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Another Year of WNS

White-nose Syndrome's disastrous spread across eastern North America seems to have slowed this spring – the sixth since this devastating disease was found in Howes Cave in upstate New York. The past year brought this and other surprises about WNS, plus several new questions about this brutal disease that has now killed more than 5.7 million bats in 19 U.S. states and four Canadian provinces.



A little brown bat infected with Geomyces destructans. © Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department

Katie Gillies leads Bat Conservation International's WNS response as the organization's Imperiled Species Coordinator. Here is her summary of where we stand now:

Each spring, bat biologists and conservationists nervously await the grim toll of new states and provinces hit by WNS. A year ago, the disease was confirmed in five additional states and two provinces. This spring, however, only two states were added: Alabama and Missouri.

While clearly good news, the results of a single year are of limited value in predicting the future. And the disease was also confirmed for the first time in endangered gray myotis, although the WNS fungus previously had been found on the species.

Many biologists were surprised that WNS hit Alabama, one of the southernmost states of the eastern U.S. It appears we still have much to learn about this disease's potential to thrive in varied climates. Some scientists had hoped warmer southern temperatures might slow or stop the spread.

The arrival of WNS in Missouri is less surprising, although it brings with it a new dismay: this is the first confirmation of the disease west of the Mississippi River. The WNS fungus, meanwhile, was confirmed for the first time in Iowa, just north of Missouri.

But despite the ongoing losses that we see every year, biologists remain mostly optimistic. There was no leap from eastern and midwestern North America into the western states. There are reports of the WNS fungus (*Geomyces destructans*) at some sites, but without significant mortality. Also, we are seeing a few isolated reports of bats remaining at caves that were battered by WNS in prior years. Many people hope these survivors will act as reservoirs from which battered populations can begin to recover.

Scientists are now examining the recovery phase of bats that survive their encounter with WNS. Is there an acquired resistance after the initial exposure? What is an individual's condition after surviving infection? Can survivors still infect other bats? The answers to these and other questions will help guide the response to White-nose Syndrome as it moves into new areas.

Although scientists have yet to find a cure, there is hope. We know that, despite changes in the composition of the bat community, bats remain on the landscape. We are, therefore, hopeful that we will see recovery at some point in the future.

Help BCI and its partners in the fight against White-nose Syndrome and other critical threats to bats. Show your support at batcon.org/donate.

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