

Survey: Bats decimated in Elizabeth Mine

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STRAFFORD, Vt. — The mysterious condition that is killing bat populations in New England and elsewhere has had devastating consequences at the Elizabeth Mine in South Strafford, Vt.

A study conducted Sept. 10 at the mine during "swarm" season, during which bats court and mate before hibernating, indicated that the hibernating bat population has nearly been eradicated, with just one bat observed entering a trap set up at the site.

Considered one of the region's most important bat hibernacula, or hibernating spot, Elizabeth Mine has sheltered as many as 950 hibernating bats in the last few years, according to Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department biologist Scott Darling.

"It's indicative of the significant losses we are experiencing in the state," said Darling.

Fish and Wildlife officials were alerted to the epidemic of white-nose syndrome at Elizabeth Mine in March 2008, when residents observed bats flying out of the abandoned copper mine in the middle of the day.

"We believe the transmission is from bat to bat. There is some evidence that it might be carried by humans on their clothing," said Diana Weaver, a spokeswoman for the Northeast division of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The service has issued several cave advisories and asked individuals to stay away from caves with infected bats.

Because all species of bats feed on insects, the disease is popularly believed to bring with it an increase in mosquitoes. The more serious threat is an increase in the number of insects that affect crops, said Mollie Matteson, a conservation advocate with the Center for Biological Diversity in Richmond, Vt.

"There's really mixed info about how much they eat mosquitoes, but they do eat huge quantities of insects, particularly moths and beetles," she said. "The actual impacts that we're likely to see are more in terms of effects on agricultural crops."

In Vermont, Darling said that Fish and Wildlife is vigorously researching the disease and trying to determine ways to slow its spread.

"In places like Vermont and New Hampshire, where white-nose has affected our bat population, we are looking at whether there are any quick treatments for reducing the number of bats that are killed," said Darling. "The next step would be look at whether and how we can recover bat populations."