

White-nose syndrome in bat populations

The presence of the syndrome is confirmed in Québec

Québec City, April 12, 2010 – The Ministère des Ressources naturelles et de la Faune (MRNF) has recently detected the presence of white-nose syndrome (WNS) in certain bat populations in Québec. This infection, although potentially fatal for bats, does not pose a threat to humans, since to date no human infection connected to the syndrome has been reported.

WNS has been formally identified in the Outaouais region, but reports of abnormal behaviour by suspect bats have also been made in the Abitibi-Témiscamingue region in recent weeks. The MRNF is monitoring the situation with assistance from the Centre québécois sur la santé des animaux sauvages and the USGS National Wildlife Health Center.

As indicated by its name, white-nose syndrome is characterized by the presence of a ring of fungal growth around the muzzles and on the wings of infected animals. The syndrome can also change bat behaviour—for example, flying in the daytime in early spring can be a sign of the syndrome.

Since 2007, a high bat mortality rate in several mines and caves in the northeastern United States has been attributed to the syndrome, and the disease appears to be spreading at an alarming rate. The syndrome was confirmed in Ontario in March 2010.

Bat mortality caused by WNS has become an international issue in the fight to conserve cave-dwelling bat populations. One example of the extent of the problem is the fact that over one million bats have died as a result of the syndrome since its discovery in the northeastern US.

Bats play a key role in the ecosystem and consume large quantities of insects that could otherwise harm humans or crops. It is important to note, in this International Year of Biodiversity, that certain species of bat, including the eastern pipistrelle (*Perimyotis subflavus*) and the eastern small-footed bat (*Myotis leibii*) are already likely to be designated as threatened or vulnerable in Québec, and are therefore under a particular threat from the syndrome.

Although WNS is not considered a threat to the human population, it is important to avoid touching bats, since some may carry the rabies virus, a fatal disease for humans.

Recommendations

Because the fungus associated with the syndrome may be carried from a contaminated site to a healthy site on boots, clothing and other items, the MRNF recommends that suitable decontamination measures be applied between visits to caves or former mines, as follows:

- Wear rubber boots that can be easily cleaned, rather than shoes or sneakers.
- Before leaving a cave: remove all mud and debris from boots, clothing and equipment, and place them in a sealed plastic bag for later disinfection.

- After leaving a cave: wash exposed skin (especially hands) with an anti-bacterial disinfectant.
- At home: wash clothing with detergent using the hottest water cycle. If possible, soak clothing in bleach before washing.
- Waterproof equipment: clean with soapy water to remove dirt, then disinfect by immersing in bleach.
- Non-waterproof equipment: clean with a soapy cloth and then disinfect with bleach.
- Ropes and harnesses: this type of equipment should only be used in a single cave, or ideally not at all. The equipment must be decontaminated, but it is important to note that the repeated use of disinfectants may reduce its safety.

Reporting of suspect cases

- If you observe suspect animals, for example bats that are dead or flying in daylight in early spring, report them to the MRNF by calling 1 866 248-6936 (1 866 CITOYEN). Report all other unusual sightings, such as bats with white markings in a cave.
- Never attempt to capture a bat to avoid all risk of rabies. If you come into contact with a bat, call Info-Santé immediately by dialling 811.

For more information:

www.mrnf.gouv.qc.ca/faune/sante-maladies/syndrome-chauve-souris.jsp