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# 1 Long-runout pyroclastic density currents: analysis and implications

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## 11 12 13 **ABSTRACT**

14  
15 Pyroclastic density currents are hazardous, ground-hugging hot mixtures of gas and solid particles  
16 produced by volcanoes. Currents generated by the largest explosive eruptions have traveled distances  
17 on the order of 100 km, and their devastating impact has repeatedly marked Earth's geologic history.  
18 We show that pyroclastic density currents from super-eruptions during the Oligocene in the Great Basin  
19 of the United States had exceptional runout distances that may have exceeded 300 km. We present a  
20 quantitative analysis of the data from these currents and consider, in particular, the areal extent of their  
21 deposits (ignimbrites) as well as the relationship between their runout and the eruption mass discharge  
22 rate. The ignimbrites have elliptical distributions characterized by axis length ratios of ~2-6, in contrast  
23 to common subcircular ignimbrites, while the maximum runouts versus the discharge rates are clearly  
24 outside the prediction intervals defined by other eruption data. We argue that the long runouts resulted  
25 from the channeling of concentrated currents in regional paleovalleys whose gentle slope worked to  
26 lengthen the travel distance. Our study demonstrates that these additional factors should be considered  
27 in assessing hazards posed by future super-eruptions.

## 28 29 30 **INTRODUCTION**

31  
32 Pyroclastic density currents (PDCs) that propagate over distances on the order of 100 km are  
33 generated by the most powerful explosive volcanic eruptions (Wilson et al., 1995; Streck and Grunder,  
34 1995; Kaneko et al., 2007; Best et al., 2013; Henry and John, 2013; Roche et al., 2016; Cisneros de León  
35 et al., 2021). These gravity-driven hot mixtures of gas and solid particles are major natural hazards  
36 because of the large areas they devastate, the amounts of ash they disperse into the atmosphere, and their  
37 environmental consequences (Self, 2006). The particle transport mechanisms, which operate according  
38 to the solid concentration ( $\phi$ ) increasing downwards and varying over several orders of magnitude, lead  
39 to two types of PDCs (Lube et al., 2020): (1) dilute currents ( $\phi < \sim 1$  vol. %) in which the turbulent gas  
40 transports particles except in a basal bedload (Andrews and Manga, 2012; Brosch and Lube, 2020;  
41 Dellino et al., 2021), and (2) two-layer currents (Shimizu et al., 2019) consisting of a concentrated basal  
42 flow ( $\phi > \sim 30$  vol.%) with dynamics controlled by particle interactions and gas pore pressure, which can  
43 be fed by a dilute turbulent upper part through settling clusters of intermediate concentrations (Breard  
44 et al., 2016). Recent advances suggest that this dichotomy may originate in the collapse dynamics of  
45 eruptive fountains (Valentine, 2020). We refer to these two types of currents as “dilute” and  
46 “concentrated” PDCs herein.

47 Earlier studies showed that the eruption mass discharge rate (MDR) is the fundamental parameter  
48 controlling the runout of PDCs (Dade and Huppert, 1995; Bursik and Woods, 1996; Esposti Ongaro et  
49 al., 2008; Roche et al., 2021) while increasing total volume of material expelled (positively correlated  
50 with MDR; Roche et al., 2021) causes thicker deposits. PDCs with runout distances  $> 100$  km are  
51 generated by eruptions with the highest known eruptive rates ( $\sim 10^{10}$ - $10^{11}$  kg/s) and are mostly associated  
52 with caldera formation (Giordano and Cas, 2021). Other parameters such as particle settling velocity  
53 and topography also control the runout of dilute and concentrated PDCs, respectively.

54 We investigated long-runout PDCs by analyzing the runout as a function of the MDR, using the  
55 database and following the approach of Roche et al. (2021). We focused our analysis on concentrated

56 PDCs, including those that formed the ignimbrite flareup of the Great Basin (Best et al., 2013; Henry  
57 and John, 2013) for which we present new runout estimates, including one estimate >300 km. Herein,  
58 we use simplified names (e.g., Pahrnagat) to designate ignimbrites and parent PDCs.

## 60 GREAT BASIN IGNIMBRITES

61  
62 Oligocene (23.0-31.7 Ma) ignimbrites of the Great Basin are predominantly rhyolites (Best et al.,  
63 2013; Henry and John, 2013). Source calderas were on a high ( $\geq 3$  km) plateau (Cassel et al., 2012) with  
64 a north-south paleodivide in east-central Nevada, USA (Fig. 1A). The parent PDCs mostly flowed in  
65 deep, wide (0.6-1 $\times$ 8-10 km) paleovalleys (Fig. 1B), particularly down valley to the west, and commonly  
66 across the Great Basin – Sierra Nevada structural-topographic boundary, which did not exist at the time,  
67 to the Pacific Ocean, which was then in the Great Valley of California (Supplemental Material).  
68 Ignimbrite correlation, which is based on stratigraphy, phenocryst assemblage, composition, remnant  
69 magnetization, and especially precise  $^{40}\text{Ar}/^{39}\text{Ar}$  dates, demonstrates that at least seven PDCs flowed  
70 more than 200 km from their source, and the Pahrnagat flowed more than 300 km (Fig. 1; Table S1 in  
71 the Supplemental Material; all distances are corrected for post-emplacement extension). Almost all  
72 deposits are massive and densely to moderately welded even in the most distal outcrops, mostly lack  
73 associated stratified deposits, and – based on detailed and reconnaissance mapping – were confined to  
74 the deepest parts of paleovalleys, which indicates that they formed from concentrated flows (Fig. S1,  
75 Supplemental Material). Upper, poorly welded zones are rarely preserved because they were fluvially  
76 eroded in the paleovalleys from 0.1 Ma to >1.0 Ma between ignimbrite emplacement. Near their source,  
77 most PDCs spread short distances north or south perpendicular to major paleovalleys and entered only  
78 one or two west-draining paleovalleys. Two ignimbrites, Nine Hill and Campbell Creek (Fig. 1), spread  
79 considerably farther north and south and are found in as many as five major east-west paleovalleys in  
80 the Sierra Nevada. This may be because some tributaries are N-S oriented, valleys of any orientation  
81 were not deep near the paleodivide and source calderas – so avulsion of concentrated parts of the  
82 voluminous PDCs was possible – and/or some deposits could have been formed from dilute parts of the  
83 PDCs that crossed topographic barriers.

84 Aspect ratios (mean thickness over diameter of a circular deposit of equivalent area) of the Great  
85 Basin ignimbrites are close to, but higher than, the threshold value of  $\sim 5 \times 10^{-5}$  given by Roche et al.  
86 (2021) and therefore indicate concentrated parent PDCs (Fig. 2), which is consistent with the  
87 sedimentological characteristics and deposit architecture. Note that the area of the Great Basin  
88 ignimbrites, which is delimited from peripheral outcrops, is overestimated due to confinement of the  
89 parent currents in regional paleovalleys. Hence, the aspect ratios we give are minimum estimates and  
90 the real values should be more in the field of concentrated PDCs.

91 A particularity of the Great Basin ignimbrites is their elliptical distribution around their respective  
92 source calderas (Fig. 3). We quantify this asymmetry using the ratio  $R_{\text{max}}/R$  of the maximum runout over  
93 the mean runout in sub-perpendicular directions (Fig. 3A). All ignimbrites (except Peach Spring) in the  
94 database of Roche et al. (2021) are characterized by  $R_{\text{max}}/R < 1.5$ , which we consider to be the upper  
95 threshold value for subcircular deposits. In contrast, the elliptical Great Basin ignimbrites have ratios  
96 significantly above this threshold (Fig. 3B). They are elongated in a broadly east-west direction that runs  
97 parallel to the regional valleys during PDC emplacement. The maximum runouts are always west of the  
98 calderas, consistent with the regional slope (Henry et al., 2012; their Fig. 8). However, in some cases  
99 (Campbell Creek, Nine Hill, Rattlesnake Canyon, and Underdown), PDCs also traveled long distances  
100 ( $\sim 130$ -200 km) eastward, probably because the calderas were close to the paleodivide and in the middle  
101 of the relatively flat plateau (Henry and John, 2013; Cassel et al., 2012). Some Great Basin ignimbrites  
102 have less elliptical distributions (i.e.,  $R_{\text{max}}/R$  close to  $\sim 1.5$ ) based on known outcrops. However,  
103 incomplete mapping in the east-central part of Fig. 1 limits interpretation (see the Supplemental  
104 Material).

## 106 ANALYSIS OF LONG RUNOUT DISTANCES

107  
108 Fig. 4 shows the relationship between PDC runout,  $R$ , and mass discharge rate,  $Q$ . The cases with  
109 MDRs known from previous studies permit us to determine well-defined power law relationships (with  
110 coefficients of determination  $> 0.91$ ) and prediction intervals that delineate the respective fields of

111 concentrated or dilute PDCs (Roche et al., 2021). Note that for concentrated PDCs, the relationship  
112  $R=71\times 10^{-4}\times Q^{0.360}$  that we present is slightly different from that given by Roche et al. (2021;  $R=55\times 10^{-4}\times Q^{0.373}$ )  
113 because Kidnappers (Wilson et al., 1995) and Rattlesnake ignimbrites (Streck and Grunder,  
114 1995; not to be confused with Rattlesnake Canyon, which we present in this study) are ignored and we  
115 define an average runout  $R=81$  km (instead of 117 km) for Peach Spring due to the elliptical shape of  
116 the ignimbrite (Roche et al., 2016; Supplemental Material).

117 For concentrated PDCs, the data for 40 subcircular ignimbrites for which we estimated the MDR  
118 using a statistical fit to their bulk volumes (Supplemental Material) are all within the 99% prediction  
119 intervals (Fig. 4A), which supports the hypothesis that the parent currents were concentrated. The mean  
120 runouts of the elliptical Great Basin ignimbrites are also within these intervals except for those of Nine  
121 Hill and Underdown, which are slightly outside. On the other hand, the  $R_{\max}$  values are clearly outside  
122 the field of concentrated PDCs, and most currents are even outside that of dilute PDCs. This is also the  
123 case for the subcircular Kidnappers and Rattlesnake ignimbrites whose shape, low aspect ratios and long  
124 runouts are compatible with the emplacement of dilute PDCs. However, in both cases elongated  
125 substrate masses in the ignimbrites (Wilson et al., 1995; Streck and Grunder, 1995) suggest erosion by  
126 concentrated basal flows (cf. Roche et al., 2016). The broad welding of the Rattlesnake ignimbrite  
127 further supports the emplacement of hot concentrated PDCs, at least in proximal and medial areas. In  
128 this context, the most distal deposits could have been formed by the dilute upper part of the currents  
129 traveling farther than the concentrated basal flow. To explain the long runout distance of  $\sim 185$  km of  
130 Kidnappers PDCs, Wilson et al. (1995) proposed that the currents travelled over a wet substrate of an  
131 early phreatomagmatic fall material and boiled the water, which was a source of gas that fluidized the  
132 (concentrated) basal flow. Note that MDRs inferred from bulk volumes may be underestimated;  
133 however, the MDRs required for the  $R_{\max}$  data to be in the field of concentrated PDCs appear to be  
134 unrealistic.

135 The Great Basin ignimbrites show that concentrated PDCs can travel distances of up to  $\sim 300$  km  
136 (i.e. Pahrnagat), approximately about three times farther than the maximum runouts reported for dilute  
137 currents. Given our data, it appears that large, draining paleovalleys are a major cause of the exceptional  
138 runouts of these PDCs. A lower MDR analog is the AD 1912 CE Katmai (Alaska, USA) eruption, during  
139 which concentrated PDCs were confined to a valley (Fierstein and Hildreth, 1992). Interestingly, the  
140  $\sim 19$  km runout at Katmai is close to the upper limit of concentrated PDCs at the same MDR of  $\sim 10^9$  kg/s  
141 (Fig. 4A), suggesting that runout enhancement was caused by flow confinement. Another key parameter  
142 to explain the long runouts is the regional slope (Lindsay et al., 2001) although the correlation is not  
143 systematic (Cas et al., 2011). In fact, recent simulations of dense, metric-scale gas-particle flows,  
144 analogous to concentrated PDCs, show that the slope increases the runout distance by a factor of  $\sim 1.2$   
145 at  $3^\circ$  to  $\sim 2.2$  at  $10^\circ$  relative to the horizontal (Aravena et al., 2021). As discussed by Aravena et al., this  
146 runout increase would be even greater in nature because high gas pore pressure would be maintained for  
147 longer durations than at a smaller length scale.

148 The data for the four dilute PDCs with volume-inferred MDR are within their corresponding field  
149 (Fig. 4B). All of the data are also outside the field of the concentrated currents, except for that of the  
150 Neapolitan Yellow Tuff lower member (Scarpati et al., 2015), for which a dilute, turbulent emplacement  
151 is nonetheless supported by the deposit aspect ratio (Fig. 2) and by field evidence. The parent currents  
152 of the Ata and Aso 4I-1 ignimbrites have runouts of 92 km and 88 km, respectively (Kaneko et al.,  
153 2007), which are close to the maximum distance known for dilute PDCs ( $\sim 125$  km at Los Chocoyos;  
154 Cisneros de León et al., 2021). The dilute nature of the Ata PDCs is supported by the presence of an  
155 underlying ground-layer such as was described for the Taupo (New Zealand; Walker et al., 1981) and  
156 Campanian (Italy; Scarpati et al., 2015) ignimbrites and which is thought to result from the efficient  
157 segregation of coarse particles in the head and/or base of a turbulent current. The Aso 4I-1 ignimbrite  
158 ( $R=88$  km,  $V_{\text{bulk}}=60$  km<sup>3</sup>, inferred MDR =  $1.1\times 10^{10}$  kg/s) has characteristics similar to those of Taupo  
159 (Wilson et al, 1985; 80 km, 30 km<sup>3</sup>,  $5.3\times 10^{10}$  kg/s) but also has a welded valley-pond facies. The latter  
160 suggests that the Aso 4I-1 PDCs may have emplaced as particular two-layer currents driven by a dilute  
161 upper suspension as proposed by Roche et al. (2021) for Taupo (which has no welded facies), but with  
162 more efficient heat retention and/or less effective entrainment of ambient air given the similar  
163 temperatures of the respective magmas, i.e. 810-850°C for Aso 4I-1 (Kaneko et al., 2007) and 840-  
164 860°C for Taupo (Smith et al., 2005).

165

## 166 CONCLUSION

167  
168 Our study shows that dilute turbulent PDCs, whose propagation is generally independent of  
169 topography and limited by buoyancy reversal due to entrainment and heating of the ambient air  
170 (Andrews and Manga, 2012), have runouts that rarely exceed ~100 km. In contrast, concentrated PDCs  
171 can travel much longer distances. This is primarily due to high MDRs of typically  $>10^{10}$  kg/s and  
172 sustained high gas pore pressure (Roche et al., 2016). Apart from specific conditions of flow  
173 emplacement (cf. Kidnappers ignimbrite), the example of the Great Basin ignimbrites shows that  
174 channelization of concentrated flows in regional valleys, even with gentle slopes, is an essential factor  
175 in enhancing the runout distance. It must be also kept in mind that the dilute parts of two-layer PDCs  
176 may impact even larger areas. The (minimum) runouts of up to ~300 km that we report show that the  
177 PDCs generated during past super-eruptions are natural hazards with consequences are beyond any  
178 human experience. However, these events are not that rare since the last super-eruptions occurred 7.3  
179 k.y., 25.4 k.y., and 75 k.y. ago, respectively at Kikai (Japan), Oruanui (New Zealand) and Toba  
180 (Indonesia); Miller and Wark (2008, p. 14) state: "the probability of a super-eruption in our lifetime is  
181 not zero." Future super-eruptions at locations where the present-day combination of volcanic activity  
182 and topography is similar to that of the Great Basin in the Oligocene would have dramatic consequences.  
183 Likely sites include Yellowstone (USA), Campi Flegrei (Italy), Taupo volcanic zone (New-Zealand),  
184 Laguna del Maule volcanic field (Andes), and Aso (Japan). Anticipating these extreme events with  
185 appropriate simulation tools is an immense challenge for the scientific community (Esposti Ongaro et  
186 al., 2020).

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195  
196  
197 We present supplementary figures, detailed information on the Great Basin ignimbrites and the  
198 paleovalleys, a summary of the database and the characteristics of the pyroclastic density currents, and  
199 the statistical model we use.

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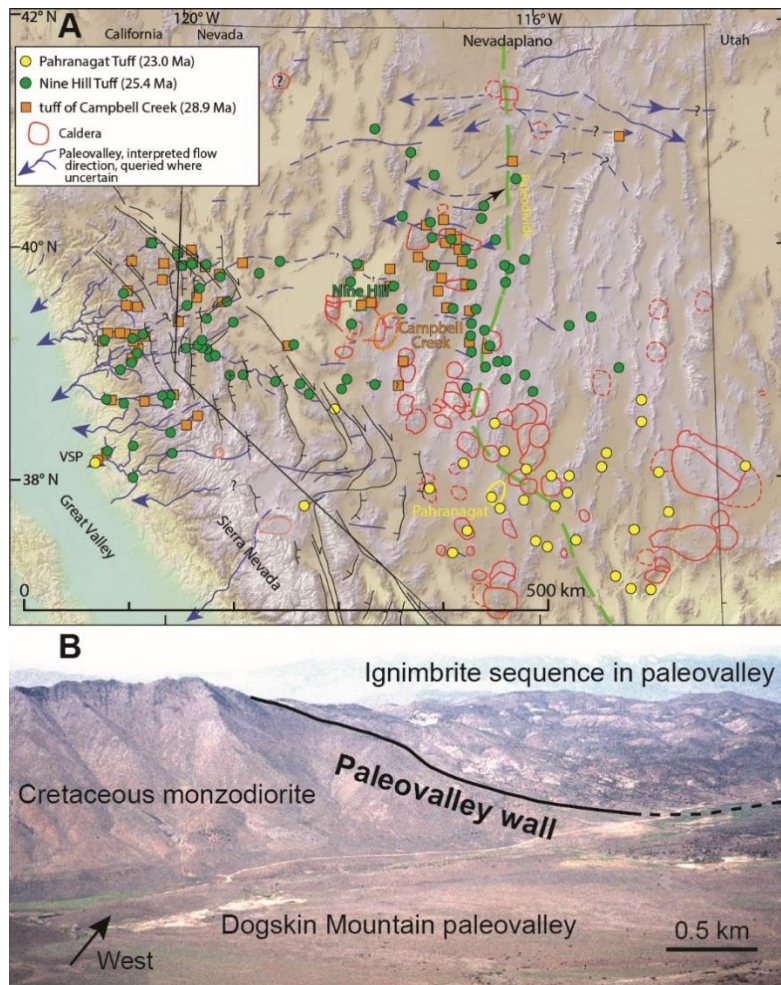
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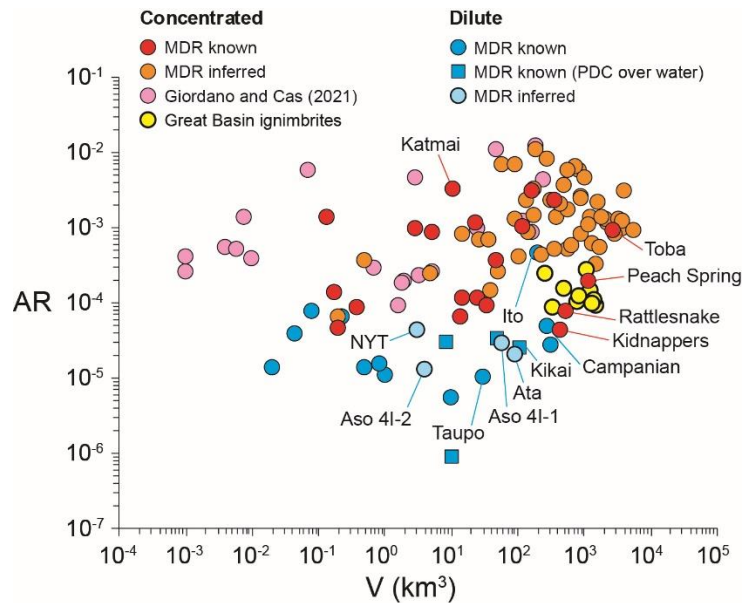
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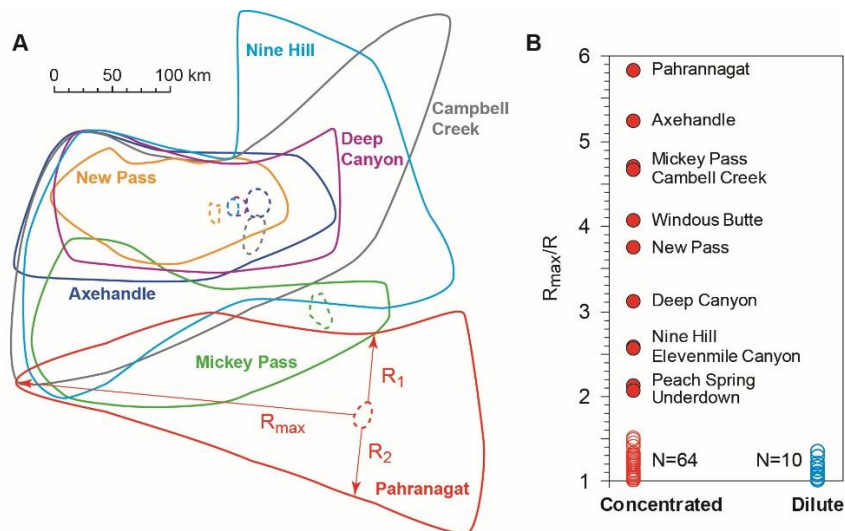


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297 **Figure 1.** (A) Paleovalley systems and calderas of the Great Basin and Sierra Nevada (Henry and John,  
298 2013; and references therein). Parent pyroclastic density currents of the 28.9 Ma Campbell Creek, 25.4  
299 Ma Nine Hill and 23.0 Ma Pahranaagat ignimbrites flowed ~228 km, ~285 km and ~314 km, respectively,  
300 westward from their source calderas (distances were corrected for post-emplacment extension, see  
301 Supplemental Material). VSP: Valley Springs Peak. (B) Aerial view westward to paleovalley partly  
302 filled with a sequence of 18 separate ignimbrites in western Nevada (Henry et al., 2004). Paleovalley is  
303 ~0.7 km deep and >7 km wide (north end is faulted).  
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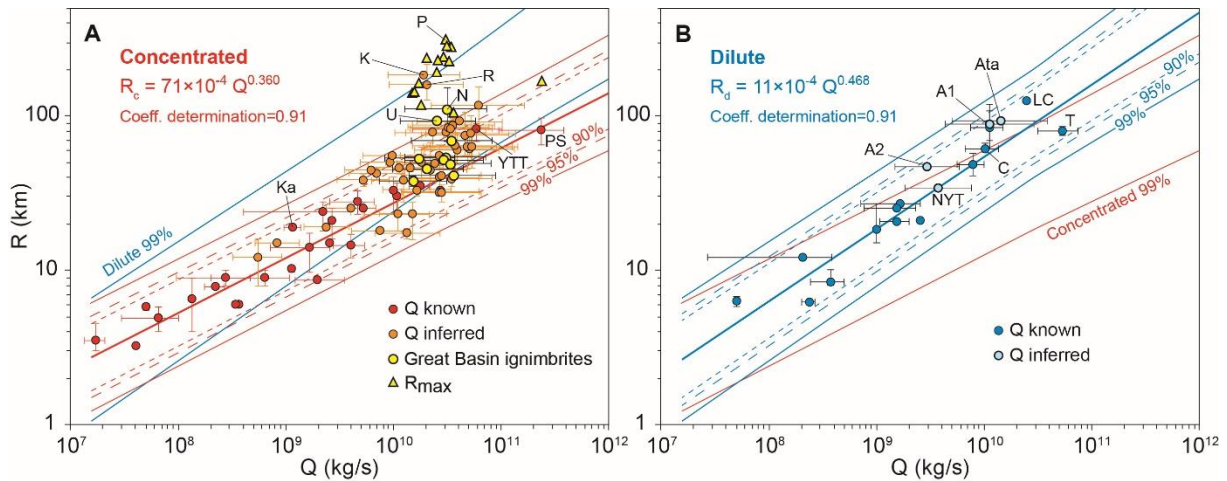


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 307 **Figure 2.** Aspect-ratio (AR) as a function of bulk volume ( $V$ ) of outflow ignimbrite. We distinguish the  
 308 cases of parent-concentrated or dilute pyroclastic density currents (PDCs), for which the mass discharge  
 309 rates (MDR) are known from earlier studies or inferred from our analysis (Supplemental Material; Table  
 310 S2), are distinguished. The ignimbrites discussed in the main text are indicated (NYT: Neapolitan  
 311 Yellow Tuff). The specific case of Ito was discussed by Roche et al. (2021).  
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 315 **Figure 3.** (A) Simplified map view of some Great Basin ignimbrites (detailed maps are provided in the  
 316 Supplementary Material). Relative latitudes are true and distances have been corrected for E-W  
 317 extension. Dashed polygons represent the source calderas. (B) Ratio of the maximum runout,  $R_{max}$ , to  
 318 the mean runout,  $R=(R_1+R_2)/2$  as defined in panel A, for ignimbrites formed by concentrated or dilute  
 319 pyroclastic density currents ( $N$ –number of ignimbrites, data from Roche et al., 2021; Supplemental  
 320 Material; Table S2). The Great Basin and the Peach Spring ignimbrites are distinguished from  
 321 subcircular ignimbrites by  $R_{max}/R>1.5$ .  
 322





323  
 324 **Figure 4.** pyroclastic density currents (PDC) runout,  $R$ , as a function of the mass discharge rate,  $Q$ , for  
 325 (A) concentrated and (B) dilute PDCs. Power law relationships and prediction intervals of 90%, 95%  
 326 and 99% are determined from eruptions for which the mass discharge rates are known (Roche et al.,  
 327 2021). For the other eruptions,  $Q$  is inferred from ignimbrite bulk volume estimates, and 95% confidence  
 328 error bars are given (Supplemental Material). For the Great Basin and Peach Spring ignimbrites,  $R$  is  
 329 the mean runout in directions sub-perpendicular to those of the maximum runout  $R_{max}$ . The cases  
 330 discussed in the main text are indicated: (A) Ka: Katmai, K: Kidnappers, N: Nine Hill, P: Pahranagat,  
 331 PS: Peach Spring, R: Rattlesnake (Streck and Grunder, 1995), U: Underdown, YTT: Young Toba tuff;  
 332 (B) A1: Aso 4I-1, A2: Aso 4I-2, C: Campanian, LC: Los Chocoyos, NYT: Neapolitan Yellow tuff, T:  
 333 Taupo.  
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