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Bat death toll rises in harsh winter

Advocates call for federal action as fungal disease spreads to 16 states

By BRIAN NEARING Staff writer

ALBANY -- A fungal disease that has wiped out more than a million hibernating bats since appearing more than four years ago near Albany continues to spread, last month turning up for the first time in North Carolina and Indiana.

There are now 16 states in the eastern United States with confirmed cases of white nose syndrome, according to the Center for Biological Diversity, an Arizona-based ecology group.

"If we're going to limit the damage and have any hope of stemming its spread from coast to coast, these latest cases must serve as a wake-up call for federal agencies to take action now," said Mollie Matteson, a conservation advocate for the center.

White nose syndrome, so-called because of a cold-loving white fungus found around the mouth and nose of infected bats, first appeared in Schoharie County during the winter of 2006 and has been spreading ever since.

The ailment kills by causing hibernating bats to lose weight and wake up before spring in a futile hunt for food or water. Researchers speculate the fungus was unintentionally brought into caves by human explorers.

In December, the state Department of Environmental Conservation reported that at the Graphite Mine in Hague in the Adirondack Park -- formerly the largest bat hibernation site in the state -- the population of Little Brown bats declined from an estimated 185,000 in 2006 to just 2,000 bats four winters later.

Two other species, the Northern bat and the federally endangered Indian bat, have disappeared completely. The Tri-Colored bat is down to a single individual.

Bats that have managed to survive may be hanging on at two caves in Schoharie County: Howes Cave and Haile's Cave, where population numbers remained stable at about 10 percent of their pre-disease count.

Two years ago, the federal government estimated that a million bats had been killed by the syndrome.

In January 2010, the center petitioned the government to close all caves and abandoned mines on federal land in the lower 48 states in an effort to stem the unintended spread of the disease into the western part of the country by people exploring caves. No ban is in effect.