

NEWS RELEASE

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DEVIL’S DEN CAVE AND THE ICE BOX CAVE AT DEVIL’S DEN STATE PARK AND WAR EAGLE CAVE AT WITHROW SPRINGS STATE PARK WILL CLOSE TEMPORARILY TO THE PUBLIC BEGINNING APRIL 16

Temporary Closures Are Necessary As Federal and State Natural Resource Agencies Work to Slow the Spread of White-nose Syndrome in Bats

(West Fork/Huntsville)—As federal and state natural resource agencies work to slow the spread of White-nose Syndrome in bats, three more Arkansas State Parks caves will close to the public. According to State Parks Director Greg Butts, “On Friday, April 16, the Devil’s Den Cave and Ice Box Cave at Devil’s Den State Park and the War Eagle Cave at Withrow Springs State Park will close temporarily to the public.” He noted that in May 2009 Farmer’s Cave and Big Ear Cave at Devil’s Den closed. “These emergency closures are necessary as we work to protect these caves from the possibility of contamination from the White-nose Syndrome, a fungus killing bats in the eastern United States. White-nose Syndrome was discovered in the northeastern United States three years ago,” Butts said, “and has now spread as far west as central Tennessee, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.” The fungus has killed as many as one million bats in the New England and Mid-Atlantic states. State cave experts said the white-nose fungus could be in Arkansas within a year.

Federal and state natural resource agencies are closing many caves to the public in an effort to slow the threat of this fungus that forces bats to wake up too early from their winter hibernation. Once awakened, the bats need food. Because their awakening is happening too early in the season before insects and fruits are available to eat, the bats slowly die of starvation.

There are 16 species of bats in Arkansas. According to Greg Butts, bats found in caves at Devil's Den State Park and Withrow Springs State Park include the Ozark Big-eared Bat, Indiana Bat and Gray Myotis, Arkansas's three endangered bats, as well as the Brown Bat and Tri-colored Bat, formerly called the Eastern Pipistrelle Bat.

Butts noted that caves located in other Arkansas state parks don't have bats or aren't deep enough to warrant restricting public access.

He emphasized, "Safeguarding natural, historical and cultural resources is an integral part of Arkansas State Parks' mission. We know the public will understand why we are joining other state and federal agencies in doing all we can to protect Arkansas's caves and the bat species that inhabit them."

White-nose Syndrome is a condition named for a newly-described species of white fungus (*Geomyces destructans*), one that is adapted to cold conditions like those found in caves. It is so named because infected bats usually exhibit a white fungus on their muzzle and/or on their wings and feet. Some experts think the fungus may be a result of an unknown virus that is the culprit. At this time only the bat species that hibernate in caves have been affected by the disease. Bat species in caves infected with the fungus suffer a 95- to 100-percent mortality rate.

The disease is transmitted bat to bat. It is believed that cavers moving their gear from cave to cave and state to state are spreading spores from the fungus.

White-nose Syndrome has caused the most rapid decline of North American wildlife in recorded history. If its spread is not slowed or halted, additional losses could multiply those bat species in the United States that are federally listed as endangered. Even worse, it could lead to the extinction of entire species. This would result in unprecedented consequences on North America's ecosystem health, as well as far reaching economic consequences. Most bats in North America feed on night-flying insects including pests of forests, agriculture, and garden crops and those that pose risks to human health. One bat eats thousands of insects each night. Multiply that by millions and the value of bats is extraordinary.

Additional information is available at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Web site at: http://www.fws.gov/northeast/white_nose.html.

Both state parks are located in the Ozark Mountains of northwest Arkansas. Devil's Den State Park is in Lee Creek Valley south of Fayetteville. Withrow Springs is five miles north of Huntsville. They are two of Arkansas's 52 state parks administered by the State Parks Division of the Arkansas Department of Parks and Tourism.

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