

What is a pika?



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

A pika is a critter that lives in the high country, at or above timberline. Many of us have never seen one, or thought it was something else when you did. I have only seen a couple in all my time in the high country, perhaps because I was looking for something much bigger and with horns.

This tiny creature measures up to 8 inches long and weighs in at a whopping 4 to 7 ounces at maturity. They have a furry and round shaped body with short legs and no visible tails. Each foot has five digits that are good for gripping the rocks on the talus slopes where they live.

The pika is a member of the *Ochotona princeps* family, to the order Lagomorpha. That order includes rabbits and hares, which is much easier for me to relate to over that scientific classification. Even though related to rabbits, to me, they look more like a hamster.

Pikas live in the Rocky Mountains, mostly above timberline. They prefer those steep and very loose talus slopes that are difficult for a human to traverse. The majority of the habitat they populate is devoid of roads, grazing and other human activity. Pikas prefer no contact with humans.

Leaves, grass stems and shrubs make up around 75 to 85 percent of the diet of a pika. Occasionally they will eat clover, conifer needles and woody bark. They use their chisel like teeth, similar to that of a beaver, to gnaw through the tough vegetation.

One would suspect any creature that spends its life at such an altitude would hibernate away the colder months, but such is not the case. Pikas spend the warm months gathering vegetation to sustain them through the long and harsh Colorado winters.

As the vegetation is collected, it is spread over the rocks, to allow the sun to cure it for storage. After curing, the vegetation is stacked into piles and stored under the rocks for winter.

A study once found that a pile of gathered food stash weighed 61 pounds. Some stashes can cover an area of up to 100 square yards, easily reaching over 2 feet high. A stash of cured food can contain over 30 species of plants, so they sure are not picky eaters.

In order to accomplish this storage feat, a pika is a busy critter. Studies found that one pika makes 14,000 foraging trips during a 10-week period. That equates to around 25 trips an hour during the daylight. I question the sanity of a guy who spent 10 weeks watching a pika work.

To sustain that level of high activity, a pika eats up to nine times a day. When he is not working, he is eating. Sounds like a pretty good workout plan to me.

Pikas are a very territorial animal. They



are known to have territory disputes with other pika and get involved in chases and fights. Hard to imagine a fight between a couple of quarter pound-animals, but I bet it is interesting to watch.

It can be very difficult to see one of these elusive and tiny creatures. You have a better chance of hearing one. Pika emit a loud and sharp squeak, similar to a squeaky toy. This squeak can be “thrown” similar to that of a ventriloquist, making it very difficult to identify the origin of the sound.

When danger is present, a pika can whistle to alert the other members of the colony. This warns the members to take immediate cover in the safety of the nearby rocks.

Breeding time for the pika is in the early spring. A pika can have two litters, but only one usually survives. The mother gives birth to an average of three babies, who are born hairless and blind after 30 days.

The young pika matures rapidly, being full grown by 6 weeks. The young are able to establish their own territory before their first winter. In the wild, a pika can reach 7 years of age.

A study in 2003 found that the pika was in trouble. Researchers believe that global warming was causing the furry critters to disappear in Nevada’s Great Basin, but found that the Colorado pika was well distributed.

Scientists call the pika a “climate change indicator species.” That means shifts in their populations tell us something about how climate change is affecting the mountain ecosystems that give us our water.

Pikas do really well when there is lots of snow and ice under the talus rocks where they live. When that snowpack is lost, because of warming or drought, that affects us as well because we depend on that same water.



(Top) Pika making his way across the rocks. These shy creatures live in the Colorado high country and spend most of their time eating or storing food to eat later. (Above) A pika with a mouthful of greens that he is storing up for the cold months. (Photos courtesy of CPW)

Loss of habitat for the pika can lead to loss of genetic diversity. This leads to inbreeding, causing them to become less resilient to the harsh winters and the heat of the summer. This loss of resilience occurs quickly, as in a few decades.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW) has established a long-term monitoring program for the pika. CPW lists the pika as a protected nongame mammal, even though the pika is not officially listed as endangered species.

CPW has identified over 900 occupied sites where the pika lives, and continues to monitor their habitats at 30 established sites around the state. The most recent report,

in 2015, found the pika to be doing well in Colorado, for now.

Global warming over the coming years will challenge many animals, including man. I hope that the Colorado animals weather the storm well. Next time I am in the high country, I am going to spend a bit more time looking for a pika.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press and avid hunter who travels across North and South America in search of adventure and serves as a Director for the Montrose County Sheriff’s Posse. For information about the Posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org



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If you can stand it...

...here is another puppy story. What do you get when you leave the puppy (now 72 lb. at 9 months old) at home for an hour to test trustworthiness? Why, you discover that said puppy likes to shred paper! We are talking about a ream of paper dragged off a lower shelf and shredded to bits. Or the waste paper basket from my husband’s office found on the puppy’s bed surrounded by another snowstorm of paper. Do you have any idea just how many gazillions of shredded pieces are in one 8.5 X 11.5 sheet of paper? It’s a rhetorical question...you really don’t want to know!

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