

White-nose syndrome confirmed in Marion County bats

Arkansas becomes 23rd state to confirm deadly disease in bats

YELLVILLE – The Arkansas Game and Fish Commission has confirmed the presence of white-nose syndrome, a disease fatal to several bat species, in Arkansas. The disease was documented in two northern long-eared bats found at a cave on natural area managed by the Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission in Marion County.

White-nose syndrome is thought to be transmitted primarily from bat to bat or substrate to bat, but fungal spores may be inadvertently carried to caves by humans on clothing, boots and equipment. The syndrome is not known to pose a threat to humans, pets or livestock.

A total of five dead bats were found during a Jan. 11 survey of the Marion County cave. Two of the bats were collected and submitted to the National Wildlife Health Center where it was confirmed both bats had the fungus. Both bats had damage to wing, ear and tail membranes consistent with white-nose syndrome.

Researchers returned to the cave a week after their initial survey and found 116 endangered Ozark big-eared bats, 15 northern long-eared bats and 30 tricolored bats in the cave. No visible signs of WNS were seen on these bats. WNS is known to impact both northern long-eared bats and tricolored bats, but has not yet been known to harm Ozark big-eared bats. During the winter of 2012-13 an estimated 220 Ozark big-eared bats hibernated in Arkansas caves.

On Oct. 2, 2013, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposed that the northern long-eared bats receive federal protection as an endangered species. It is considered endangered by the AGFC.

Last summer a low level of the fungus that causes white-nose syndrome was detected in two north Arkansas caves. The fungus was discovered in a cave at Devil's Den State Park in Washington County and a private cave located in southern Baxter County.

The fungus was found in swab samples taken from hibernating bats in February 2012 and January 2013. Tests detected DNA that indicates the fungus that causes white-nose syndrome, which is deadly for bats, particularly in the northeastern U.S. and Canada. The testing was part of a national study funded by the National Science Foundation and led by researchers at University of California Santa Cruz and Northern Arizona University to track the spread of the disease.

Blake Sasse, the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission's Nongame Mammal Program Leader said the agency had been expecting the news. "After finding out that the fungus was present Arkansas last year, it wasn't a surprise to confirm that white-nose syndrome was killing bats this winter," Sasse said.

AGFC's bat surveys are part of a national plan to manage white-nose syndrome. "The work of AGFC provides critical data for our ongoing efforts to detect and address the impacts of

this devastating disease," said Jonathan Reichard, national white-nose syndrome assistant coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

In March 2010, the AGFC closed all caves on AGFC land and Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission natural areas/wildlife management areas to prevent the spread of white-nose syndrome.

The AGFC encourages owners of caves on private lands to also close their caves to public access in order to protect bats. Cave explorers should check with land owners and property managers to check status before visiting any cave. All cave visitors should decontaminate clothing, footwear and equipment before and after cave visits, following national WNS decontamination protocols. The most up-to-date protocols can be found here:<http://whitenosesyndrome.org/topics/decontamination>.

Bats with WNS may exhibit unusual behavior during cold winter months, including flying outside during the day and clustering near the entrances of caves and mines where they hibernate. Bats have been found sick and dying in unprecedented numbers near affected sites. Bats play a key role in keeping insects, including agricultural pests, mosquitoes and forest pests, under control.

The disease is associated with massive bat mortality in the northeastern and mid-Atlantic United States. Since the winter of 2006-07, bat population declines ranging from 80 percent to 97 percent have been documented at surveyed hibernation areas that have been most severely affected. Although exact numbers are difficult to determine, biologists estimate that losses may exceed five million bats since 2007.

The public can help several of the species that are known to be impacted by white-nose syndrome by building bat houses on their property. They can be obtained commercially from many sources or they can be built by using plans available on the AGFC's website at www.agfc.com.

Additional information on white-nose syndrome and bats is available at www.whitenosesyndrome.org. For photos, go to: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/usfwsHQ/collections/72157626455036388/>. For more information on natural areas managed by the Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission visit www.naturalheritage.com.

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