

THE FOLLOWING ANNOUNCEMENT IS EMBARGOED FOR RELEASE UNTIL 11 A.M. TUESDAY, MARCH 12

Media Advisory

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Georgia Department of Natural Resources and National Park Service will hold a press conference call at 11 a.m. EST Tuesday, March 12, 2013.

Number: 877.531.0156

Passcode: 8025831

Present:

- Trina Morris, Wildlife Biologist, Georgia Department of Natural Resources
- David Allen, Communications/Outreach Specialist, Georgia Department of Natural Resources
- Kim Hatcher, Public Affairs Coordinator, Georgia Department of Natural Resources
- Dr. Kevin Castle, White-Nose Syndrome Coordinator, National Park Service
- Steven Thomas, Monitoring Program Leader, National Park Service, Cumberland Piedmont Network
- Bill Reynolds, National Park Service
- Jim Szykowski, Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park
- Dr. Jeremy Coleman, National White-Nose Syndrome Coordinator, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
- Ann Froschauer, WNS Communications Leader, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Press Release

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Photos at: <http://www.flickr.com/wildliferesourcesdivision>

Video at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldsA1DSGV3M>

DISEASE DEADLY TO BATS CONFIRMED IN GEORGIA

ATLANTA (March 12, 2013) – The disease that has killed millions of bats in the eastern U.S. has been confirmed for the first time in Georgia.

The Georgia Department of Natural Resources, the National Park Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today that bats with white-nose syndrome were found recently at two caves in Dade County.

A National Park Service biologist and volunteers discovered about 15 tri-colored bats with visible white-nose symptoms in a Lookout Mountain Cave at Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park in late February. On March 5, a group led by a Georgia DNR biologist also found tri-colored bats with visible symptoms in Sittons Cave at Cloudland Canyon State Park.

A bat from each northwest Georgia site was sent to the Southeastern Cooperative Wildlife Disease Study in Athens. Histopathology confirmed both bats had white-nose syndrome.

The name describes a white fungus, *Geomyces destructans*, often found on the muzzles, ears and wings of infected bats. White-nose, or WNS, spreads mainly through bat-to-bat contact. There is no evidence it infects humans or other animals. But spores may be carried cave-to-cave by people on clothing or gear.

Detected in New York in 2006, the disease has spread steadily to 22 states and five Canadian provinces. WNS has killed an estimated 5.7 million to 6.7 million bats and threatens endangered species such as Indiana and gray bats. In some caves and mines, 90 to 100 percent of the bats have died.

South Carolina announced Monday that WNS had been confirmed there. Last year, the disease was found in north Alabama and on the Tennessee side of Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park in Hamilton County.

“We’ve been expecting the discovery of WNS in Georgia after it was confirmed in Tennessee and Alabama counties last season,” said Trina Morris, DNR wildlife biologist. “Still, I don’t think anyone can prepare themselves to see it for the first time.”

To address the threat of WNS, Georgia DNR’s Wildlife Resources Division has been conducting more surveys to better assess bat populations, while limiting scientific activities in caves, actions outlined in the state’s White-nose Syndrome Response Plan (www.georgiawildlife.com/WNS). Biologists have worked with cavers, cave owners and conservation organizations to raise awareness about limiting trips into caves and following national decontamination protocols (whitenosesyndrome.org) for disinfecting clothes and gear.

DNR is urging cavers to reduce trips to Georgia caves and follow federal guidelines for disinfecting clothes and gear. Sittons Cave is currently closed to the public for the winter to prevent disturbance to hibernating bats at the site. About 15 percent of Georgia’s caves are on state-managed lands.

The National Park Service closed all caves at Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park to the public in 2009 in an attempt to reduce the chance of importation of the white-nose pathogen. Park caves will remain closed to minimize the risk of spreading the disease to other areas.

The National Park Service has seen no evidence of mass mortality in bats due to WNS at Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park. About six dead bats were found at Sittons, although the cause

of death was not determined. Researchers estimate that a third of the some 1,600 live bats seen in the cave showed signs of white-nose.

White-nose thrives in the cold, humid conditions characteristic of caves and mines used by bats. The fungus leads to bats being awakened too often from hibernation or less intense periods of torpor, causing them to use up fat reserves. The animals often starve to death, leaving caves in winter to search for insects that have not yet emerged. There is also evidence the fungus may cause some bats to die from dehydration or electrolyte imbalances. There is no known cure for WNS.

Georgia has few known large hibernacula, or hibernation areas. Yet WNS poses a significant threat to the 16 bats species in the state. Of nine species confirmed with either the disease or the fungus so far, eight are found in Georgia. Two, the Indiana and gray bats, are federally endangered species. One, the small-footed myotis, is state-listed as a species of concern.

Bats play a critical role in ecosystems, serving as a natural pest control that saves the U.S. agricultural industry at least \$3 billion a year and also helping limit insects that can spread disease to people. Many bat populations are already in decline because of habitat loss. Their ability to rebound is limited by reproduction rates as low as one offspring a year.

“Some bat populations were beginning to recover due to conservation efforts to protect caves and other critical habitats,” Morris also said. “WNS now threatens these populations with significant declines that they may not be able to recover from.”

According to the National Park Service Office of Public Health, WNS does not appear to pose a threat to human health since the fungus that causes the disease only grows at temperatures well below human body temperature. Yet, while people are not at risk of contracting WNS, the public is cautioned against handling bats, which can carry other diseases such as rabies.

Please contact a Wildlife Resources Division office (www.georgiawildlife.com) or – if on national parklands – the National Park Service (www.nps.gov) if you find dead bats or see bats flying outside during the day in winter months when they would usually be roosting or hibernating.

For more:

<http://www.georgiawildlife.com/WNS>

<http://www.nature.nps.gov/biology/wns/index/cfm>

<http://whitenosesyndrome.org>

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