

## No Maine cases of bat illness

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PHOTO BY NANCY HEASLIP, NEW YORK DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION

Little brown bats with white-nose syndrome in New York are shown on the Web site of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Northeast Region.

Biologists said they are keeping an eye on Maine's bat population for signs of a condition that is wiping out bats across the Northeast and appears headed this way.

Last month, biologists discovered what they believe are the first cases of white-nose syndrome among hibernating bats in a cave in western New Hampshire. The suspected cases, if confirmed, would heighten fears that the lethal problem is steadily creeping north and east toward the Pine Tree State.

First discovered in New York two winters ago, the syndrome has killed hundreds of thousands of bats from West Virginia to Vermont. In some cases, 100 percent of the bats hibernating in affected caves or mines have succumbed to white-nose syndrome, so called because it covers the muzzles and other body parts of its victims in a white fungus.

John DePue, the fur-bearer and small mammal biologist with the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, said there have been no confirmed cases of white-nose syndrome in Maine. But that doesn't mean the syndrome isn't affecting bats here.

Many of Maine's bats spend the winter hibernating in the states where the fungus already is well established, DePue said. Affected bats could either fail to return or carry the syndrome back to Maine when spring arrives.

"We definitely are concerned about our bat population," DePue said recently.

Scientists around the country are struggling to figure out how and why the bats are contracting the syndrome. Infected bats are often emaciated to the point where biologists believe they wake from their winter slumber and leave their caves, likely in search of food.

Bats suffering from white-nose syndrome are sometimes spotted flying around during the daytime for extended periods during winter, struggling on the ground or demonstrating other uncharacteristic behavior.

The only major predator of flying insects at night, bats can each consume 600 to 1,000 mosquitoes or other bugs in just a few hours, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. A large-scale die-off of the winged mammals could have significant ecological implications.

David Yates, a biologist with the BioDiversity Research Institute in Gorham, said there are only four known places where large numbers of bats hibernate for the winter in Maine. Yates said he checked two of these “hibernaculums” within the past two weeks and found no signs of the syndrome, but that doesn’t mean the disease is not already in the state.

“If you look at the maps and the way it is being spread ... there is definitely a good possibility that it will show up in Maine over the next couple of years,” said Yates, who conducts bat research and field studies from Virginia to Maine,

In fact, Yates said he and other local researchers found capturing bats this past year more difficult than usual, which could indicate white-nose syndrome already is taking a toll on Maine bats that hibernate elsewhere.

The federal Fish and Wildlife Service is communicating regularly with biologists throughout the affected region and is contracting with researchers to investigate the problem further.

DePue said homeowners shouldn’t panic if they see a single bat flying outside even during daylight hours. Healthy bats, especially big brown bats that are common in Maine, occasionally leave their places of hibernation only to return quickly after realizing there is nothing to eat.

But seeing several bats flying around the same area during the day, or finding bats dead on the snow, may be a sign of a bigger problem, DePue said.

Mainers concerned about unusual bat behavior should contact DIF&W at 941-4440.

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