

# Wildlife Express

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# Pika



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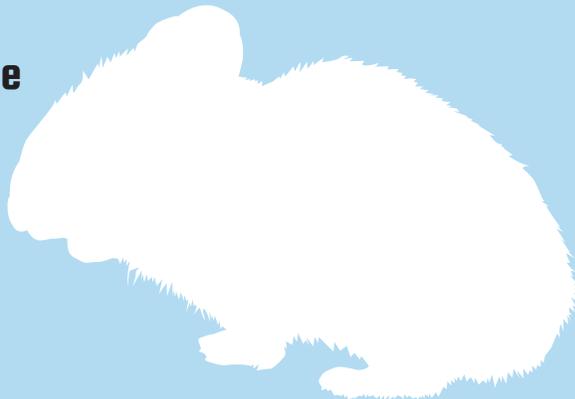
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# American Pika



BEE-JEE

BEE-JEE

BEE-JEE

**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 an **American 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 to breed.** Females have two litters of babies a year. Two to six babies are born in the spring and in June or early July. Newborn pikas weight about as much as two crayons, but they develop quickly. Their eyes open in about seven days. The babies are weaned in just three to four weeks; in about three months they are adult size. Most pikas will live three to four years.

**If you hear BEE-JEE while hiking in Idaho's high mountains, try and find the pika that is nearby.** You will want to stop, sit, listen and watch. Try to blend-in as much as possible with your surroundings. Pikas offer many hours of entertaining observations!





# A CANARY ON THE MOUNTAINSIDE

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**Have you ever heard of the phrase “The canary in the coal mine?”** Do you know what the saying means? 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, a type of bird, 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 changing. This time the canary is the pika, and the danger is climate change.

**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.

**Another problem for pikas is less snowfall.** Overtime, there has been a decrease in the amount of snow that is falling in the winter. Pikas need a thick layer of insulating snow to protect them from freezing temperatures. Pikas have a nice layer of warm fur, but their fur is no match for the subzero temperatures at high elevations. A lower snowpack also means less water for plants to grow, which means less food for pikas to eat and store for the winter.

BEE-JEE

BEE-JEE

**Pikas do live in a surprising place in Idaho.** They may be found at Craters of the Moon National Monument. Craters of the Moon can be roasting in the summer. How can pikas live there? The answer is found deep in the lava-tube caves in the area. Underground ice can be found year-round deep in the caves.

BEE-JEE

**Scientists are still learning how a changing climate might affect pikas.** One thing they know is pikas need snow and ice to survive. Pikas can give scientists an early warning about changes in our environment. We just need to listen to the cries of the new canary in the coal mine - the pikas on the mountainside.



# Home Sweet Home

**An animal's home is called its habitat.**

A habitat contains four things: food, water, shelter and space. Fish and Game likes to add another part to habitat, arrangement. How the parts are arranged, or put together, is important. All the parts need to fit together like a puzzle. 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. Space also contains something every animal needs to survive. Oxygen is found in the space where an animal lives.

**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.



# 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 that help you learn and people that 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 insects. 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 is a pika's niche?** When a pika builds a haystack, it is moving and recycling nutrients and plant seeds. The pika is also food for weasels, coyotes and birds of prey.

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





# 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 southern California and Mexico for the winter? It is our state insect, the monarch butterfly!



**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. Marmots and bears eat lots of plants. Most trees drop their leaves during the winter; grass dries up and turns brown. Idaho's bats eat insects. Insects are also difficult to find during the winter. It is best for these animals to conserve energy and wait for greener times.

**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 treats.



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



THIS IS MY HOME

SQUEEEEEEEK!!!!!!

# 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 home.

**How do pikas communicate?** They are actually pretty noisy. Usually people hear pikas before they ever see them. Pikas make a high-pitched, shrill whistle to alert others of danger or to say "this is my home." Some people think this call sounds a bit like the bleat of a goat or lamb but higher in pitch and squeaky. 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 their 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.

OVER HERE!

CHK CHK CHK

CHK CHK CHK

BLEH

FWEEET!!



# BE OUTSIDE! AUTUMN

**Autumn is a great time to be outside!** All the colorful leaves make a wonderful backdrop for a walk outside. How many colors can you find? What kinds of trees turn what colors? Bring some paper and crayons or colored pencils outside with you to make leaf rubbings or draw a picture of the most colorful tree you find.

**After the leaves fall off the trees, take a walk and look for bird nests that were hidden by the leaves.** If you find a nest within easy reach, take a closer look. What is it made of? Is it tightly woven or kind of messy? How big is it and what kind of bird do you think used it? Make a map of where you find nests. Check on them through the fall and winter to see if they last until spring.

**Squirrels also make nests and you can look for their nests, too.** Squirrel nests are called “dreys.” They will look like a messy bunch of leaves and sticks stuck high up in a tree. The presence of dried leaves will tell you that the nest belongs to a squirrel instead of a bird. Squirrels often have several dreys in their territory.

**If you live in a higher elevation area, look for the middens of red squirrels.** These are large piles of conifer cone scales and nut shells. Red squirrels cache (cash) their food, often in underground burrows. When it comes time for a snack, the red squirrel brings food from its cache and eats it, usually in the same place every day. The result of all this daily eating and dropping of cone scales and nut shells is a midden. If you find one, you know red squirrels are living nearby.

**Autumn is also a good time to look for “buck rubs.”** In early fall, buck deer scrape the velvet off their antlers by rubbing them along small trees. This scraping and rubbing can take the bark right off of young trees. The tree’s trunk will have long stripes where the bark is gone. You can often find these rubs in stands of small trees.



**BE OUTSIDE**  
IDAHO CHILDREN IN NATURE

**Autumn is a time of crisp temperatures, bright colors and a lot of wildlife activity.** Get outside and see what you can observe before winter’s snow blankets the land.



# American Pika



## Across

5. An animal's job or role where it lives.
7. Pikas store their food in these.
9. Male pikas do this to attract a mate.
10. Newborn pikas weigh about as much as two \_\_\_\_\_.

## Down

1. Pikas may be found in and around rock slides called \_\_\_\_\_.
2. This is what pikas eat.
3. Pikas need \_\_\_\_\_ and ice to survive.
4. Pikas are related to these animals.
6. The word for an animal's home.
8. Pikas use \_\_\_\_\_ and scent to communicate.

## Words

- Crayons
- Habitat
- Haystacks
- Niche
- Plants
- Rabbits
- Sing
- Snow
- Sounds
- Talus



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WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU!  
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