

EAGLE POST 55

The newsletter of **ESWA - EAGLE SUMMIT WILDERNESS ALLIANCE** apprises you of important activities in and around Eagles Nest, Holy Cross, and Ptarmigan Peak Wilderness Areas.

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BEFORE WE BEGIN:

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December 2020

Dear ***|FNAME|***
Greetings! Our topic this month:
The Mighty American Pika
Frances Hartogh



THE MIGHTY AMERICAN PIKA

Frances Hartogh

When we head into our local Wilderness, we enter the homes of myriad species of creatures. And while it may not be fair to pick favorites, one particular critter may win the prize for sheer

adorableness. The American Pika, with its round ears, short furry body, and whistling call - sometimes seen carrying a bouquet of wildflowers



in its mouth - looks downright cute and cuddly. But despite their pocket-pet appearance, American Pikas are among North America's toughest animals: they are one of the few mammals in the lower 48 states that can survive their entire lives in the windswept alpine terrain above treeline. Yet that toughness today is



challenged by factors for which even the mighty little pika is no match. Read on to learn more about this amazing creature, and what we can all do to protect its welfare.

Where Do Pikas Call Home? There are about 30 pika species around the world, but only two species live in North America. The American Pika, the subject of this essay, is our "local" pika that lives

high in the mountains of western North America from central BC and Alberta all the way down to New Mexico. With habitats mainly above 2,500 meters (8,200 feet), they make their homes in existing space in talus slopes above treeline. Although a few American Pikas have learned to survive in warmer, lower climates, such as Lava Beds National Monument, where deep, cool caves are available, their survival is in question.

What's a Pika Anyway? Pikas are not rodents, but rather the tiniest member of the lagomorph family, which includes rabbits. And like rabbits, the females are called does, while the slightly larger males are bucks. They weigh just over 100 grams, about four ounces. The American Pika's brown and black fur helps camouflage them in their rocky habitat. Winter fur is thicker to keep them warm, and their feet have furry soles (nice for walking on snow), with little black pads at the ends of their toes.



What Do Pikas Do All Day? The American Pika is a diurnal species of mammal, active during the day. Unlike their burrow-building neighbor the marmot, pikas don't hibernate, and so they require more energy than other alpine animals. When "haying" (gathering food for winter), the American Pika makes an average of 13 trips per hour to collect food--over 100 trips a day. This means that pikas are exposed and vulnerable to predators, such as raptors, weasels, bobcats, coyotes - and your curious off-leash dog!



What to Eat? Pikas are herbivores; they eat grasses, thistles, and flowers. They can get most of the moisture that they need from plants, but will drink water when available.



Pikas eat live plants or they eat from "haypiles" of food cached for the winter. They collect piles of wildflowers and grasses and lay them out in the sun – the heat dries the plants so they don't get moldy during winter storage. And, scatologically speaking, here's a cool factoid – Pika poop comes in two kinds, and you can spot these around their dens: In addition to hard, brown, round pellets, pikas' caeca (first part of the large intestine) form pellets that are soft, black shiny strings—these caecal pellets have more energy value than stored plant food and the pika may consume them directly or store them for later.

Those Whistles: Pikas help protect themselves by living in colonies, and will alert their neighbors to threats by sending out their familiar whistle--but pikas are also quite territorial over their individual dens, and will give off territorial calls to define the boundaries within the colony. Pikas have distinct calls that vary in duration and tone. Their calls can be short, a bit longer and drawn out, or quite long, depending upon the season and whether used for individual recognition, predator warning signals, territory defense, or as a way to attract a mate. Check out this [video](#) for a sample of pika calls. Notice that those whistles sound a lot like your dog's favorite squeaky toy - what pup could resist? Another reason to keep your dog on leash in pika country!

You Say Pika: Time to stop fighting - either "pika" or "peeka" are acceptable pronunciations.

Making More Pikas: In early to mid-spring, American Pikas begin to breed. Pikas can breed twice in a season—once in spring and again in summer--but the second litter won't be born if the first one survives. The female is pregnant for a month before giving birth to a litter of two to six young. It takes another month for the young to wean and three months to reach adult size. Nursing significantly reduces the mother's fat stores. After a year, the young develop into breeding adult pikas. American Pikas can live up to seven years, but many die after three or four.

The Pika's Dilemma – Trapped at the Top: A dubious claim to fame, the American Pika is considered one of the best early-warning systems for detecting global warming in the western US. They cannot tolerate high temperatures. Heat makes pikas lethargic, causing them to withdraw into their cooler dens in talus slopes, which means they aren't gathering essential food for winter. Pikas can die in six hours when exposed to temperatures above 25.5 °C (77.9 °F). As temperatures warm, American Pikas have been observed moving higher in elevation in search of cooler



temperatures - however, those higher climes often don't provide enough food. And higher temperatures and more visitors to the high country are also causing introduction of new predators and risk of diseases, such as the Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease virus.

For these many reasons, in 2007 the nonprofit [Center for Biological Diversity](#) petitioned for the American Pika to be protected under the Endangered Species Act. But in 2010, the US government decided not to protect the American Pika, stating that to merit protection under the Endangered Species Act ([ESA](#)), a species must be "in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of their range." Acknowledging that climate change may cause the American Pika to disappear from the Great Basin and other lower elevations, the government determined that in other areas, such as Colorado's high country, there were sufficiently healthy populations for the time being. Federal biologists said that then-current studies suggested pikas will "adjust" to warmer homes or "migrate upslope." Although recognizing that "climate change is a potential threat to the long-term survival of the American pika," the government concluded that the threat wasn't urgent enough to warrant regulatory action.

Key to the 2010 decision, but not as openly recognized, is the recognition that protecting the pika as endangered or threatened would also require the protection of the habitat necessary for the pika's survival and recovery. This means that because global warming is affecting the habitat necessary for the pika's survival and recovery, the government would need to take global warming into account in any decision related to the pika's habitat.

How We Can Help:

- Try to stay on established trails. As of the time of this writing, the COVID-19 pandemic is resulting in more folks in the high country, and it's tempting to head cross country above treeline. But doing so impacts pika habitat, stresses pikas, and can introduce disease.

- Leash your dog, especially near and above treeline, and clean up after them – and remind others to do so. In the Holy Cross Wilderness, where in recent years dogs have been allowed off leash if "under control," the author has seen off-leash dogs kill pikas. Let's encourage our new District Ranger to restore the leash rule for Holy Cross Wilderness.



- Clean boots and hiking poles after use to avoid the possibility of bringing Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease virus into our Wilderness Areas.
- Volunteer to help pikas. The [Front Range Pika Project](#) is seeking volunteers to monitor pika sites, including in the White River National Forest and Holy Cross Wilderness. Consider joining ESWA's



[Volunteer Wilderness Ranger](#) program: Our Rangers assist the US Forest Service by patrolling the Eagles Nest, Holy Cross, and Ptarmigan Wilderness Areas, educating Wilderness users about protection of resources and Leave No Trace

Principles.

- Write to your representatives and ask that the American Pika be reconsidered for protection under the ESA. New post-2010 research, including by the USGS, indicates that pika populations are under even greater threat than originally thought. See the USGS study "[Pikas Disappearing from Parts of the West Due to Climate Change](#)".
- And let's all keep doing what we can to slow climate change. These websites have useful reminders on how each of us can help put the brakes on rising temperatures: [LINK](#) [LINK](#) [LINK](#)

Together, we can work to protect our smallest neighbor, the American Pika!

ABOUT FRANCES HARTOGH:

Frances is an ESWA Wilderness Volunteer Ranger, and serves on ESWA's leadership committee. Entering her second year of retirement from being an environmental and natural resources lawyer, Frances says she takes great pleasure in her new skills as a crosscut-sawyer--a job where you can actually see your progress. She was first introduced to the Rocky Mountains when she went to high school in Utah, where backpacking and skiing were part of the curriculum. At St. John's College in Santa Fe, she served on the college's search and rescue team, exploring the Pecos Wilderness and climbing New Mexico's high points. Law school took her to Colorado, where she fell in love with the Eagles Nest and Holy Cross Wilderness Areas, as well as her husband, ESWA Chair Mike Browning. As an environmental and natural resources lawyer, Frances worked in in-house counsel positions, for the Colorado Attorney General, and for a nonprofit foundation. Frances says she appreciates that her varied career allowed her to view from myriad angles the complex issues surrounding our public lands and the environment. She also has served on several citizen boards, including ESWA, and recommends this as a great way to give back to our public lands.



Resources for More Information:

[National Wildlife Foundation](#)

[Front Range Pika Project](#)

[Colorado Parks and Wildlife](#)

[Center for Biological Diversity](#) “But despite clear scientific evidence that the pika is threatened with extinction by global warming, in early 2010 the Fish and Wildlife Service declared it would not protect the species.”

Endangered Species Act, 16 U.S.C. §1531 et seq. (1973). See also [50 CFR 402.10](#).

A 2008 study by the [Colorado Department of Fish & Wildlife](#) was cited in the US Fish & Wildlife’s 2010 decision not to protect the American Pika under the Endangered Species Act. The Colorado study surveyed 62 historical locations across the state to determine the presence of pikas, and found pikas in 90% of the sites.

For more information on Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease, see:

[LINK LINK](#)

The Front Range Pika Project requires volunteers to take precautions not to spread this disease - click [HERE](#)

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Join us! Next Planning Meeting

Thursday, December 10 at 5:30 PM via [Zoom](#). Questions? Send us an [email](#).

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staff have donated generously to their **Employee Environmental Fund**, of which ESWA has been a steady beneficiary. Last year, more than 150 employees donated, led by A-Basin Director **Alan Henceroth**. Our enduring THANKS to them.

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