

Bat attack: legal ‘bat’le brewing

Mysterious affliction killing bats in other states; is Pennsylvania next?

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UPPER DELAWARE REGION
— Bats are dying by the thousands in New York, Vermont and Massachusetts, and conservation groups want the federal government to do something about it. Something more than studies and meetings, that is. The groups want things stopped—activities that might be adversely affecting the survival of bats—and are taking legal action on their behalf.

The Center for Biological Diversity (CBD), the Adirondack Council, Friends of Blackwater, Heartwood and Restore: The North Woods have filed a letter of intent to sue federal agencies conducting potentially harmful activities, including logging, road-building, prescribed burning on public lands and federally financed highway construction, asking that these projects be revisited for their potential contribution to the threat of white-nose syndrome.

Over the past 18 months, bats have experienced record die-offs associated with the mysterious affliction, so-named for the ring of white fungus that appears on the faces of the victims. It is unknown whether the fungus is a cause or a

symptom, but the end result is the same: the bats suffer starvation and leave roosts too early, before insects are available as a food source.

Agencies named in the letter include the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service, Federal Highway Administration, Army Corps of Engineers, National Park Service, Tennessee Valley Authority and Department of Defense.

On January 29, the CBD sent a letter to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) asking it to close all caves and abandoned mines where four federally listed endangered bat species are found. While scientists determine whether white-nose syndrome is transmittable by people, on clothing and equipment, the CBD urged this precautionary approach to avoid further devastation to bat populations.

The CBD noted, “According to the FWS’s records, 10 percent of the total population of Indiana bats winter in New York caves. In the most recent recovery plan for this bat, the Service emphasizes the past decade’s population increase in the northern region of the Indiana bat’s range, including New York, Vermont and Pennsylvania. It’s now quite possible that nearly the entire population of Indiana bats in these states is gone.”



TRR photo by Sandy Long

Pennsylvania’s bat population is being scrutinized for evidence of white nose syndrome. This bat, a member of a colony that roosts in the attic of the Zane Grey Museum in Lackawaxen, PA, appears to be healthy.

In February, the CBD followed up by petitioning the agencies to reevaluate projects that might be endangering the already stressed populations. These federal agencies oversee highways, dams and logging in bat habitat. As bats continued to die, and with no new protections on the horizon, the CBD filed its notice of intent to sue the agencies on April 14.

Mollie Matteson, conservation advocate for the CBD, said that the agencies have 60 days to respond and that the extent of the response will determine whether a lawsuit

will be filed. No response has been received yet.

Is PA seeing its first cases?

Recently, the Pennsylvania Game Commission (PGC) conducted its annual monitoring of bat hibernacula sites, with special attention to the possibility of the syndrome's spread into bat populations within the state. "We have not confirmed white nose syndrome, but we do have three sites that have been deemed suspect," said agency spokesperson Jerry Feaser. The sites are located in Luzerne, Fayette and Blair counties. A specimen was collected at one site, and the

agency is awaiting the test results to determine what, if any, actions will be taken.

Pennsylvania's bats have not exhibited several of the symptoms characterizing bats that have succumbed to the disease. "Our bats are not leaving their hibernacula earlier, they are not emaciated and there have been no reports of die-offs," said Feaser.

The PGC is meeting with wildlife agencies from affected states and working with others, such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Pennsylvania's Department of Conservation and Natural

Resources. "We're continuing to investigate the situation," said Feaser. "There's no 'all-clear' sign at this point, but we're watching and monitoring."

Feaser encouraged anyone who notices abnormal bat behavior to contact the PGC at 570/675-1143. The agency offers additional information about bats on its website at www.pgc.state.pa.us. For instructions on constructing houses to support bat colonies, click on the wildlife section, then bats and structures. "Every effort we make to preserve their habitat and provide for their welfare is important," said Feaser.