

Pika



Order Lagomorpha

Family Ochotonidae

Genus *Ochotona*

30 species of pikas within *Ochotona* genus*

Local species:

American Pika (*Ochotona princeps*)

*Classification under review (Galbreath et al. 2009)

The lagomorph order consists of two distinct families: Ochotonidae, including the pikas, and Leporidae, including rabbits, jackrabbits and hares. Pikas are the smallest member of the rabbit family. They are also called the “rock rabbit”, “coney”, and “little chief hare”.

Physical Features

Pikas have broad, round ears with white margins, short legs, no visible tail, and hair covering all but the toe pads. They are gray to brown in color and typically measure 6-8½ inches (15.24-21.59 cm), head and body, and weigh 4-6 ounces (113.4-170.1 g).

Life History

Pika breeding season occurs in May-June, with a second litter sometimes in July-August. Female pikas can breed and produce young at about one year of age. Young are born after a gestation period of 30 days, typically in litters of two to six.

Young pikas reach adult size after about 40-50 days. The average natural life span for a pika is relatively short, as there is high mortality due to predation.

Food Habits and Behavior

Pikas feed primarily on the stems and leaves of various grasses, weeds and small shrubs. By early July, pikas begin haymaking – collecting, drying and storing food in piles of “hay” beneath boulders. These stores can grow to 3 feet in diameter (.91 m), and are built in the same location year after year. Pikas do not hibernate, so their survival during the winter is largely dependent upon the integrity of subnivean tunnels that lead to food sources and the success of their haying season.

Pikas are diurnal, being most active during the morning and late afternoon. They proclaim their territory with a series of high-pitched, whistling calls. Pikas are colonial, and each pika has its territory within the colony. Pikas commonly move by hopping and have a short dispersal distance.

Predators

Pikas possess excellent hearing and vision, and rely on these features to warn them of potential predators. The primary pika predators are coyotes, foxes, bobcats, weasels, hawks, eagles and owls. Pikas are also affected by parasites, such as fleas, mites, nematodes and bot fly larvae.

Other Threats

Pikas are particularly vulnerable to changing climatic conditions. Ambient temperatures of 80°F can be lethal in as little as six hours. To avoid overheating, pikas cool off under the rocks, thus reducing critical foraging time. While high summer temperatures may reduce much-needed foraging, freeze/thaw patterns brought on by warm winter temperatures are equally detrimental. Repeated freezing and thawing can cause snow tunnels to collapse and hay piles to ice-over, restricting access to critical food resources.

Scat and Tracks

Pika scat is generally characterized by small, dark, oval pellets. If it is darker in color and dry, that indicates older scat; whereas fresh scat is moist with a green pigment (remnant chlorophyll). White urine stains may also be found on rocks, surrounded by bright, orange-colored nitrophilous lichen.

Due to lack of soil in most rockfields, pika tracks are most often found in late-lying snow banks. Tracks are indistinct because of the hair on the feet and small size (less than 1 inch or 25.4 mm). The hind print is slightly larger, with 5 toes on the forefoot and 4 on the hindfoot.

Habitat and Distribution

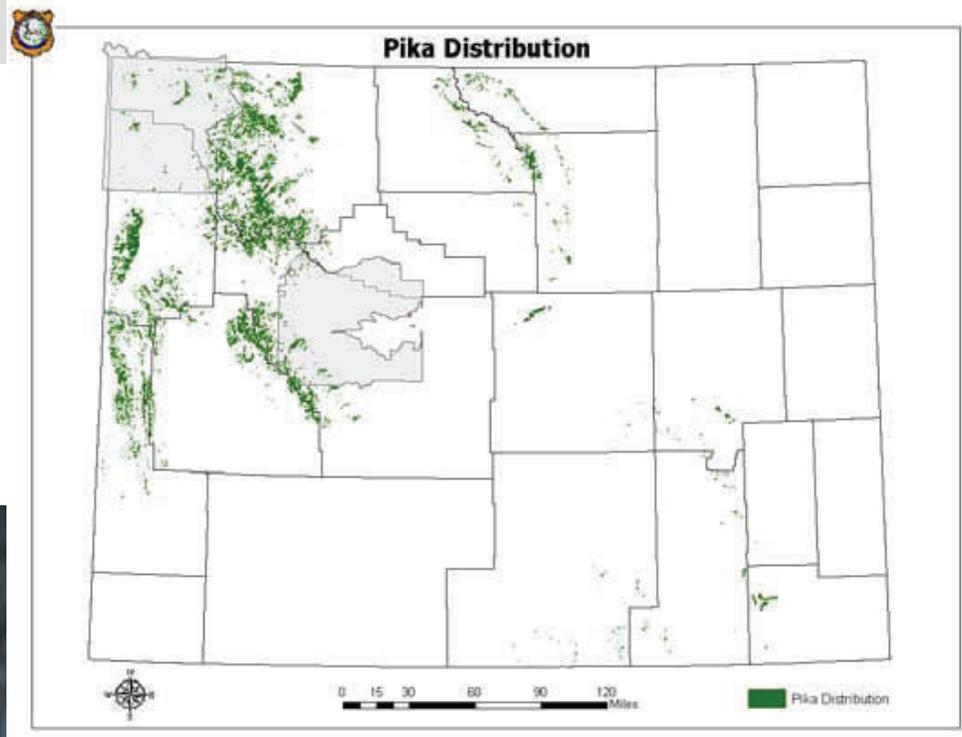
Pikas live in mountainous terrain at high elevations (usually 7,000-13,000 ft or 2,133-3,048 m; populations noted as low as 5,800 ft in GYE), living in old rock slides, talus slopes or around large boulders. Typically, a meadow or patch of vegetation is in the vicinity. Pikas live in North America and Asia, specifically the following countries:

Afghanistan	Burma	India	Kirghizstan	North Korea	Tajikistan
Armenia	Canada	Iran	Mongolia	Pakistan	Tibet
Bhutan	China	Japan	Nepal	Russia	United States

Pikas in our Area

Found in alpine environments, the American pika (*Ochotona princeps*), ranges from Southwest Canada to the Western United States.

Pikas are listed as an NSS3 Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the current Wyoming State Wildlife Action Plan (WGFD 2010).



Compiled by Teton Science Schools from the following sources: Animal: The Definitive Visual Guide to the World's Wildlife (Burnie & Wilson, 2005); Guide to the Rocky Mountain States (National Audubon Society, 1999); A Field Guide to Mammal Tracking in North America (Halfpenny, 1986); Peterson Field Guide to Mammals of North America (Reid, 2006); Identifying and Finding the Mammals of Jackson Hole (Wile, 1996); Small Mammals of the Yellowstone Ecosystem (Streubel, 1989); Wyoming Game and Fish Species Account (2009); A Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy for Wyoming (WGFD, 2010); Wildlife Information Network (wildlife1.wildlifeinformation.org/S/OMLagomorph/Ochotonidae/Ochotona/Ochotona_princeps.html); World Wildlife Fund (www.worldwildlife.org/species/finder/americanpika/americanpika.html); Alaska Department of Fish & Game (www.adfg.state.ak.us/pubs/notebook/smggame/pikas.php).