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White-Nose Syndrome Bat Disease: An Unprecedented Epidemic

By Mollie Matteson

You might not know it, but a quiet killer is stalking America's bats. A fast-spreading disease called white-nose syndrome has already wiped out more than a million bats in the eastern United States. And just recently, it made more startling moves: showing up in Indiana and North Carolina for the first time ever, renewing scientists' worries that it could easily march into the western United States and jeopardize millions more bats.

The disease -- which leaves a telltale white fungus around the muzzles of the bats it kills -- was first detected in this country five years ago in upstate New York. Since then, it has spread into 15 other states and two Canadian provinces. In some caves, it has wiped out every single bat. Left unchecked, white-nose syndrome could drive some bat species extinct and rob us of some of our most important night-time hunters, which consume millions of pounds of insects each year.

Unfortunately, federal agencies have not done enough to slow this unprecedented epidemic, and this winter -- the time of year when the disease exacts its deadliest toll -- threatens to be the worst yet.

One of the most important steps that federal land managers in the West can take is to shut down caves to all-but-essential human access. While bats are clearly spreading the fungus themselves and are probably the most frequent vector, the threat of human transmission, via contaminated gear and clothing, remains an enormous concern because people can transport the fungus across great distances.

That's why, in January 2010, the Center for Biological Diversity petitioned the government for an emergency closure of all caves and abandoned mines on federal land in the lower 48 states. There are now widespread closures in the eastern United States.

In the West, though, it's a different story. Our recent survey of federal land managers found that the vast majority of bat caves and abandoned mines in the West are legally accessible to anyone, and thus bats are at a greater risk of infection from white-nose fungus that's hitchhiking on people's gear and clothing.

To stem the spread of this disease, we also need faster action from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, our

country's leading wildlife agency. The Service has been working on a national response plan for more than a year and a half, but it's still not done. Congress also ought to provide $10 million for white-nose research.

Most biologists now agree that white-nose syndrome is caused by a fungus previously unknown to science, and that it was likely brought to North America by people who visited European caves, then came to New York. Six bat species have already been lethally affected by the disease and individuals from three other bat species have been found with the fungus.

While some cavers vigorously protest widespread closures, and federal land managers continue to put off the one action that can clearly slow the spread of the bat epidemic, the rest of us should be deeply concerned not just about the future of bats (which make up 25 percent of all mammal species in the world), but about what their loss means for the balance of nature. These night-flying predators provide essential services to people and ecosystems by keeping insect populations in check. Their loss could have serious repercussions for agriculture, forestry and human health.

In the weeks ahead, there will likely be more news about white-nose syndrome showing up in new places. Last spring, news that the disease had jumped the Mississippi shocked biologists and led some state and federal agencies to ramp up their efforts to prevent the spread of the disease into their areas. However, not nearly enough has been done, particularly in the West, where many still cling to the false hope that distance is protective.

It's true that acting now has a price, including, for some, inconvenience and loss of caving opportunities. But failing to act comes with a price too, including, perhaps, the permanent loss of creatures that have patrolled the night skies for eons, benefiting us and the world we live in.

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