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Bat-killing fungus found at Kentucky's Mammoth Cave National Park

White-nose syndrome is found in a bat in a smaller cave. The park service will continue giving tours of Mammoth Cave.

White-nose syndrome, which can be transmitted between animals through direct contact, gets its name from the powdery, white substance that appears around muzzles, ears and wings of affected bats. (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

By Louis Sahagun, Los Angeles Times

A fungus that has killed roughly 6 million bats in North America and Canada has now been found for the first time in Kentucky's Mammoth Cave National Park, federal authorities announced Wednesday.

White-nose syndrome, discovered in New York in 2006, has been confirmed in nine national parks and 19 states as far west as Missouri.

"I am incredibly sad to report this," Mammoth Cave National Park Supt. Sarah Craighead said at a news conference. "A northern long-eared bat showing symptoms of white-nose syndrome was found in Long Cave in the park. The bat was euthanized on Jan. 4 and sent for laboratory testing. Those tests confirmed white-nose syndrome."

Long Cave, an undeveloped cave about 1.3 miles long, is not connected to 390-mile long Mammoth Cave, a popular historic site visited by about 400,000 each year.

The park service will continue giving tours of Mammoth Cave, which annually generate about $3.9 million in fees from visitors. To prevent spread of the disease, the parks service screens all visitors before they go on a tour and has them walk across decontamination mats as they exit, Craighead said.

The rapidly spreading fungus, which scientists know as Geomyces destructans, hits hardest among the 25 species of hibernating bats.

The disease "could persist in cave environments for decades even in the absence of bats," said Jeremy Coleman of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. White-nose syndrome, which can be transmitted between animals through direct contact, gets its name from the powdery, white substance that appears around muzzles, ears and wings of affected bats.

Bats with white-nose syndrome exhibit unusual behavior during cold winter months, including flying outside during the day and clustering near the entrances of caves and mines where they hibernate. Bats have been found sick and dying in unprecedented numbers near these hibernacula during a portion of the year when there are no insects to eat.

In November, U.S. Geological Survey scientists and collaborators at the National Institutes of Health hypothesized that bats recovering from white-nose syndrome show evidence of an inflammatory condition first described in HIV-AIDS patients.

If confirmed, the discovery could prove significant for studies on treatment for AIDS, Marcia McNutt, director of the U.S. Geological Survey, said recently.

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