

# *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*

By Rachel Wood

You don't have to seek out polar bears to spot a climate change indicator species. You're likely to encounter a charismatic climate change spokes-beast on rocky alpine slopes right here in the Northwest.

Hiking through a talus field, you'll hear them. The telltale, "Eeeeepppp!" sounds almost like the squeak of a dog toy. If you're lucky, you might catch a quick glimpse of them scurrying through the scree, often with a mouthful of grass or wildflowers. American pikas make for charming trail companions. A member of the rabbit family, pikas have sizable round ears and are roughly the size of a large potato. They make their homes beneath the cool rocks of alpine mountainsides—a place that is threatened by rising temperatures due to climate change.

## *IN A WARMING CLIMATE*

Pikas are ideally adapted to their rocky habitats, which help them keep cool, avoid predators and seek shelter. They spend their summers preparing for winter by building "haypiles," a collection of grasses and other vegetation—sometimes more than a meter thick! Pikas do not hibernate, but instead live off their haypiles, insulated underneath the snowpack. Their regimented life leaves little room for change.

With warming temperatures, biologists have already begun to observe dwindling numbers of pikas, especially among populations in California, Utah and southern Colorado. Pikas cannot be out in temperatures above 75 degrees for very long, meaning that as summers in the high country get warmer, the less time pikas can collect food for winter. A warming climate also forces them to higher and higher environments, where vegetation declines as the elevation increases. This means that as pikas move uplope, there will be greater competition for food.

## *ADAPTING TO CHANGE*

But the pika might be more resilient than we give it credit for. Researchers have reported finding populations of pikas in Utah living off a diet of lichen and moss, which have nutrient levels close to cardboard. Even more surprising, there's a thriving population of pikas living at low elevations along the rocky slopes of the Columbia River. Like the pikas in Utah, moss is a big part of their survival. Besides being a food source, pikas use moss in their homes to keep temperatures cool enough in the summer and warm enough in the winter.

## *HIKING FOR PIKAS*

The unique Columbia Gorge population is also one of the driving reasons behind Cascade Pika Watch. A collaborative pika-monitoring program, Cascade Pika Watch sends researchers and citizen scientists out on trails throughout the Cascades to record pika observations through opportunistic sightings. The organization first started in the Columbia River area, before gaining more volunteers and expanding to cover mountain populations across Washington and Oregon's Cascade Mountains. This summer also marks an exciting time for the program—it will be the first summer that all observations and data will be collected solely by citizen scientists.

Want to be a pika hiker? Cascade Pika Watch offers citizen scientist training programs, Pika Hikes and online certification to become a citizen scientist for the program. Visit [oregonzoo.org/cascades-pika-watch](http://oregonzoo.org/cascades-pika-watch) to learn more or sign up for a training session.

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