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Cave closed to reduce risk of bat disease spreading to Alberta

Province closes Wapiabi Cave north of Nordegg

Edmonton... The province has closed Wapiabi Cave north of Nordegg until further notice to reduce the risk of spreading a disease to bats in Alberta.

White-nose syndrome has not yet been identified in Alberta, but the province is monitoring the situation closely as the disease has recently spread from northeastern United States and Oklahoma to Ontario and Quebec, causing high mortality in bat populations there. Since 2006, the disease has killed more than one million hibernating bats in eastern North America. The exact cause of the disease is unknown, but dead bats are often characterized by a ring of white fungus on the face and wings.

The disease is not a threat to humans, but humans are believed to spread it when they explore caves. Clothing and equipment can be contaminated with fungal spores which are then transferred to new sites. The fungus also is spread directly from bat to bat, particularly in dense populations at hibernation sites. Recent evidence indicates that the fungus attacks the immune system of sleeping bats and causes them to use up limited winter energy reserves.

Cadomin Cave near Hinton, the largest known bat hibernating site in the province, was closed to the public earlier this year. Cadomin and Wapiabi caves are considered to be at the highest risk of exposure to white-nose syndrome in Alberta because of their popularity and ease of human access. Although bats probably use other sites, there are only two other caves in Alberta known to support hibernating bats. These caves lie within Jasper and Wood Buffalo national parks.

Bats play an integral role in functioning ecosystems and limiting nuisance species, such as mosquitoes and agricultural and forest insect pests.

More information about white-nose syndrome is available at www.srd.alberta.ca by clicking on Biodiversity and Stewardship > Wildlife Diseases > White-nose Syndrome

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