

Bat disease spreading rapidly

John D. Waller - Bennington Banner

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MANCHESTER — The state's leading bat biologist updated locals Tuesday on white-nose syndrome, a mysterious affliction that is devastating bat populations in the area and throughout the Northeast.

Scott Darling, a bat biologist with the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department, has been on the case since bats, exhibiting the white fungus for which the affliction was named, were first found in Vermont in the Morris Cave in Danby on Jan. 21, 2008.

Since, signs of the affliction have appeared all over Vermont, including in the Aeolus Cave in Dorset, the largest hibernation site for bats in New England, and Darling, along with his research, has traveled the state trying to spread the word.

"This week, there's a little less skip in my step," he told a crowd of about 50 at Hildene, "a little less hope."

On March 16, scientists confirmed the disease, first found in New York two years ago, is now in New York, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, West Virginia and Virginia, five more states than last year.

"Its spread is rapid," Darling said of the affliction, which has largely baffled scientists since its discovery.

Bats usually stop hibernating in mid-April, but this year and last, Vermont residents have spotted bats much earlier, many dead or dying on the landscape. Darling said the scene in "Guano Hall," near the

entrance of Aeolus Cave, is far worse.

"This year more so than last the cave floor of Guano Hall' is littered with dead bats," he said.

Bats affected by the affliction have been hibernating in colder areas of caves, those areas closer to the entrance. Darling estimated between 10,000 and 20,000 dead bats in "Guano Hall" on his last visit, which does not include the vast number of bats that have died outside the cave, possibly in search of food.

"It's a sight for sore eyes," he said of the cave's entrance. "It's very difficult for people who work with bats."

Scientists believe a skin infection might be disrupting their hibernation and, in turn, depleting their fat reserves.

The affliction has shown to have about a 90 percent mortality rate, and roughly 400,000 bats in Vermont are thought to be affected.

In October, experts identified a new species of fungus, *Geomyces* genus, that might be linked to the syndrome. However, there is still no way to stop it and no one has yet figured out a cause.

Darling said resident reports of winter bat sightings on www.vtfishandwildlife.com have been helpful but some extensive funding is also needed.

"Bats couldn't have picked a worst time to

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go out looking for money to help their cause," he joked.

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