

Roads and salt pushing evolution of species



Brine leaves streaks on the road at the end of North Upper Truckee Road toward Highway 50. Photo/John Adamski

By Jason Daley, Sierra

Over the course of millions of years, environmental pressures push species to adapt, leading to a new tail shape, a striped color scheme, or a taste for eucalyptus leaves. But in the last couple decades, researchers have found that evolution isn't just a slow invisible hand molding dinosaurs into birds.

“Contemporary evolution” is also happening at a scale that is easily observable in a human lifetime, and some of those changes are actually driven by humans. In fact, a new study explores how one of humanity's biggest footprints, the massive system of roads that crisscross earth, are driving evolution in the plants and animals that live near them.

That's not to say roads are creating new species in front of our eyes. Instead, they are driving localized adaptations that take place in relatively isolated populations.

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