

Natural Resources

[extension.usu.edu](http://extension.usu.edu)

November 2017

NR/Wildlife/2017-02pr

## The American Pika in Southern Utah

*Ethan Hammer and Nicki Frey*

Pikas (pronounced 'pie-ka' in the U.S.) are the smallest lagomorphs - members of the rabbit and hare family (Peri, 2012). While over 20 pika species live throughout Central Asia, North America is home to two members of the *Ochotona* family - the collared pika and the American pika. The collared pika inhabits Alaska and northern Canada; the American pika resides throughout the western United States and southwestern Canada (Smith, 1994).

American pikas resemble a cross between a rabbit and a hamster. They have large, rounded ears, no visible tail, and fur on the soles of their feet. Adults are 6 - 8.5" long and weigh about 4 oz. They are social animals, with several species living together in colonies. However, they are territorial of their nests and shelters, frequently making a call such as "eenk" or "ehh-ehh" to tell others where their territory is (Smith, 1994.) Pikas are often confused with a more common



American Pika (*Ochotona princeps*). Photo Credit: Ethan Hammer.

animal in the Western U.S., the yellow-bellied marmot (*Marmota flaviventris*). Both animals are active during the day and live in rocky terrain, but marmots are much larger, 18-28” long, weighing 5 – 10 lbs. (Burt & Grossenheider, 1964).

American pikas, as with many pika species, live in high elevation (8,000 – 13,500 feet) talus slopes. Talus slopes are mountain sides made of medium and large sized rocks, with little vegetation. Most vegetation is grass and flowers. Often grey, buff, or brown, the American pika sits camouflaged among the rocks, often unseen from predators such as weasels, hawks, and coyotes (Burt & Grossenheider, 1964).



An example of a talus slope on the Markagunt Plateau in southern Utah.  
Photo Credit: Ethan Hammer.

American pikas give birth to 2-6 young in May-June. A female may have a second litter later in the summer. They can live up to 7 years, eating the grass and green plants that grow among the slopes (Smith & Beaver, 2016.) Throughout the summer, pikas “cut” vegetation and lay it out on rocks to dry. Piles of drying vegetation can be as large as a bushel. Once the “hay” is dry, a pika will store its harvest deep in the rocks. Pikas do not hibernate, so they need this stored food to make it through the long alpine winter (Whitaker, 1997.)

### **Concerns for American Pika Populations**

American pikas have evolved to require cool alpine temperatures. Because of increasing temperatures in high elevation regions throughout the Western U.S., many talus slopes have become inhabitable to pikas. Their metabolism (i.e., heart rate) cannot adapt to regulate their body temperatures if summers become warm. Because they already live at high elevations, such as the tops of plateaus and mountains, pikas are often unable to migrate higher in elevation to avoid increasing temperatures. They have been known to die from heat stress if continually exposed to temperatures as high as 77 °F for less than 6 hours (Bonello, 2004.) Thus, with the



warming trend that has occurred in the western U.S., the population of American pikas has declined across their range in the last decade. If the population decline continues, the American pikas, an indicator species of increasing global temperatures, could be the first species to become extinct due to climate change (Yandow et al., 2015). Loss of pikas from talus slopes is detrimental to other animals because they form the basis of their ecosystem (Wilkening, 2015). For example, their hay piles often attract other animals to the area and provide a source of food. Additionally, they themselves are food for predators. Without them in the ecosystem, a valuable food source would be lost for both plant and meat eaters.

### **The American Pika in Cedar Breaks National Monument**

American pikas can be found in southern Utah; although their populations are limited to a few talus slopes on the higher mountains in the region. One such population can be found above the town of Brian Head, on the Markagunt Plateau. They used to be found throughout the plateau, including talus sloped areas within Cedar Breaks National Monument, about a mile from Brian Head Peak, however their populations are now limited to a few areas on the plateau.

Just beyond the north entrance of Alpine Pond Trail, there is a habitat suitable for pikas. This talus slope had been home to countless generations of pikas, but they have not been present since 2012. There is still a small population near Rattlesnake Trail, on the north side of the park. Vanishing from the park is not an uncommon act; pikas have “left” previously for reasons unknown. Even though the weather in the park is generally mild, with recorded temperatures never reaching 80 degrees, the United States Geological Survey is monitoring the slope’s temperature to determine if warming played a role in this pika population’s disappearance (B. Larsen, National Park Service, personal communication, July 2017).



An American pika is stretched, reaching for vegetation on a talus slope outside of Cedar Breaks National Monument east gate. Photo credit: Ethan Hammer.

## How You Can Help Monitor Pika at Cedar Breaks and Throughout Utah

If you do see a pika perched on a boulder or scurrying among the rocks, please remember that they are wild animals. **Do not** attempt to climb the slope to get closer because you can disrupt pika habitat and injure yourself on the unstable rocks. **Do** quietly observe the animal as the elusive pika may suddenly disappear under the talus, into its home. If you see a pika at Cedar Breaks, **do** report your sighting with a behavioral description to Cedar Breaks National Monument staff or fill out a brief rare-animal sighting form, which can be picked up at the fee booth or the visitor center at Point Supreme. If you see pikas anywhere in Utah, but not in the park, we would still like to know. Your reported sightings can help protect valuable pika habitat. You can contact the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources at [DWRcomment@utah.gov](mailto:DWRcomment@utah.gov), or contact Utah State University at [nicki.frey@usu.edu](mailto:nicki.frey@usu.edu)



An American pika sitting alert behind a rock outside of Cedar Breaks National Monument, southern Utah. Photo Credit: Ethan Hammer.

## References

- Burt, W. H., & Grossenheider, R. P. (1964). *A field guide to the mammals: field marks of all North American species found north of the Mexican boundary*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Bonello, J. (2004). Latest Census Finds More American Pika Populations Disappear as Climate Warms. Retrieved from <https://www.worldwildlife.org/press-releases/latest-census-finds-more-american-pika-populations-disappear-as-climate-warms>
- Peri, A. 2012. "Ochotona princeps" (On-line), Animal Diversity Web. Retrieved from [http://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Ochotona\\_princeps/](http://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Ochotona_princeps/)
- Smith, A. T. (1994). "Pika". Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/animal/pika>



- Smith, A. T., & Beever, E. (2016). *Ochotona princeps*. Retrieved from <http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/41267/0>
- Whitaker, J. O., Jr. (1997). *National Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Mammals*. New York: A. A. Knopf, Inc.
- Wilkening, J. L., Ray, C., Ramsay, N., & Klinger, K. (2015). Alpine biodiversity and assisted migration: the case of the American pika (*Ochotona princeps*). *Biodiversity* 16: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14888386.2015.1112304>
- Yandow LH, Chalfoun AD, Doak DF (2015) Climate Tolerances and Habitat Requirements Jointly Shape the Elevational Distribution of the American Pika (*Ochotona princeps*), with Implications for Climate Change Effects. *PLoS ONE* 10(8): e0131082. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0131082>



Utah State University is committed to providing an environment free from harassment and other forms of illegal discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age (40 and older), disability, and veteran's status. USU's policy also prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in employment and academic related practices and decisions. Utah State University employees and students cannot, because of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, or veteran's status, refuse to hire; discharge; promote; demote; terminate; discriminate in compensation; or discriminate regarding terms, privileges, or conditions of employment, against any person otherwise qualified. Employees and students also cannot discriminate in the classroom, residence halls, or in on/off campus, USU-sponsored events and activities. This publication is issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Kenneth L. White, Vice President for Extension and Agriculture, Utah State University. (11-17)