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## A Rabbit on the Run

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by Eric Bailey

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You've probably never seen one let alone heard of it, but the tiny American pika might soon become the little bunny that roared.

A small relative of the rabbit, the pika dwells among alpine boulder fields of the Sierra and other high-altitude ranges, and as such is wonderfully adapted to life in cold climates. But with global warming raising mountain temperatures, it is a creature running out of room.

The Center for Biological Diversity and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today reached a settlement agreement that might provide a spotlight, if not help.

Under the settlement, federal authorities must determine by May whether the pika warrants listing as a federally protected endangered species. If the answer is yes, the little creature — which emits a squeaky call familiar to alpine hikers — probably would be formally placed on the list by early 2010.

That would make it a poster child of sorts as the first mammal in the lower 48 states needing federal protection due to global warming.

A third of the pika populations in the mountains of Nevada and Oregon have become extinct in the last century as temperatures warmed. Those that remain in Western states are found 900 feet further upslope. With predictions that U.S. temperatures will rise twice as fast this century as they did over the last 100 years, experts fear the creature could disappear from huge swaths of the American West.

Warm temperatures can literally cause the critters to die of overheating. Climate change also threatens to reduce the insulating winter snowpack they depend on and probably will shorten the foraging season for an animal that weighs just a third of a pound but collects more than 60 pounds of vegetation to survive the winter.

“Global warming has hit home in the lower 48 states, and this is our chance to act,” said Gregory C. Loarie, an attorney with Earthjustice, an environmental law firm involved in the issue. “If we lose the pika to climate change, we can expect other species to follow.”

What remains unclear is what benefits endangered species protections could bring to the pika. Like polar bears threatened by melting sea ice linked to global warming, the av-



Photo: Center for Biological Diversity

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enues of change needed to protect the pika sometimes seem bigger than the globe we share with them.