

NOTICE TO CAVERS NUMBER 2 (16 June 2008)

“White Nose Syndrome – Update”

Background.

There has been a great deal of discussion about White Nose Syndrome (WNS) since our last Notice to Cavers. This problem has continued to spread and is now documented in Connecticut, Massachusetts, New York, and Vermont. Affected bats have been observed in New Hampshire, and these bats are probably from hibernacula in Vermont or one of the other affected states. Although a few bats with small amounts of fungus on the forearms and ears were observed in Pennsylvania and Trout Cave, West Virginia, WNS has not been confirmed in either state. Part of the problem is that we are now looking so closely at bats that we are observing very small amounts of fungus that very well may be normal but would not have been noted in the past. So far, no unusual behaviors or dead bats have been observed at these “suspicious” sites.

Despite what you may have read in the papers, **there were no dead bats found at Trout Cave**. At the recent White Nose Syndrome meeting in Albany, NY we were able to obtain additional information on the two bats from Trout Cave that were sent off for testing. The results are inconclusive. Both bats were low in weight, one more than the other. The lab was not able to culture any fungi off of either bat. Both bats had roundworm parasites in their guts. Because no one knows how to define white nose, there is no definitive test the lab can run to see if it is present. However, based on the absence of other symptoms of WNS such as unusual roosting locations, bats emerging during cold weather, evidence of excessively poor body condition, or the presence of dead bats, WV is considered an unaffected State at this time.

We still do not know how or why WNS has continued to spread. The data suggest that WNS is turning up in sites where human vectors are not the cause. It appears highly likely that WNS can be spread by bats, and it is not clear if cavers could also spread the problem from cave to cave. Although there does not appear to be a clear link between cavers and the spread of WNS, we do not know if there is an incubation time for the syndrome, and it is possible that it could take a year or more to present itself in the bat populations. Therefore, at this time it is safest to assume that it is possible for cavers to spread WNS and to disinfect potentially contaminated gear between caving trips. This is probably a good procedure to follow any time you are caving to minimize the movement of micro-organisms between caves.

For these reasons, the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources (WVDNR) and the US Fish and Wildlife Service West Virginia Field Office (USFWS) are revising their requests to cavers. Unlike NY where WNS is presumed to be widespread, we do not think WNS is in West Virginia yet and need to continue to take every effort to keep it out of the state. We believe that it is reasonable to allow entry into some of the previously closed caves during the summer when hibernating bats are not present. However, because of the importance of these caves to bats, we ask that you pay particularly strict attention to cleaning and disinfecting all gear prior to entering these caves. In addition, it would be preferable to not use the same gear in these caves that has been used in caves/mines in the affected states (CT, MA, NY, and VT) or potentially affected areas (PA).

Because Virginia big-eared bats could be so severely impacted if WNS gets into caves they use, we are asking that significant Virginia big-eared bat caves remain closed for now. This includes not only hibernation and summer colony caves, but caves we know these bats routinely use as they move between summer and winter sites (i.e. Blood Cave and Flute Cave). Also, some caves are remaining closed at the request of the owner. For example, significant bat caves in public ownership (US Forest Service and WVDNR) will remain closed until more is known about what factors are contributing to the spread of WNS.

What can you do?

1. Effective 20 June 2008, the closure requests for West Virginia caves with significant bat populations have been lifted with the exception of the caves listed in the table below. We ask cavers not to enter the caves on this list. This is the best precautionary step we can take at this time. All other caves revert back to their closure status prior to the February 2008 closure for White Nose Syndrome.

The list of closed caves is attached, and updated lists will be posted on the USFWS web site:

http://www.fws.gov/northeast/white_nose.html

and on the Virginia Region's Limited Access Cave List:

www.VAR-caves.us

Please check for updates before planning a trip. Note that not all the cave owners have expressly closed their caves, but we still ask you to avoid them at this time.

2. Please pay strict attention to following the containment and decontamination procedures on the USFWS web site to reduce the risk of spreading WNS to new sites. The protocol can be found at:

<http://www.fws.gov/northeast/whitenosemessage.html#containment>

Check for updates.

3. If you have been caving in the affected area (CT, MA, NY and VT or potentially infected areas such as PA) during the past two years, please do not use gear that has been used in these areas in West Virginia caves if at all possible. This is particularly important for gear that may carry cave dirt (boots, coveralls, etc.). If you have been caving in the affected area and may have been in an affected cave, please visit www.necaveconservancy.org and complete a simple questionnaire regarding affected caves you have visited and caves you visited subsequently. This may help target caves that should be surveyed for White Nose Syndrome.

4. Pendleton County contains a large number of bat caves, including some of the most important hibernacula, in the region. The county has the state's most important bat hibernaculum, Hellhole (which is the only cave designated as critical habitat for both the Indiana bat and Virginia big-eared bat), and three other caves designated as critical habitat for the Virginia big-eared bat. Pendleton County caves hold 72% of the Virginia big-eared bats in maternity colonies in West Virginia, including the largest maternity colony in the world.

Pendleton County also contains caves with smaller numbers of bats that are not included on the closed cave list. Many of these minor bat caves are located in close proximity to the major bat caves, and bats are known to move from cave to cave. If WNS were introduced into the county, either by cavers or bats moving between caves, it could quickly spread to major bat caves, and have devastating impacts. For this reason, cavers should be especially vigilant in using decontamination procedures when visiting any cave in the county.

5. If you are aware of any other significant bat caves that should be closed until we learn more, please contact Craig Stihler or Barbara Douglas (contact information below). This would include caves with large numbers of common bats as well as caves with endangered species.

6. If you see affected bats or dead bats, please follow the procedure listed on the USFWS web site and report the observations (with pictures if possible) to Craig or Barb ASAP.

We appreciate the support we have received from the caving community. All states in the Northeast and many states beyond are working on the problem and will continue to address this issue in the future. Guidelines for bat researchers to follow during summer bat surveys have been developed to minimize the possibility of researchers spreading this problem from bat to bat. As stated in our first notice, we have a mutual interest in resolving this situation as quickly as possible. As we learn more about White Nose Syndrome, we may revise these recommendations including cave closures, disinfection protocols, etc. No one has dealt with this problem before and your assistance and patience at this time is greatly appreciated.

At this time we are not sure if it will be necessary to close additional caves (the caves listed in the original notice to cavers) this fall and winter. Many of these caves harbor hibernating endangered bats and will be closed in the winter as usual to minimize disturbance. We are still trying to determine the best course of action for caves with significant numbers of bats, but no endangered species. To assist in planning, if we determine it is necessary to close these caves, closures will not take affect until after Labor Day weekend 2008.

Sincerely,

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**West Virginia Closed Cave List for White Nose Syndrome in Bats
16 June 2008**

Cave Name	County	Status
Arbogast/Cave Hollow	Tucker	Closed
Big Springs	Tucker	Closed
Caldwell	Mercer	Closed
Cave Mountain	Pendleton	Closed
Dreen	Randolph	Closed
Elkhorn Mountain	Grant	Closed
Flute	Pendleton	Closed
General Davis	Greenbrier	Closed
Greenville Saltpetre	Monroe	Closed
Lambert #1	Pendleton	Closed
Marthas	Pocahontas	Closed
Mill Run	Pendleton	Closed
Minor Rexrode	Pendleton	Closed
Mystic	Pendleton	Closed
Peacock	Grant	Closed
Piercys	Greenbrier	Closed
Saltpeter	Pendleton	Closed
Schoolhouse	Pendleton	Closed
Sinnett/Thorn	Pendleton	Closed
Smokehole (cave, not caverns)	Pendleton	Closed
Two Lick Run	Randolph	Closed
Upper Marthas	Pocahontas	Closed

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