

Illinois Caverns to Reopen to the Public

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SPRINGFIELD – Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) today announced Illinois Caverns, a staple attraction in southern Illinois, will reopen to the public Wednesday, June 16, 2021, after being closed for more than 10 years.

“As the life-saving power of vaccination allows more and more Illinoisans to get back out there and explore this summer, I’m delighted to announce that travelers will be able to add the Illinois Caverns to their road trip itineraries for the first time in over a decade,” **said Governor JB Pritzker.** “Starting June 16, visitors can explore these natural wonders feeling secure in IDNR’s ongoing management of the native ecosystem, which allows Illinoisans to explore nature while also letting nature thrive. The Illinois Caverns are the perfect addition to any Metro East or Southern Illinois road trip – and visitors from across the Midwest can visit enjoyillinois.com to plan their safe summer adventures.”

Illinois Caverns, along with all IDNR-managed caves in Illinois, were closed in 2010 as a precaution against the spread of White-nose Syndrome (WNS), a fatal disease which affects certain types of cave-dwelling bats.

“The caverns – one of the state’s scenic wonders – attracted visitors from across the state, which is why the decision was made to close them,” **said Joe Kath, Endangered Species Program manager, IDNR.** “Our biologists felt that proactively closing Illinois Caverns, and other state-managed caves across the state, was the best option to protect the state’s bat population from WNS.”

While WNS cannot be transmitted to humans or other animals, it is fatal to hibernating bats. Named for the white fungus that infects skin of the muzzle, ears, and wings of hibernating bats, the fungus thrives in cold and humid conditions characteristic of caves and mines used by bats. Scientists believe that WNS is transmitted primarily from bat to bat, but there is a possibility that it may also be transmitted by humans inadvertently carrying the fungus from cave to cave on their clothing and gear, necessitating the closure of the state’s caves.

“Compared to many other caves and mines in Illinois testing positive for WNS, the prevalence of this disease in bats hibernating within Illinois Caverns has been relatively low,” **Kath said.** “A small number of animals exhibiting the white fungal growth on their muzzles was first documented at Illinois Caverns in 2013. Since then, instances of WNS at Illinois Caverns continue to be very localized. Further, the bat population was never significant in this cave and seems to be the same despite WNS being witnessed in a small number of animals.”

While the site was closed, staff were able to complete necessary repairs and maintenance to buildings and the site in general.

“We certainly didn’t like to see the site closed, but the closure did allow us to complete some necessary work to ensure the safety and enjoyment of our visitors once we reopen,” **said Von Bandy, director, Office of Land Management, IDNR.** “We are always looking for ways to engage with the state’s diverse population and Illinois Caverns is like no other IDNR site. There are so many excellent opportunities for everyone from school-aged children to adults looking for something other than one of our existing outdoor program offerings.”

Beginning June 16, Illinois Caverns will be open seasonally from April through October. Weekly, the site will be open Wednesday through Sunday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Ahead of the public opening, media are invited to attend a media preview day Tuesday, June 15 at 1 p.m. at Illinois Caverns, 4369 G Road, Waterloo, 62298. IDNR

representatives will be on hand to answer questions about the site and future accommodations.