



## Fungus could be spreading to bat caves in Pennsylvania

By: **BRIAN SCHEID** (Tue, Apr/29/2008)

It sounds like the premise for an second-rate Hollywood blockbuster, but a mysterious fungus that might have killed tens of thousands of bats throughout the Northeast could have spread into Pennsylvania this month.

The potential bat plague has scientists baffled and many wildlife experts worried that it could annihilate the region's bat population and, in turn, lead to rampant growth in mosquito, moth and other flying insect populations that bats traditionally have kept in check.

"It's pretty scary stuff," said Sandra Yerger, a manager with the Doylestown Township-based Heritage Conservancy, which owns the Durham Mine Bat Hibernaculum in Upper Bucks.

Yerger said that during a recent inspection of the Durham cave, inspectors with the state Game Commission found no evidence of the fungus, also known as "white nose syndrome," within the community of an estimated 6,000 bats.

However, state officials might have recently found evidence of the syndrome, a white fungus that appears on the snout and other parts of some bats, in three bat hibernation locations in Luzerne, Blair and Fayette counties. Jerry Feaser, a spokesman for the Game Commission, said Monday that tests on the potential fungus were still to be conducted.

"We are concerned about the fact that we have found something," Feaser said. "This is suspicious, but there is no confirmation and, more importantly, there are no mortalities. This could be something completely different."

The "white nose syndrome" was first noticed in caves near Albany, N.Y., last year, according to R. Laurence Davis, a professor of ecology and environmental sciences at the University of New Haven and science coordinator for the Northeastern Cave Conservancy. Several thousand bats, many with the white fungus on their snouts, had mysteriously died in those caves. As many as 95 percent of the bats in some caves in New York were killed this winter, Davis said.

Researchers later found an unprecedented number of dead bats that were hibernating this winter in caves in New York, Vermont, Massachusetts and Connecticut.

"Whatever it is, it's clearly spreading outwards," Davis said. "It's very, very serious."

Similar bat deaths have not been reported in Pennsylvania, Feaser said.

According to a recent report from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, it's not clear if the fungus is causing the deaths or is simply a symptom of a disease that kills the bat. At the same time, scientists are unsure how the disease is spread from bat to bat or if people have anything to do with transmission.

"People are working like crazy trying to figure this out," Davis said.

According to Aura Stauffer, a wildlife biologist with the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, officials have decided not to open Barton Cave, a popular spelunking cave near Uniontown, Fayette County, next month after possible evidence of white nose syndrome was found there.

The problem is so grave that Game Commission officials have severely restricted any access to the Durham bat cave in Upper Bucks, including employees with the Heritage Conservancy, even though no evidence of the fungus was found there, Yerger said.

**Brian Scheid can be reached at 215-949-4165 or [bscheid@phillyburbs.com](mailto:bscheid@phillyburbs.com).**

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