

American Pika

Ochotona princeps

By Els Van Woert

Also known as rock rabbits and whistling hares, American pikas are small mammals familiar to those who ramble in Montana's high-altitude backcountry. If lucky, a hiker might witness late-summer "haying," when pikas cut alpine vegetation with their teeth and stack it near their burrow entrances. To collect enough food to survive winter in the mountains, pikas make up to 100 trips in one day. At times, overly hasty pikas will even try to "hay" backpack straps and rock-climbing ropes.

DESCRIPTION American pikas look much like gerbils. Both males and females have white-edged ears and thick, gray-brown fur peppered with cinnamon-buff hairs. They have short legs, almost no tail, and egg-shaped bodies 6 to 8½ inches long.

Pikas also resemble their rabbit and hare cousins, but have smaller bodies and shorter, rounder ears. Like rabbits and hares, pikas are herbivores and have four upper incisors to chew plant material. Pikas eat hay, grass, leaves, flowers, bark, roots, and fruit. Like rabbits and hares, pikas eat their own soft, vitamin B-rich droppings to help digest the cellulose they consume.

Only two of the world's twenty-five pika species live outside of Asia, where they most likely originated. Scientists believe that pikas migrated across the Bering land bridge between Russia and Alaska during a glaciation period when the two continents were linked, perhaps as long as 30 million years ago. As temperatures warmed, the cold-loving pikas sought alpine habitats. Over time, various populations became geographically isolated from one another. Biologists now believe there are 36 different American pika subspecies inhabiting the United States and southern British Columbia.

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DISTRIBUTION AND HABITAT American pikas live on boulder fields and scree slopes near meadows above tree line in the Intermountain West, including the Cascade and Sierra Nevada ranges of Washington, Oregon, and California, high areas in Nevada and Utah, and the Rockies from Colorado north through east-central Idaho, western Wyoming, and Montana. In Montana, pikas are found in all western and some central mountain ranges above 8,000 feet.

HABITS Pikas are active during the day, foraging, feeding, and watching for predators. In winter they tuck into rock burrows and consume the vegetation they cured and stored during summer. They do not hibernate, and on warm winter days sun themselves on rocks.

American pikas burrow alone and defend their feeding territories from one another. But if threatened by predators, pikas work as a team, making repeated, high-pitched calls to warn each other before diving into their burrows. (The name pika comes from the Russian word *pikat*, meaning "to squeak.") Sharp hearing, keen depth perception, and a wide field of vision help pikas escape eagles, hawks, coyotes, bobcats, foxes, weasels, and other predators.

BREEDING Pikas begin courting in May when males and females form pairs by cooing to each other from adjacent territories. The litters range from one to five young, which emerge from the den after a month and become fertile adults within a year. Pikas live an average of six years.

STATUS The American pika is an animal of cold, moist climates that can't survive in temperatures above 80 degrees. Scientists consider it the North American mammal most threatened by global warming. A 2003 report by the U.S. Geological Survey showed that more than 25 percent of local pika populations studied in the Sierra Nevadas east to the Rockies became extinct during the previous 20 years. Biologists say that if warming trends are not halted or reversed, American pikas could face extinction. 🐾

