



Scott Crocoll holds a dead Indiana bat in an abandoned mine in Rosendale, N.Y., Tuesday, Jan. 27, 2009. White nose syndrome is killing more bats over a larger area this winter, reaching south into New Jersey and Pennsylvania and leaving caves in hard-hit areas like New York with decimated bat populations. (AP Photo/Mike Groll)



Bat-killing syndrome spreads in Northeast

By MICHAEL HILL – 1 day ago

ROSENDALE, N.Y. (AP) — A mysterious and deadly bat disorder discovered just two winters ago in a few New York caves has now spread to at least six northeastern states, and scientists are scrambling to find solutions before it spreads across the country.

White-nose syndrome poses no health threat to people, but some scientists say that if bat populations diminish too much, the insects and crop pests they eat could flourish. Researchers recently identified the fungus that creates the syndrome's distinctive white smudges on the noses and wings of hibernating bats, but they don't yet know how to stop the disorder from killing off caves full of the ecologically important animals.

"The cause for concern is that this is going to race across the country faster than we can come up with a solution," said Alan Hicks, a wildlife biologist with New York state's Department of Environmental Conservation.

"Now that is entirely possible."

Bats with white-nose burn through their fat stores before spring, driving some to rouse early from hibernation in a futile search for food. Many die as they hunt fruitlessly for insects.

White-nose syndrome spread fast last winter to dozens of caves in New York and southern New England, within a roughly 150-mile radius of the caves west of Albany, N.Y., where it was first found. Early observations show it has reached farther still this winter, even before cave inspections and bat counts begin in earnest this month.

Bats with white-nose syndrome were found recently in northern New Jersey's Morris County and in an old iron mine in Shindler, Pa., more than 200 miles away from the outbreak's epicenter. In addition, the Pennsylvania Game Commission on Tuesday said that hundreds of little brown bats, a species devastated by white-nose syndrome, were found dead from the disorder outside two mines in the northeastern part of the state.

The syndrome may have spread as far as 450 miles from the epicenter, to the John Guilday Caves Nature Preserve in West Virginia. The National Speleological Society has temporarily shut down the preserve as a possible white-nose sighting is investigated.

So far, there are 40 confirmed white-nose sites in the Northeast, said Jeremy Coleman, who is tracking the disorder for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service office in Cortland, N.Y.

Death tolls for the tiny creatures are hard to pinpoint, but some estimates run into the hundreds of thousands.

The news was grim on a recent day when more than a dozen researchers lowered themselves by rope into a sprawling old limestone mine in New York's Hudson Valley, about 80 miles north of New York City.

Bat counter Ryan von Linden's headlamp swept across isolated clusters of the mammals hanging off the rock ceiling. A chorus of squeaks echoed in the blackness.

"There are not as many as there are supposed to be," von Linden whispered. "Not even close."

With a precise total pending, Hicks estimated the cave's count of Indiana bats, an endangered species, was down 15 to 35 percent from last year's roughly 19,000. Researchers said the number of little brown bats also appeared to be down, although they didn't have enough specifics from prior years to measure the drop exactly.

Hoping to glean more information on the syndrome, the researchers plucked 14 groggy little brown bats from the rock, weighed them, measured them, snipped a bit of their hair and stuck tiny radio transmitters to them to track their activity levels.

Bats' nocturnal habits and some species' ability to carry rabies can give the flying mammals a fearsome image. But they can pollinate plants and play an important role in checking the populations of mosquitoes and insects that can damage wheat, apples and dozens of other crops.

Researchers at the U.S. Geological Survey's Wildlife Health Center this fall established that the sugary smudges on infected bats are a previously undescribed fungus that thrives in the

refrigerator-like cold of winter caves. The center is still working to determine whether the fungus causes the disorder, but biologists are already focusing on potential ways to combat the fungus.

Since the fungus grows in the cold and damp, they could try to lower humidity levels in at least some crucial caves, though that could create other problems for those ecosystems.

Researchers also are looking at the possibility of a fungicide or even fungus-killing bacteria that could spread from bat to bat. Ward Stone, New York state's wildlife pathologist, said he has been able to culture bacteria that live on big brown bats and kill the white-nose fungus in a lab.

Tests need to be performed to see whether any of the options are realistic. And time is "our biggest enemy," said David Blehert, head of microbiology at the USGS center in Madison, Wis.

On the Net:

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