

# Feds review mountain-dwelling pika for threatened-species list

August 31 2009, By Lynda V. Mapes

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Pikas don't ask much. With brave squeaks, belted out from atop their rock piles, they defend their realm in the talus slopes way up here in the mountains, more than a mile in the sky, far from anyone, anywhere.

Yet even in their remote realm, the small, furry pika, a close relative of the rabbit, may be affected by humans.

Some wildlife advocates warn that pikas, with their preference for the cool, lofty high country, are at risk of extinction throughout the West by the end of the century as the climate warms. They have sued the feds to determine whether the animal should be listed for protection under the [Endangered Species Act](#).

But others say losses of some local populations don't spell [extinction](#) risk for an animal still abundant in many places.

A decision is due from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service by February.

Meanwhile, in a separate effort, scientists are studying pika populations at North Cascades National Park, in a first-ever, one-year pilot study funded by Seattle City Light, which tracks habitat in the North Cascades, where it operates hydroelectric dams. The study is intended to build a baseline of data about where pika are presently found.

"[Climate change](#) is the biggest issue facing our national parks," said Chip Jenkins, park superintendent. "Scientists have determined that our

climate is changing, and it is changing rapidly. What we are doing is looking for key indicators, key species that are likely to be the ones that show the first response to climate change."

To many scientists, pikas are a perfect study candidate because they are sensitive to temperature. They can be killed by temperatures higher than 78 degrees Fahrenheit, and prefer the rugged, rocky habitat found typically, but not exclusively, at higher elevations.

*Ochotona princeps* spend their summers gathering and stowing vegetation in great haypiles in their homes in the crevices between rocks. There are 36 recognized American pika subspecies in North America, 31 of which live in islands of unconnected habitat flung across nine of the western United States, including Washington and Oregon.

The pikas' signature call is a one-note squeak, blurted out to sound an alert, or defend their territory. Sweet-faced, with round ears and egg-shaped, furry bodies, pikas have cute down cold.

Adapting to a warming world could be a challenge for the pika, however. Erik Beever of the U.S. Geological Survey has found seven of 25 populations of pika reported earlier in the 20th century in the Great Basin appear to be lost. He thinks climate is the primary driver.

Shaye Wolf of the Center for Biological Diversity, headquartered in San Francisco, which sued to force the feds to consider listing, links population losses with climate change, and fears more to come.

"The loss of pika really shows that climate is impacting wildlife in our own backyard," Wolf said. "It's happening right now; it is not a distance problem for our grandchildren to worry about."

But other scientists caution that while pika are an excellent indicator

species to study, localized losses don't mean the animals are doomed.

"It is not a question of them running off the tops of summits until there is no more space," said Connie Millar, a senior research scientist for the U.S. Forest Service, based in Albany, Calif. Pika have turned up in abundance in her own surveys in the East Sierra, south of Lake Tahoe. "I don't see any evidence of their decline in this region," Millar said.

In the advocates' claim for listing, Andrew Smith of Arizona State University sees a case of going overboard, and extending implications from limited studies.

In his own work in Bodie, Calif., begun in 1969, Smith said he found pika capable of adapting to temperature swings by haying at night, instead of during the day, if it is too warm. He also has found the animals at low elevations, where they were not documented previously, complicating the theory that pikas are being chased relentlessly upslope.

"We really think pikas are at risk, and we should learn more about them, and be monitoring them at lower elevations," Smith said. "They should tell us an incredible amount about climate change. But they are not endangered."

Jason Bruggeman of Beartooth Wildlife Research in Farmington, Minn., is the researcher leading the study of pika populations at North Cascades National Park. So far this summer, he's investigated pika populations in 17 areas and found pika in 14 of them. "They definitely are widely distributed," Bruggeman said. His survey work will continue into September.

The population survey is intended to help the park build an ongoing inventory of the park's vital signs, including a review of the status of land birds, subalpine vegetation, mountain lake ecology, amphibian

populations, and more.

Jenkins, the park superintendent, says pika matter. "They are the icon of the wild high country.

"It's pretty cool that any kid could come up to the Cascades now and go to Easy Pass, or Cascade Pass, and they will hear that screech, and see that animal, just as people have for the last 100 years. What if we lost that? What happens if my kids' kids don't get to hear or see that? We lose something important. We lose a symbol of the park, of the wild Cascades."

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## FACTS

American Pika

Pronunciation: PIE-ka

Size: About 7 inches long, with no visible tail

Local habitat: typically talus slopes at alpine and subalpine areas in the Cascades.

Near relative: rabbit

Predators: weasel, ermine, eagle, fox

Fun facts: Pikas spend their days haying -- cutting vegetation and caching it for winter food supply -- and musing on their rocks. They don't hibernate, but rather forage under the snow for lichen and other food, to supplement feeding from their stored haypiles.

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