

Endangered Species Act Protection Sought for American Pika Alpine "Boulder Bunny" Joins the Polar Bear in the Struggle Against Global Warming

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Today the Center for Biological Diversity filed a scientific [petition](#) with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to protect the American pika under the federal Endangered Species Act due to threats from global warming. Rising temperatures caused by greenhouse gas pollution have led to dramatic



American Pika. Photo: Michael Mengak

losses of pika populations and could eliminate the species from large regions of the American West by the end of this century. More than a third of documented pika populations in the Great Basin mountains of Nevada and Oregon have gone extinct.

"The American pika is the American West's canary in the coal mine," said Dr. Shaye Wolf, a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity and one of the primary authors of the petition. "The pika is adapted to life in the cold and thrives in the high-elevation mountain ranges of the western United States. As temperatures rise, pika populations at lower elevations are being driven to extinction, pushing the pika further upslope until there will be no where left for it to go."

The American pika, *Ochotona princeps*, is a small, furry mammal related to rabbits and hares whose squeaky calls are familiar companions to alpine hikers. Pikas live in the boulder fields and adjoining meadows of windswept mountain peaks, where they spend summers diligently gathering bundles of flowers and grasses to sustain them through the winter months. These "boulder bunnies," which weigh only a third of a pound, must collect over 60 pounds of vegetation to survive the winter.

Adapted to cold alpine conditions, pikas are intolerant of high temperatures and can die from overheating when exposed to temperatures as low as 80°F for just a few hours. Pikas avoid this lethal heat by seeking the cool crevices in the boulder fields where they live and by remaining inactive during warm periods; but they can only do this up to a point. Rising temperatures from global warming threaten pikas by shortening the period available for them to gather food, changing the types of plants in the alpine meadows where they forage, shrinking the area of their meadow foraging habitat, reducing protective insulating snowpack during winter, and, most directly, by causing the animals to die from overheating.

And with climate change this heat death zone is creeping higher up the mountains, jeopardizing the survival of the species. In the Great Basin mountains, researchers have

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found that the range of the American pika is retreating upslope at an accelerating pace as temperatures warm. More than a third of documented pika populations in the Great Basin have gone extinct in the past century, and those that remain are found an average of 900 feet further upslope. According to climate experts, temperatures in the western United States in this century will increase twice as much as they did in the past century and perhaps more. This level of warming threatens the continued survival of the pika and will prove particularly devastating for pikas living at lower elevations and lower latitudes of the west.

Today's petition asks the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to protect the pika from the worst impacts of global warming and from other threats to its high-elevation habitat. It triggers a several-step process to protect the pika, with an initial finding due in 90 days, followed by a year-long status review to determine if protection under the law is warranted. Because the Endangered Species Act requires all federal agencies to avoid actions that threaten the survival of species protected under the statute, listing the American pika will provide further impetus for the United States to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions.

"Our oil addiction is driving the American pika and many other species to extinction," said Wolf. "The pika's survival hinges on achieving immediate reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, but we're running out of time." The American pika joins the polar bear, penguins, and corals in a growing group of species imperiled by global warming for which the Center for Biological Diversity is pursuing federal protection.

Further information, including the petition, is available at <http://www.biologicaldiversity.org>.

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