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Caving challenges in the era of white-nose



Lawrence Pierce

National Speleological Society conventioners (from left) Avra Cohen of New York City, Tim Burlingame of Jersey City, N.J., and Jeff Call of Saltville, Va., power-wash their caving gear to guard against the spread of white-nose syndrome after visiting a pair of Greenbrier County caves. More than 1,100 cavers from across the nation and around the world are in Lewisburg this week for the group's annual convention.

By [Rick Steelhammer](#)

LEWISBURG, W.Va. -- Nothing has affected recreational caving like the spread of white-nose syndrome, the disease that has killed millions of hibernating bats in 19 states and four Canadian provinces since it was first detected -- by a caver -- in Schoharie Caverns, N.Y., in 2006.

In an effort to slow the spread of the fungus-borne disease, state and federal officials initially closed all caves on public lands. Caves owned by conservancies and caving organizations in states where WNS had been found followed suit.



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off, and the communities that hosted them suffered. Stihler, liaison for the National Speleological Society. The closures also took their toll on campgrounds and cafes in caving areas, he said.

Since then, as decontamination protocols were established for cavers and their gear, and as scientists learned more about the nature of the disease, a number of caves once closed have reopened, or are barring access only during winter hibernation months.

"It's now a patchwork of closures that can make it a challenge for cavers to know where to go," said Youngbaer. But National Speleological Society members are committed to continue working with state and federal scientists to learn more about WNS and limit its effect on cave dwelling bats, while promoting public awareness about the disease and cave conservation, Youngbaer said.

More than 1,100 cavers from across the world have gathered this week in Lewisburg to take part in the National Speleological Society's 2012 convention, nicknamed MayaCon 2012, in humorous homage to the Mayan calendar's supposed end-of-the-world forecast for the year in progress.

"Back in 2004, when we started planning for this convention, there was no white-nose syndrome," said John Pearson of Renick, co-chairman of MayaCon 2012. But for the past several NSS national conventions, the disease has been a major topic of discussion, he said.

At this year's convention, those making presentations on WNS included Jeremy Coleman, head of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's WNS program, and Craig Stihler of the West Virginia DNR, who coordinates the state's effort to combat the disease.

Coleman said one research topic now occupying scientists is trying to determine why European bat populations infected with the fungus associated with WNS aren't prone to the same massive die-offs as their American cousins. While bat mortality has approached 100 percent at some Eastern U.S. hibernation caves where WNS is present, and the national death toll from the disease has been estimated as high as 6.7 million bats, the disease has claimed very few European bats.

Many bats that fall victim to WNS die from exposure, after they are awakened from hibernation and leave the shelter of their caves in mid-winter, apparently in search of food.

"We need to know exactly what it is that drives them out of their caves," Coleman said. "We also need to understand why some bat species don't seem to be affected while others are being decimated."

Stihler said the Virginia big-eared bat, a federally listed endangered species, hibernates in



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a caves where WNS has been detected, but shows no sign

"In fact, we now have the highest number of Virginia big-eared bats on record hibernating here," he said. "Since WNS showed up in the state, it's the only species that doesn't seem to be affected by it."

"We've come a long way in the past four or five years," Coleman said, "and the caving community has a lot to do with it."

In addition to helping Department of Natural Resources and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service personnel conduct bat surveys inside and outside hibernation caves, cavers have been invaluable in detecting new outbreaks of WNS and educating the public about the disease.

"The first confirmed report of white-nose syndrome in West Virginia came from a caver exploring a cave in Pendleton County," Stihler said. "So did the first reports of white-nose in Monongalia and Preston counties."

Pearson said that although only a small percentage of the 1,300 caves in Greenbrier County accommodate bat hibernation, cavers visiting any cave should decontaminate their gear and garb after each trip underground.

At the convention, decontamination kits containing plastic bags, duct tape, disinfectant wipes and spray, are made available to cavers taking part in the 40 organized caving trips, and countless other self-guided trips, that take place daily during the weeklong convention. The bags and duct tape are used to quarantine clothing and gear, removed immediately after leaving a cave, for transport to a decontamination station set up near the convention's campground, located on a grassy expanse of State Fair land.

The decontamination facility includes several power washers, a series of screen tables on which clothes and gear are placed while power washing takes places, and tubs filled with disinfectants and detergents.

Among those using the setup Tuesday afternoon was Avra Cohen of New York City, a member of the National Speleological Society's New York City Grotto, just back from a visit to 16.4-mile McClung's Cave.

"It's my first convention and my first time down here," said Cohen, as he arranged his cave-soiled coveralls on a screen table in preparation for power washing. "It's great that someone put all these



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all kinds of fun getting into big rooms and going through

"The caves down here are big and beautiful, and there are a lot of them," added Tim Burlingame, who was decontaminating his gear following a crawl through Scotts Hollow Cave.

Headquarters for convention activities is Greenbrier East High School, where conventioners tour exhibits, listen to speakers and sign up for activities ranging from cave photography to cave conservation and management.

In the school's gymnasium, climbers take part in workshops to hone climbing skills, such as re-belaying, and take part in competitions involving ascending gear and wooden squeezeboxes, used to determine who can wriggle through the narrowest passage.

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