

American pika disappears from large area of Sierra

By Tim Stephens, UC Santa Cruz

The American pika, a small mammal adapted to high altitudes and cold temperatures, has died out from a 64-square-mile span of habitat in California's northern Sierra Nevada mountains, and the cause appears to be climate change, according to a study published Aug. 30 in PLOS One.

Researchers surveyed pika habitat throughout the North Lake Tahoe area and found that pikas had disappeared from an area that stretches from near Tahoe City to Truckee, more than 10 miles away, and includes Mount Pluto. This local extinction is the largest area of pika extinction yet reported for the modern era.

"The loss of pikas from this large area of otherwise suitable habitat echoes prehistoric range collapses that happened when temperatures increased after the last ice age," said lead author Joseph Stewart, a doctoral candidate at UC Santa Cruz. "This time, however, we're seeing the effects of climate change unfold on a scale of decades as opposed to millennia."

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