

## NEWS for immediate release

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# White-nose syndrome detected in Delaware bats

*Visitors to Fort Delaware to be asked to follow guidelines to minimize spread*

DELAWARE CITY (March 29, 2012) – Visitors to Fort Delaware State Park are drawn by the history of the famed Civil War fort and prison for Confederate soldiers. The more adventuresome are thrilled and chilled by its popular ghost tours. Other visitors are birdwatchers interested in Pea Patch Island's heron rookery. But few are aware of Fort Delaware's rarely-seen bat population. However, when the park opens for the 2012 season, visitors will learn about these long-time Fort residents due to DNREC biologists' recent detection of white-nose syndrome (WNS), an illness that has befallen millions of bats in eastern North America.

"White-nose syndrome is an illness that has devastated bat populations throughout the Northeast and has spread to the Southeast, Midwest and Canada," said DNREC Division of Fish and Wildlife biologist Holly Niederriter. "There is no evidence that it poses any health threat to humans. However, we will need to educate visitors to Fort Delaware about the presence of WNS and how they can help prevent spreading it to other bat populations. Microscopic WNS spores can easily hitch a ride on shoes, clothing, cameras and backpacks from the fort to areas where unaffected bats reside."

Delaware Division of Parks and Recreation staff and Division of Fish and Wildlife biologists are currently working together on a plan to educate park visitors about WNS and on guidelines for visitors to minimize contact with WNS spores while they enjoy Fort Delaware's popular programs.

"Fort Delaware's new season begins on May 5, and we will welcome thousands of visitors to enjoy our regular full calendar of spring, summer and fall activities," said DNREC Division of Parks and Recreation Director Charles Salkin. "We will simply be asking our visitors to follow some new guidelines to help protect unaffected bats in other parts of the state and beyond."

Since its discovery in 2006, WNS has caused the death of 5.7 to 6.7 million bats. The disease has been detected from Canada to Indiana to Alabama. In 2010, the fungus associated with white-nose syndrome was found on bats at maternity colonies in Delaware but no bats were confirmed to actually have the disease. This winter, Division of Fish and Wildlife biologists visited hibernating bats at Fort Delaware and nearby Fort DuPont in Delaware City to monitor the population and to look for signs of WNS – and found it on northern long-eared and little brown bats. The big brown bats and tri-colored bats hibernating there could also have WNS, but were not showing symptoms.

Characterized by a white fungus visible on the noses, wings, tails and ears of bats, WNS is transmitted primarily by contact between bats. The fungus thrives in cold temperatures and is found mainly in areas with caves and mines where bats hibernate. "Delaware does not have typical hibernation sites such as mines and large caves, but the cave-like conditions at the forts provide the right temperature and humidity levels for bats to hibernate and for the fungus to survive," Niederriter said.

All northeastern cave-hibernating bat species – little brown, big brown, tri-colored, Indiana, northern long-eared and small-footed bats – are known to be affected by WNS. Other bat species found in Delaware, such as the red bat, silver-haired, hoary and evening bats are less at risk because they do not typically overwinter in caves and mines where the fungus is doing most of its damage.

"Although there is no evidence of a health threat to humans, pets or livestock, the loss of large numbers of bats in Delaware could have indirect impacts on humans," Niederriter said. "As the primary consumer of night flying insects, bats help control mosquito, beetle and moth populations, including some serious agricultural pests. A recent study estimated that bats save farmers as much as \$3.7 billion to \$53 billion a year in pesticide costs."

Division of Fish and Wildlife Director David Saveikis said state wildlife biologists will continue to monitor Fort Delaware and other bat populations statewide for WNS impacts. "Fort Delaware is a popular destination for Delaware residents, tourists and school groups, and we are committed to protecting wildlife resources while the Fort continues to provide its regular programming," Saveikis added.

### Volunteers, information needed for bat count project

The Division of Fish and Wildlife is also continuing its volunteer bat count project to search for bat colonies, monitor bats for signs of WNS and assess possible changes in population sizes. The public can assist by:

- Reporting bat roost locations;
- Reporting dead bats or bats exhibiting unusual behavior, such as flying during the day;
- Not touching bats. In addition to the possibility of the bat carrying rabies, there is concern that humans can speed the spread of WNS by unknowingly carrying the fungus from one location to another.

To report a bat colony or unusual bat behavior, please call 302-735-8651 or enter the information online at <http://www.dnrec.delaware.gov/fw/bats> and scroll to link at bottom of page.

To volunteer to help with the bat count, please visit <http://www.dnrec.delaware.gov/fw/bats>.

For more information on volunteer bat monitoring, bats and white-nose syndrome in Delaware, please call Erin Adams or Holly Niederriter, Delaware Division of Fish and Wildlife, at 302-735-8651.