

Wildlife Express!

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Photo courtesy Joan MacKenzie, www.pikaworks.com

LET'S LOOK AT ...



Photo courtesy Joan MacKenzie, www.pikaworks.com

PIKAS

Hiking in Idaho's high mountains you might hear the call of an animal. "BEE-JEE," it says as you jump a little. The call is so loud it might have come from a large, dangerous creature. "BEE-JEE," it says again, but look as you might, you cannot find the animal. This animal is a master at hiding.

The animal with the loud warning cry is not large or dangerous. It is a rather cute animal called a pika (PIE-ka). Pikas are related to rabbits, but they look a bit different. Pikas bodies are round and small - about the size of a guinea pig. They have shorter rounded ears and no tails.

Pikas can be found all across Idaho at high elevations living in and around boulder-covered rock slides called talus. Talus might not seem like a great place to live. For humans, the pointed, ragged rocks make it difficult and dangerous to be around. But pikas use the talus to escape from predators and nasty weather. The piled up rocks make perfect pika-sized caves and tunnels to escape weasels, coyotes, and hawks. Talus also makes the perfect shelter. Air is trapped in between the rocks. The air along with a thick layer of snow insulates pikas from sub-zero temperatures in the winter. During the summer, the rocks offer cool shade. Although pikas live side

by side, they will defend their small portion of the talus from other pikas. They are very territorial. Pikas have been known to lose hunks of fur and skin during fights.

Pikas are plant eaters. They eat a variety of grasses, wildflowers, aspen, even twigs from pine trees. Some plants they eat right away, but some food gets stored for the winter. Pikas do not hibernate, so they use the last bit of summer and fall to gather food. They gather mouthfuls of food and then quickly scurry back and pile the food up in a "haystack." They may have one or two haystacks. Haystacks can be huge - up to three feet in diameter! Haystacks contain more than just plants. Pikas also gather the poop of other animals. They really like the poop of another talus neighbor called a marmot. Scientists don't really know if pikas eat the marmot poop in their haystacks. They might be gathering it for another reason.

There is poop they do eat. Their own! Pikas, like rabbits, excrete two kinds of poop. The first is soft and dark green. Pikas eat this poop right away or store it in a haystack. Why do pikas eat their poop? It contains important nutrients, especially vitamin B. If pikas didn't eat their poop, they would be unhealthy. The final poop after being eaten twice, is small, round, and dry. Pikas don't eat this.

The only time pikas allow each other on their territories is during the breeding season. Mating season runs from late March to early June. Females give birth to about three babies in the spring. The babies are weaned in just three to four weeks. The female will have a second litter by early July. It only takes three months for the babies to reach adult size.

If you hear "BEE-JEE" hiking in Idaho's high mountains, stop, sit, listen and watch. Find the pika nearby. Pikas offer many hours of entertaining observations!

A CANARY ON THE MOUNTAINSIDE

Have you ever heard of the phrase “The canary in the coal mine?” Do you know what the saying means? Many, many years ago long before computers and high tech gadgets, miners would take canaries down into mines. Mines often build up deadly gases. A person can’t see or smell the gases. Miners would sometimes pass out and even die without ever knowing their lives were in danger. Canaries are even more sensitive to the gases. Miners would use the canaries to warn them when deadly gases were building up. When miners saw the canaries passing out and dying, the miners knew that it was time to get out of the mine and get out fast! Great for the miner, not so great for the canary. Today, scientists believe that there is other “canary” warning us that something is wrong. This time the canary is the pika, and the danger is global warming.

Pikas are animals that are very sensitive to high temperatures. They like cool, moist mountaintops. Even when the temperature is just a few degrees warmer, pikas are affected. With their thick fur coat, it is hard for pikas to cool their bodies. They also don’t travel long distances. Within its entire lifetime, a pika might only move one-half mile away from the place it was born. Pikas may move up a mountainside over many generations, but for some pikas, temperatures are changing too quickly to move. For a single pika to move one mile would be a huge task. It would be like you running from Boise to New York in a few days. It is just not possible.

The pikas that seem to be affected the most live in the Great Basin. This is the area that stretches from central Oregon south to Las Vegas and from Reno, Nevada to Salt Lake City. The mountains in the Great Basin are separated by hot, dry deserts. Pikas can’t walk through a desert when their mountain retreat gets too hot. Scientists have been studying pika numbers over the years. They have found that out of 25 groups, nine groups disappeared. The pikas in Yosemite National Park are also having problems. In 1910, visitors to the Park would have seen pikas living at 7,800 feet. Now visitors have to climb to 9,500 feet to see a pika. It is just too warm for them at 7,000 feet now. Pikas all over the West are being affected by warmer temperatures.

There are things you can do to help the pika. Encourage your family to walk, bike, or carpool whenever they can instead of driving a car. This will help to reduce harmful gases in the air and help slow global warming. Every little bit helps. By working together, we can slow global warming. We just need to listen to the cries of the new “canary in the coal mine” - the pika on the mountainside.

Photo courtesy DonGettyPhoto.com





Photo courtesy IDFG

HOME SWEET HOME

An animal's home is called its habitat. A habitat contains four things: food, water, shelter and space. If one part is missing, an animal will not survive.

It is easy to see how important food, water and shelter are to an animal. You must eat. A big glass of ice water sure hits the spot on a hot summer day. You wouldn't want to stand outside during a thunderstorm, but the space part of habitat is just as important as food, water or shelter.

Animals need enough space to find the things they need without having to fight for them. When animals have to fight over food, they use important energy. Animals gathered together in small spaces can also make each other sick. Think of a student who has a cough. In the small space of a classroom, that student's germs quickly spread to other students who also get sick.

Next time you see an animal, think about its habitat. What is around that the animal might eat? Is there water nearby? Is there a bush, hole or cave for shelter? Does it seem like many other animals are around? Answering these questions will tell you a lot about the life and habitat of the animal you saw.

WINTER PREPARATION

The harsh, cold days of winter will soon be upon us. Freezing temperatures, blowing wind, rain, and snow not only affect us; they also affect wildlife. Fall is a busy time of year for wild animals. They must get ready for times when food will be more difficult to find. How do animals prepare for the rigors of winter?

Some animals leave. They migrate to warmer climates where food is easier to find. Some animals travel long distances. Birds are the animals you probably think of migrating, but there are other animals that also travel great distances. Can you name an insect that travels to central Mexico for the winter? It is our state insect, the monarch butterfly! This amazing butterfly flies thousands of miles from Idaho to central Mexico. The monarchs spend the winter in fir tree forests east of Mexico City.

Other animals sleep through the long, harsh winter. Marmots, bears and bats are just some of the animals that hibernate through the winter. Why do they hibernate? It's not so much the cold; it's the food. Bears and marmots eat plants while bats eat insects. Most trees drop their leaves during the winter. Grass dries up and turns brown, and most insects die. By hibernating, these animals conserve energy and wait for greener times. That's what hibernation lets them do.

Pikas don't hibernate. They stockpile food. Many animals try and store enough food to help them make it through the winter. Beaver are animals that store food. Their pond is their pantry. Beaver cut limbs off of trees and stick them in the mud at the bottom of their pond. Squirrels and Clark's Nutcrackers store pine nuts and other seeds.

Can you think of other ways that animals prepare for winter? Head outside and see if you can notice animals busy with winter preparation.



Photo courtesy IDFG

ANIMAL TALK

Animals don't talk, of course, but they do "tell" each other things. They need to communicate. They may need to warn each other that danger is near, or let others know where to find food. They may want to protect their territory, keep their family together or find a mate.

Animals "talk" to each other in many different ways. They may see a message. White-tailed deer raise their tails when danger is near. Other deer see the white tail and know to be alert. The signal may be a noise. Wolves howl to communicate with other members of the pack. Chemical signals may also be shared. Many animals have special, stinky glands. The glands make oil that the animal can rub on plants and rocks. We may be able to smell a skunk, but we might not be able to smell the scent mark of a bear. Even though we can't smell the mark, other bears can. When one male bear smells another bear's mark, he knows he is entering someone else's territory.

How do pikas communicate? They are actually pretty noisy. Usually people hear pikas before they ever see them. Pikas make a high-pitched, shrill or whistle to alert others of danger or to say "this is my home." "BEE-JEE" Some people think this call sounds a bit like the bleat of a goat but higher in pitch. Sometimes they sound a bit like a cat; they can make a sort of mewling sound. Male pikas attract a mate by singing. They make a series of whistles, trills and bleats. The females may also sing during the fall, but usually it is the male that does most of the singing. Pikas also use scent to communicate. They have scent glands on the cheeks. Pikas rub their faces on rocks all around the border of their territories. They also rub their cheeks on rocks a lot during the mating season. This may be one way of telling other pikas that they are looking for a mate.

All animals need to communicate. Learn about other animals and find out ways they "talk" to each other.



WHAT'S YOUR NICHE?

Think of the town where you live. People in your community have jobs that make it a nice place to live. There are doctors that keep you healthy. Teachers help you learn and people make food for you to eat.

Animals, plants and other organisms also have jobs and roles to play where they live. This role is called a niche (NICH). An animal's niche includes such things as where and how the animal gathers food and its link in a food chain.

Within ecosystems, every living thing has important jobs and roles. If one of these organisms is missing, the ecosystem will be unhealthy. At times, it may be hard to identify an animal's niche. What about skunks? They just seem like stinky animals that cause problems. Even the smelly skunk has a role in nature. Skunks eat more insects than anything else. They really love to eat grasshoppers, beetles and moth larvae. Skunks eat insects that like to munch on farmer's crops. Skunks help farmers by eating crop pests. The small bit of soil and plants they dig up looking for food is a small price to pay for all the insects they eat.

What's your niche? Do you have an important job or role to play in your family or school?



Photo courtesy IDFG

IT'S A CONTEST!

We at *Wildlife Express* love to be outside! Do you like to be outside too? If you love the outdoors, we want to hear about it! We are running a contest to see who can tell us the best story about why being outside is so great. Write us a story about your favorite outside spot, why you like it, and what you like to do there. If your story is picked, you might win some fabulous prizes - binoculars, fishing poles, field guides, journals, maybe even a sleeping bag. Who knows what fabulous prizes we might reward? Here are the rules:

- Write about why you like to be outside. Tell us about your favorite outdoor spot, why it is important to you, and what you like to do there.
- Your story needs to be 250 words or less.
- Type your story or write very neatly. Be sure to check spelling and grammar. Your story will be published in the Be Outside April edition of *Wildlife Express*.
- You must include a color drawing of your special outside place. You might just draw a picture of your place or draw a picture of you participating in your favorite activity in your outside place.
- Entries must be received by February 1, 2009
- Send entries to:
Wildlife Express Contest
P.O. Box 25
Boise, ID 83707

Good Luck!

BE OUTSIDE!

This year you will notice a new addition to *Wildlife Express*. Every issue will feature an article called “Be Outside!” We live in such an amazing state with so many natural wonders, your *Wildlife Express* staff want to encourage you to go out and discover it!

In this new section, you will find some great ideas for activities to explore the world around you and get some information on what is currently happening in nature. You might be surprised by what you can find in your own backyard or neighborhood park.

This month we would like to encourage you to start a nature journal. Nature journals don’t have to be fancy – a simple notebook will do. They also don’t have to just contain words. Pictures, drawings, poems, and plant samples might all be part of your journal. You use your imagination and make your journal as special and unique as you are.

Once you have a journal, head outside and pick a spot to sit for a while. Observe everything around you. What do you smell, hear and see? Is it light or dark? What does the ground feel like around you? Go to the same spot every week at around the same time of day and record what you experience. September is a month of change. What changes did you observe happening around you in your observation spot? Did anything surprise you? Record your findings. You might want to go to the same spot once a month for the rest of the year and record what you see. This is a great way to see how the seasons affect nature. Have fun!



Photo courtesy IDFG

Across

- 2. Pikas make a high-pitched _____ call when alarmed.
- 9. Although pikas live side by side, they will defend their _____ from other pikas.
- 10. Pikas use _____ glands on their cheeks to help mark their homes.

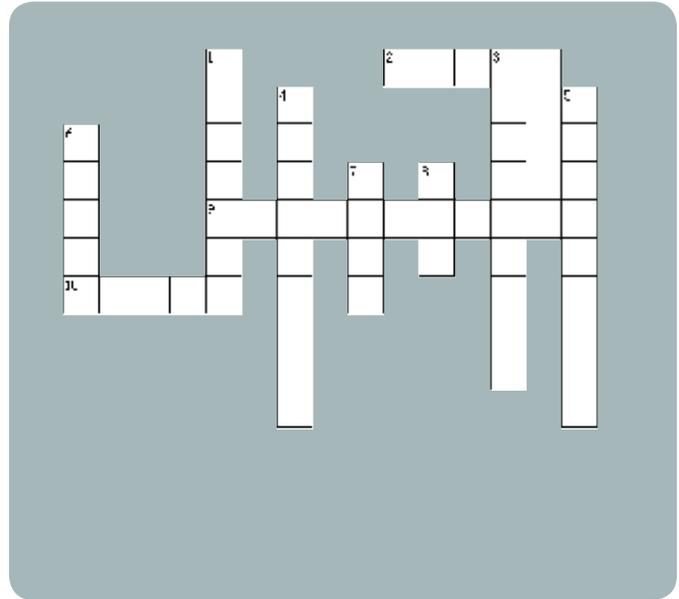
Down

- 1. An animal's home is called its _____.
- 3. Pikas are _____ to high temperatures.
- 4. Pikas eat their own poop to get all the _____ they need.
- 5. Pikas store food in _____ they make.
- 6. Pikas live on high mountain _____ slopes.
- 7. Grass makes up most of a pikas _____.
- 8. An animal's _____ is called its niche.

Words

- Noisy
- Nutrients
- Diet
- Scent
- Habitat
- Sensitive
- Haystacks
- Talus
- Job
- Territories

PIKA PUZZLER



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WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU !

If you have a letter, poem or question for *Wildlife Express*, it may be included in a future issue! Send it to the address printed above!