

We have received many inquiries about recommendations issued to National Wildlife Refuges on Friday, March 27, by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Wildlife Health Office regarding the potential risks of transmitting the COVID-19 virus (SARS CoV-2) to North American bats. The email was an internal memo aimed at protecting natural resources on refuges and not intended for release outside of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. We apologize for any confusion this may have caused and acknowledge that our collective response to the COVID-19 pandemic is rapidly evolving.

For clarification on the context of the memo, we know that many mammals are susceptible to infection by a diversity of coronaviruses, and that these viruses can be found in wildlife just as they can in people. What is not currently known is whether the novel coronavirus, SARS CoV-2, has the potential to infect, or cause illness in, North American wildlife, including bats. To that end, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with the U.S. Geological Survey and a team of wildlife disease experts to quickly assess the risk SARS-CoV-2 may pose to bat populations and will release recommendations as soon as evidence-based guidance becomes available. In the meantime, consistent with universal precautions, and out of an abundance of caution to protect bat health, the Wildlife Health Office asked Refuge staff to postpone activities requiring direct contact with bats.

Until we have a better understanding of the risk to bats posed by SARS-CoV-2 we recommend that people consider temporarily postponing activities requiring direct contact with wild bats. When such activities are necessary, they should only be conducted with protective equipment to prevent possible viral transmission. These recommendations do not apply to bat research activities that do not involve physical contact or close proximity with bats, such as acoustic monitoring or emergence counts when an appropriate distance and protection can be maintained.

For more information, the USGS National Wildlife Health Center has just released a Wildlife Health Bulletin (2020-03) with information on coronaviruses in wildlife, including mention of the assessment we are conducting and guidance for selecting protective equipment, available here: https://www.usgs.gov/centers/nwhc/science/wildlife-health-bulletins?qt-science_center_objects=0#qt-science_center_objects

Additionally, the Centers for Disease Control maintains the latest information on COVID-19 associated risks for animals, with details found here: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html#animals>