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For Immediate Release

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Ozark NSR Closes All Caves after White-Nose Syndrome is Discovered in Shannon County

Van Buren, MO - Officials at Ozark National Scenic Riverways have announced the closure of all caves in the park effective immediately. On May 2 bat researchers from Missouri State University found an infectious fungus in five gray bats netted just outside a cave in Shannon County, Missouri. The bats tested positive in a genetics test for the *Geomyces destructans* fungus, which causes White-Nose Syndrome (WNS). Scars on their wings were a clue that the bats probably were infected over the winter, when the fungus grows on the bats' faces and skin during hibernation. The cool, damp conditions in many caves provide an environment in which the fungus thrives.

WNS is a serious disease that has been responsible for the deaths of over one million bats since its discovery in New York in 2006. The first occurrence in Missouri, the twelfth state to document the disease, was discovered in Pike County in April. Six bat species were known to be vulnerable, but the recent find is the first known case in Shannon County, and the first case in the federally endangered gray bat.

The westward spread of WNS is believed to occur primarily through bat-to-bat contact, but might also be transmitted on the clothes and gear of humans who have visited an infected cave. Closing bat caves to human entry reduces human disturbance of bats, which exacerbates the mortality rate caused by WNS, and reduces the risk of possible human-borne transmission. WNS does not infect other animals or humans.

The four biologists who discovered the infected bats are graduate students supervised by Dr. Lynn Robbins at Missouri State University and are conducting a bat research project supported by a grant from the National Park Service. They had obtained netting permits from the Missouri Department of Conservation, National Park Service, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for that purpose.

The cave, owned by the Missouri Department of Conservation, is on the Current River within the boundaries of Ozark National Scenic Riverways. The name and location are withheld to avoid disturbance of the cave, which contains many natural resources and several species of bats. A cave gate on the entrance prevents trespassers from entering.

Ozark Riverways protects over 300 caves within its boundaries. Access to several of these has previously been restricted in order to protect fragile resources and ecosystems. Due to WNS, the park is exercising caution in managing activities that impact caves and bats. Park

Superintendent Reed Detring has determined that WNS is an imminent threat to the cave bats in the park and every effort should be made to prevent or slow its spread.

The park is asking visitors to observe all closures and to avoid other caves or passages of caves that may contain hibernating populations of bats.

Round Spring Caverns will remain open to public tours at this time, although the park will implement screening measures and precautions designed to reduce the risk of human transmission of WNS. Visitors should decontaminate all clothing, footwear, and gear upon exiting any cave in order to reduce the possibility of transmitting the disease. For more information regarding decontamination of clothing and cave gear please visit: http://www.fws.gov/northeast/white_nose.html.

According to Detring, this new policy will be reviewed regularly as new information about the spread of WNS becomes available. "The park's biologists have been working diligently to gather information about WNS since its discovery and to assess the cave resources at Ozark Riverways. We are using the best scientific data at hand to make decisions about our future management actions in this situation. We will continue to gather information and cooperate with other entities in order to protect these valuable resources."

The discovery of WNS in Missouri, a state with more than 6,300 caves, is troubling to the state's leading cave resource experts.

"Missouri is home to at least 12 species of bats," explained Missouri Department of Conservation Cave Biologist Bill Elliott. "They are our front-line defense against many insect pests including some moths, certain beetles and mosquitoes. Insect pests can cause extensive forest and agricultural damage. Missouri's 775,000 gray bats alone eat more than 223 billion bugs a year, or about 540 tons. They also play a vital role in cave ecosystems, providing nutrients for other cave life through their droppings, or guano, and are food for other animals such as snakes and owls."

The National Park Service will join other resource agencies in June to begin work on a comprehensive Statewide White-Nose Syndrome Action Plan to address management of this issue.

Ozark National Scenic Riverways preserves the free-flowing Current and Jacks Fork Rivers, the surrounding natural resources, and the unique cultural heritage of the Ozark people. For more information, visit the park website at www.nps.gov/ozar.

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