

Bats on the Brink

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By Jessica Rae Patton

A mysterious disease is devastating bat populations in the eastern U.S., threatening to render certain species extinct and seriously upset the food chain. In a letter to Congress last week, the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD), Defenders of Wildlife and other conservation, wildlife, sustainable farming and anti-pesticide organizations outlined the importance of varied bat species to the ecosystem and the possibly devastating ramifications of their extinction. According to the CBD, "Biologists predict that the widespread loss of insect-eating bats will lead to burgeoning bug populations, including those that attack crops. Increased use of pesticides on farms may result from the bat die-off." The letter requested increased funding for research on white-nose syndrome, an illness for which there is no known cause or cure.

White-nose syndrome, which is associated with a previously unknown fungus that invades the bats' skin, was first documented in the winter of 2007-08 near Albany, New York. It has since spread to eight other states, affecting six species and killing bats in their hibernation colonies at rates up to 100%. It does not appear to pose a threat to humans. White-nose syndrome is spreading toward Kentucky, Tennessee and other southern and midwestern states, where some of the world's largest bat populations reside.

"Biologists have been scrambling to figure out why the bats are dying, but they've had very little resources to work with," says Nina Fascione, vice president of field conservation programs at Defenders of Wildlife. "We're asking Congress to help provide those resources because we don't have the luxury of time with this illness. We can save the bats, but we may lose them if we don't act now."

A hearing on white-nose syndrome is scheduled for the House Natural Resources Committee on June 4.

CONTACTS: [Center for Biological Diversity](#); [Bat Conservation International](#)



If bats continue to die from white-nose syndrome, we could see a sharp rise in crop-eating insects, environmental groups say.

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