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**Millions of** **Bats Killed Off by Fungal Disease**

**Nearly 7 million bats in 16 states and Canada have died since the disease was first detected.**

About five years ago, scientists in New York discovered that unusually large numbers of **bats** were dying. The cause, they eventually found out, was a disease called "**white**-**nose** syndrome." Sick **bats** get a **white** fungus around their noses and on the tips of their ears and wings. Researchers who have been studying this disease think about 7 million **bats** have died of the disease so far. Many scientists are worried that some kinds of **bats** may become extinct.

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| [Indian Fruit Bat](http://discoverer.prod.sirs.com/discoweb/disco/do/picture?picurn=urn:sirs:US;IMAGE;GIF;0000156920&urn=urn:sirs:US;ARTICLE;ART;0000337392)  **Indian Fruit Bat**  (Credit: Educational Images LTD/Custom Medical Stock Photo "CMSP Biology"/Newscom) Photo Selected by Proquest Staff |

Since it was first discovered, the disease has spread further and further west. The fungus that causes **white**-**nose** syndrome grows in cold, damp caves where **bats** hibernate. Hibernating mammals spend most of the winter in a deep sleep without needing to eat or drink. **Bats** can easily spread infection during hibernation because they often huddle close together in big groups. **Bats** with **white**-**nose** syndrome wake up too early from their hibernation, and have a hard time finding food. The sick **bats** lose too much body fat and die of starvation. Some caves in the United States have been closed to human activities in an effort to keep the disease from spreading to healthy **bats**. And scientists are trying to find other ways to keep the disease from spreading to healthy **bats**.

**Bats are very beneficial to humans.**

Are you afraid of **bats**? One reason that many people fear **bats** is that **bats** can carry a dangerous disease called rabies. You should never touch a bat, or any other wild animal. But it's actually very rare for people to get rabies from **bats**. In fact, **Bats** are extremely helpful to humans and the environment.

Most **bats** eat insects, including mosquitoes and bugs that damage food crops. An adult little brown bat can eat about 1,200 bugs in an hour. Other **bats** eat fruit, and help spread fruit seeds that grow more fruit trees. **Bats** are also important pollinators--they spread pollen from plant to plant. Plants that have flowers must be pollinated in order to reproduce. Plants can be pollinated by bees and other insects, and sometimes **bats**. More than 300 species of fruit, including bananas, depend on **bats** for pollination.

There are about 1,000 different kinds of **bats**. The large bat here is a type of fruit-eating bat called a large flying fox. It is one of the largest known species of bat, with a wingspan that can reach 6 feet. Some **bats** are very tiny. In fact, the bumblebee bat, which weighs less than a penny, may be the world's smallest mammal. Some **bats**, known as vampire **bats**, live off the blood of birds, cattle, and other animals, although they rarely bite humans. There are only three types of vampire **bats**, and they all live in Mexico, Central and South America--so there is not much chance you will ever have to deal with one.

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| [Map: Bats Killed By Fungal Disease](http://discoverer.prod.sirs.com/discoweb/disco/do/picture?picurn=urn:sirs:US;IMAGE;GIF;0000156974&urn=urn:sirs:US;ARTICLE;ART;0000337392)  **Map: Bats Killed By Fungal Disease**  (Credit: NewsCurrents Read to Know) |

**Bats use echolocation to find their food.**

**Bats** are the only mammals that can fly. However, they cannot take off from the ground the way birds can. That's why **bats** hang upside down. This is called roosting. When they want to fly, they let go with their feet and start flapping their wings. **Bats** are nocturnal, which means they are active at night and asleep in the day.

You may have heard the expression "blind as a bat." But, **bats** are not blind, and their vision is not that much different from human vision. Yet **bats** can fly around in complete darkness without hitting anything. They do this using something called echolocation. Echolocation is a way of finding an object's distance and location by using echoes. A bat sends out a high-pitched sound, sometimes so high-pitched that humans can't hear it. That sound carries through the air until it hits something and bounces back to the bat's ears. A bat can interpret this reflected sound and know exactly what's in front of it--a tree, a wall, or a big, juicy moth. If you see a bat flying a little too close to you one night, it's not trying to scare you or attack you. It's probably in pursuit of food and you are in its way!

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| [Brown Bat with White-Nose Syndrome](http://discoverer.prod.sirs.com/discoweb/disco/do/picture?picurn=urn:sirs:US;IMAGE;GIF;0000156921&urn=urn:sirs:US;ARTICLE;ART;0000337392)  **Brown Bat with White-Nose Syndrome**  (Credit: AFP/Getty Images/Newscom) Photo Selected by ProQuest Staff |

**Bats** aren't the only animals to use echolocation. Dolphins and some whales can use it, too. And some blind people can use echolocation to get around, too, although this is unusual.

**Thought Questions:**

How do you think humans would be affected if **bats** suddenly disappeared?

How did you feel about **bats** before you read this story? How do you feel about them now? Explain your answer.