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Canada's Bats and COVID-19: A Dangerous Dynamic

As COVID-19 continues to spread throughout the global community, everyday life has been turned on its ear. With each passing day, we learn a little more about this highly contagious virus and the importance of slowing its spread by “starving it out” within our communities via social distancing. In addition to its threat to human beings, there are worries that COVID-19 might impact our native wildlife as well.

In recent news, concerned wildlife experts are now warning biologists and wildlife rehabilitators across Canada to avoid interaction with bats. The Canadian Wildlife Health Cooperative (CWHC) is set to release a formal recommendation to suspend all fieldwork involving bats. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has proposed similar recommendations for American biologists. Craig Willis, a biologist and wildlife disease expert at the University of Winnipeg, believes that while the risk is low there is a possibility that humans carrying COVID-19 could infect millions of bats across North America. If this were to happen, the results would be catastrophic. The reasons for concern are multi-faceted. With regard to bat conservation, such a scenario could be devastating. Normally, bats have very strong immune systems capable of handling many pathogens, including different coronaviruses; but our bat populations are already suffering with White-nose Syndrome, a Eurasian fungal disease that was introduced into North America. White-nose Syndrome has killed millions of bats since its discovery in 2006, making it one of the deadliest diseases to a group of mammals ever known. With their populations already weakened and struggling, a new threat from COVID-19 could have dire consequences for our bats. Even if you are not a big fan of bats, there is another troubling component to this potential situation. If we were to infect bats with COVID-19, it would create a new wildlife source from which the virus could then be passed back to people. At that stage, eradicating COVID-19 from our continent and beyond would be profoundly problematic – perhaps even impossible – hence, the advice for bat scientists and wildlife rehabbers to refrain from handling bats during this pandemic crisis.

The formal name of the coronavirus that causes COVID-10 is SARS-CoV-2, and it has genetic similarities to a coronavirus found in Asian horseshoe bats. One theory speculates that horseshoe bats passed on the virus to another species where it evolved into the pseudo-organism that has killed over 166,000 people and sickened over 2 million more. Another theory purports that the virus jumped the lab in Wuhan, where it was being studied by virologists. When an infectious illness is able to be passed from animals to humans or humans to animals, it is classified as a “zoonotic disease.” While North American bats carry other types of coronaviruses (many animal species do), we know that COVID-19 is not currently in our bat population. Nevertheless, it is one that our indigenous bats, such as the little brown bat, could carry. This is very sobering to contemplate.

The life-altering impact of COVID-19 has forced us all to examine the ways we have been interacting globally, nationally and within our own communities and families. It is also a most prudent time for those working with wildlife to reassess safety precautions and err on the side of caution to prevent the spread of zoonotic diseases like COVID-19. During the cessation of their field work, bat biologists are asking the public to be citizen scientists by sharing our own observations. Learn more at batwatch.ca.

Article by Margie Manthey; photo: Pixabay