

THE HEAT IS ON

Species feeling the effects of climate change



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American Pika

Ochotona princeps

Region:

Southwest

Area affected:

Great Basin

Climatic change:

Rising temperatures

Impact:

Heat stress

ABOUT THIS SPECIES

Related to rabbits but appearing more like oversize hamsters, pikas live on the rocky slopes of high mountains in the West. They do not dig burrows, but shelter instead under large piles of rocks, known as talus, adjacent to patches of grass and other vegetation. Pikas are active in the daytime year-round. Since they do not hibernate, they must store food to see them through the long winters. They harvest plants and stack them in “haypiles” to dry, before storing them under talus in piles that can weigh as much as 50 pounds. Pikas live in colonies, with individual territories of 0.1 to 0.2 acres. They communicate with each other extensively through whistles, bleats and sharp alarm calls that send the animals scurrying for cover when a predator nears. They mate in April and have litters of about three young in May.

DESCRIPTION OF IMPACT

Suitable pika habitat is restricted to regions with fewer than 30 days per year above 95 degrees F. Pikas keep their warm winter coats year-round and are thus very sensitive to high ambient temperatures—in fact, long exposure to excessive warmth can kill the animals outright. Climate warming is already affecting them: Long-term research has shown that pika populations are moving up to higher elevations, where cooler temperatures still prevail, at rates averaging more than 450 feet per decade. As climate change continues to heat up their mountain homes, pikas will be pushed farther and farther upslope. Once they reach the top, they will have nowhere to go. This may already be happening in California, Nevada, New Mexico and Utah, the southern part of their range. **In the Great Basin, 40 percent of pika populations have vanished in recent years.**

References

Beever, E.A. et al. 2011. Contemporary climate change alters the pace and drivers of extinction. *Global Change Biology* 17(6): 2054–2070. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1365-2486.2010.02389.x/abstract>

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