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BAT-KILLING FUNGUS DETECTED AT LIBERTY PARK

Biologists have confirmed the presence of white-nose syndrome in bats living in the caves and ledges of Liberty Park in Twinsburg, OH.

The number of infected bats in this northern Summit County park is unknown, but the fungus responsible for white-nose syndrome (WNS) has killed more than 5 million bats in eastern North America since it was first detected during the winter of 2006-07. The first documented case in Ohio was in 2011.

Park staff made the local discovery following a weekly survey of the area in mid-January. Biologists found a dead little brown bat outside one of the park's off-trail caves and collected it for testing, and WNS was confirmed in the specimen by researchers at the Southeastern Cooperative Wildlife Disease Study in Athens, Georgia. In the days since, park biologists have witnessed bats congregating near the mouth of the cave – and bats should still be hibernating.

Although it is still unknown how bats are affected by WNS, one theory is that it irritates them – and wakes them up – during hibernation, forcing them to find food when little is available. The result of the early wake-up is starvation.

The park district is working collaboratively with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Division of Wildlife, on WNS surveillance and testing.

To help explain the significance of WNS and show the public what infected bats look like, the park district posted a video about the disease on its YouTube channel, which can be viewed at youtube.com/summitmetroparks.

“Liberty Park is surrounded by subdivisions, and unfortunately there are a lot of off-trail hikers who wander the woods there and go into these caves,” said Mike Johnson, chief of natural resources for Metro Parks, Serving Summit County. “They’re not only violating park rules by being in these protected areas, but they may actually be spreading the disease and making things worse.”

People cannot contract WNS because it requires much cooler body temperatures, but humans can spread it from contaminated sites to new areas on their clothing, footwear and outdoor gear. And since bats are a top predator for night-flying insects including mosquitoes, beetles, moths and other pests, wildlife officials across the country are concerned about the potential impact of WNS on agriculture and entire ecosystems, not just a few species.

Several bat species can be found in the Metro Parks including little brown, big brown, northern long-eared, red, hoary, silver-haired and tri-colored. The federally endangered Indiana bat has also been recorded.

For more information about bats and the effects of WNS, visit fws.gov/WhiteNoseSyndrome or call the natural resources department for Metro Parks, Serving Summit County: 330-865-8057.

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Metro Parks, Serving Summit County manages 11,000 acres, including 14 developed parks, six conservation areas and more than 125 miles of trails, with 22.4 miles of the Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath Trail. Annual attendance averages 5 million visitors.