

Virus that can drive bats to madness spreads through NC's abandoned gold mines

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A virus that can lead to a form of madness in bats has spread across four

additional counties in North Carolina, thanks in part to countless abandoned gold mines from the 1800s, according to the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission.

The advancing fungal pathogen is known to cause White-Nose Syndrome, a fatal disease that prompts bats to engage in "unusual behavior such as flying outside during the day," including in the cold dead of winter, according to Bat Conservation International. This disruption in their life cycle causes bats to starve to death, says the conservation.

Biologists suspect the pathogen is spreading among bats living in the gold mines abandoned a century ago across North Carolina's Piedmont. Those shafts, some 500 feet down, crisscross below heavily populated places like uptown Charlotte and neighboring communities, *The Charlotte Observer* reported in December.

White-Nose Syndrome earns its name "because of the telltale white fuzzy growth on the nose, ears, and wings of infected bats," says Bat Conservation International.

New evidence shows the "[fungal pathogen](#)" has spread into Madison, Montgomery, Rowan and Gaston counties, the latter of which is just west of Charlotte. In all, it has been in 16 North Carolina counties, a press release said.

The disease "does not affect people," but the loss of bats impacts the ecosystem, said [state officials](#).

"White-nose Syndrome is a deadly disease that has killed millions of bats in the eastern United States—and thousands of bats in North Carolina—since it was first detected in New York 13 years ago," said a release from the wildlife commission.

North Carolina biologists first found evidence of the pathogen in Avery County in 2011, and it appears to be spreading east, said Katherine Etchison, the commission's bat biologist. She hopes the warmer temperatures of the state's Piedmont may thwart the further spread of the disease.

"The fungus is the first step in the WNS equation, but other factors like [cold temperatures](#), high humidity levels, and long-duration hibernation are needed to result in a WNS infection," she said in the release.

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