

Pikas Beneath the Snow



This pika's rounded ears are an adaptation to their high, cold lifestyle, photo from the USFWS

Walking in snow, bathed in bright sunlight, it is hard to comprehend the world of the pika. This small rodent lives beneath my feet and beneath this six-foot depth of snow. Even farther down since its tunnels and nests are deep beneath and between boulders.

I would think an animal could only survive such harsh conditions by hibernating but not the pika. It prepared all summer by cutting vegetation and drying it in "haystacks," turning its piles to ensure even drying and tucking them beneath boulders before rain storms. The dried vegetation was then stored in tunnels beneath the talus as its winter food supply. During my one and only summer trip to the top of Ruby Dome, I was amazed to hear their shrill calls and still cannot imagine pikas wintering on top of the peak, but apparently they do.

In many areas of the West, pika populations are declining but it is not cold winters that are the problem. It is the warming temperatures and hot summers. Their thick coats can prove fatal if exposed to temperatures above 77 degrees for more than six hours.

In Canada, they can survive at sea level, but this far south they rarely are found below 8,200 feet elevation. Across the Great Basin, some of the lower elevation pika populations have disappeared as they could not stay cool enough during hot summers.

Idaho's Craters of the Moon have pikas but they have adapted by spending more daylight hours beneath their beloved boulders and foraging more at night. It is hoped pikas will either use this strategy during summer days or migrate to higher elevations. Last February, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service rejected a petition to list the pika as an endangered species.

Pete Bradley is a biologist with the Nevada Department of Wildlife. He told me the Ruby Mountains provide such good pika habitat that populations here appear to be doing fine, although it is known populations have been lost in other, lower elevation sites around Elko County. There is evidence that pikas lived at 7,500 feet elevation during historic times but are typically found no lower than 8,500 feet today. Pete said there is a lot of concern about pikas and ongoing inventories and studies will show how local populations are handling the warmer temperatures.

Elko Daily Free Press, "Nature Notes", 12/3/2010

© Gray Jay Press, Elko, NV