populations in North America."

Bats are the only major predator of night-flying insects and play a crucial role in the environment. A single big brown bat can eat between 3,000 and 7,000 mosquitos in a night, with large populations of bats consuming thousands of tons of potentially harmful forest and agricultural pests annually. The bat conservation community is deeply concerned and involved with fighting the spread of WNS. Researchers in Illinois and across the U.S. are working diligently on finding a way to mitigate this fatal disease. Federal, state and local organizations continue to focus on conservation, containment, and education.

**ADVISORY**
The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service will host a press conference call from 11:30am to 12:30pm Central Standard Time (CST) on Thursday, February 28, 2013. Interested parties should dial 877-531-0156 and enter the Passcode 8025831#.

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