



# WILDLIFE NOTES

## Pika

### DESCRIPTION

The pika is a small furry mammal 6-8 inches long and weighing less than 5 ounces. Its tiny, clawed feet are as thickly furred as the rest of its body, even on the pads. The pika's beautiful gray-brown coat grows in three layers for superb insulation. Its short legs, small round ears, and almost nonexistent tail help the pika retain precious body heat by means of extremity reduction.

All appearances to the contrary, pikas aren't related to rats, guinea pigs, or chinchillas. Pikas are lagomorphs, close cousins to rabbits and hares. Rodents and lagomorphs have different types of incisors. Incisors are the large, front "buck" teeth. Lagomorphs have two sets of upper incisors,

four in all. Rodents only have two such teeth. Pikas incisors are completely covered with enamel, while rodent incisors have enamel only on the front. Large and strong for gnawing, pika incisors never stop growing, continuing to lengthen with age. If a pika didn't keep wearing them down with constant chewing, the incisors would eventually grow into its chin.

### SOCIAL BEHAVIOR

Pikas are social animals living in large colonies. Few animals are hardy enough to live year round in a place where snowdrifts cover their homes eight months of the year, but the pika is well adapted for this harsh life. These hardy creatures

make their home on rocky banks, boulder-covered hillsides, and treeless slopes of the alpine tundra.

Wide-spread in the Northern Hemisphere, they usually live at altitudes of 8,000 to 13,500 feet. In New Mexico, pikas can be found

in the Sangre de

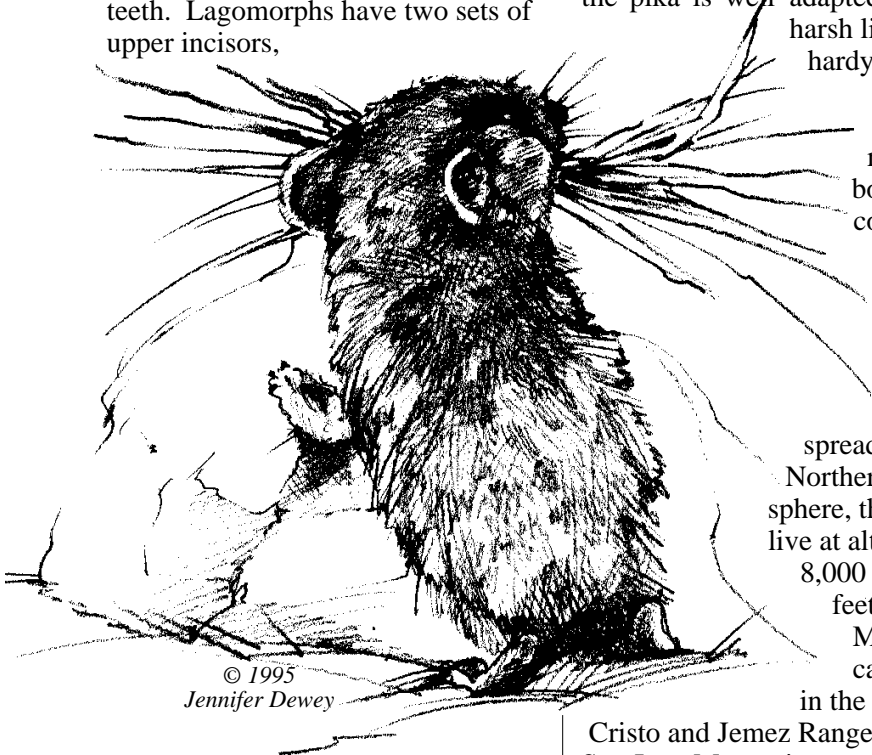
Cristo and Jemez Ranges and the San Juan Mountains.

After a long winter underground, pikas emerge in spring from their burrows. The talus mountainsides ring with the calls of pikas-greeting-pikas. Unlike rabbits, pikas are highly vocal. With shrill bleats, barks and squeaks, they're in constant communication with each another.

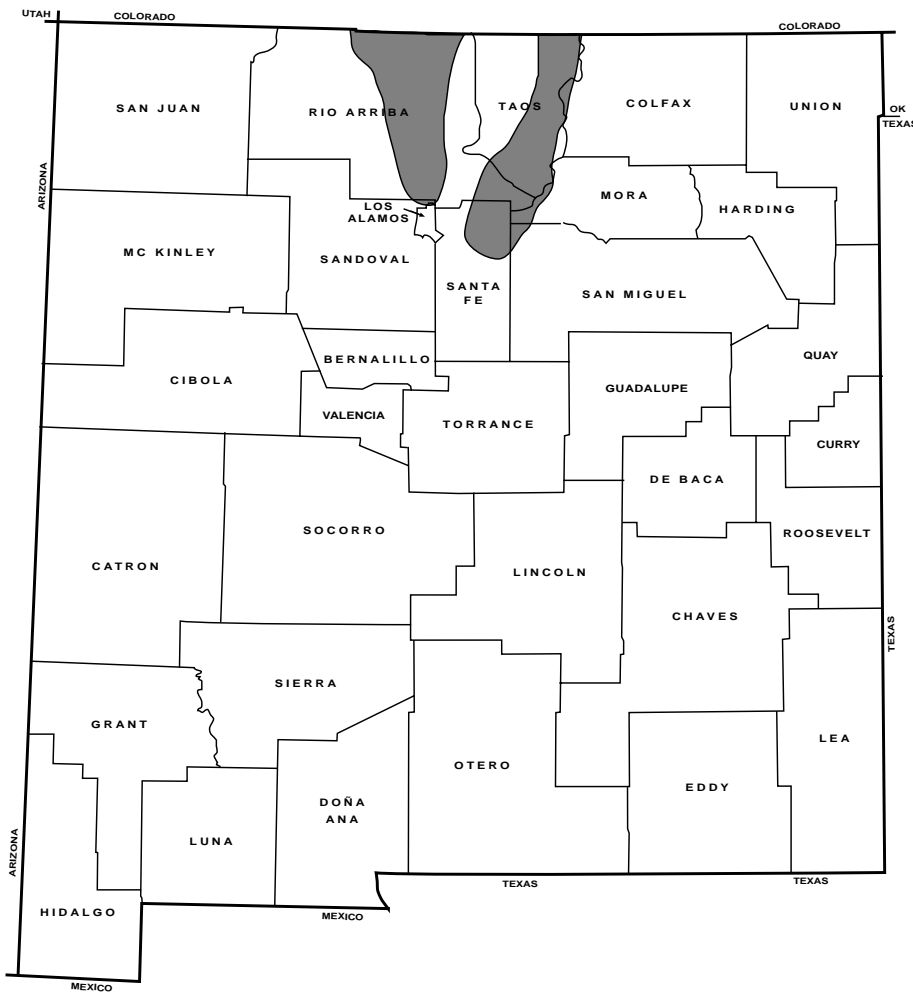
### TERRITORIES

The first pika task in spring is the establishment of territories, marked with urine. Pika urine is especially rich in nitrogen. Pikas have evolved a way to conserve moisture by concentrating their urine into uric acid crystals. The crystals play an important role in the production of lichens that grow upon the rocks. The brilliantly colored, reddish-orange lichens live in colonies on the whitish urine deposits left by pikas as territory markers.

If lucky enough to have secured a good territory last season, a pika will attempt to reclaim the same area. If it cannot, it seeks a new one as soon as possible. Dominant males get the choicest areas, while dominant females take second best. Young males usually settle for third choice, and young females have the slimmest pickings of all. If a young pika cannot secure a territory, it is forced to emigrate to unknown country. This is risky business for a pika, with weasels an ever-present danger on the ground and golden eagles a lurking danger above.



© 1995  
Jennifer Dewey



## REPRODUCTION

Once territories are established, mating begins. There are no pair bonds: instead, mother pikas raise young on their own in the grass-lined nests of underground burrows. A litter of naked, blind young — usually twins or triplets, but sometimes more — is born a month after mating, usually in May or June. Once the babies grow fur and open their eyes, pika mothers bring them out into the sunshine. Later in the summer, there may be second litters.

## HAY-MAKING

Summer is a critical time for pika survival. This is the only time pikas are able to carry out a task to ensure survival for another year: hay-making. Using their sharp incisors, pikas gnaw at plant stems, collect plants in their mouths, and dash off in search of more. Once a mouthful of greenery is gathered, pikas deposit it on a likely flat rock in its territory.

They add to their steadily increasing forage piles, then begin another. And another. These collected grasses and twigs cure in the sun exactly like hay. A pika maintains many such haypiles within its territory. This can lead to pika thievery, as hay piles are often filched from absent or napping individuals. Youngsters learn from mothers to gather grasses and bring them back to the family hay piles.

By the end of summer, an industrious pika will have accumulated nearly 30 pounds of grasses, herbs, and other plants. Hay piles may contain up to a bushel of vegetation. At the first drop of rain, pikas work feverishly to move unprotected hay piles to dry areas, under rocks, ledges, or even underground. The hay piles must not get wet, or they will mildew and rot. If you are hiking in the mountains above treeline and find a pile of dried plants under an overhanging rock or on a boulder, don't disturb it — it's most likely a precious pika haypile.

As fall turns to winter, pikas instinctively start moving haypiles underground, mouthful by mouthful. By first snowfall, all pikas who survived a summer of eagles, hawks, weasels, and other predators, have settled in snugly for the winter.

## REINGESTION

While hard at work in summer, pikas spend the rest of their time feeding and fattening on many kinds of plants. They also feed on something else: pikas share a practice with rabbits called “chewing pellets” or reingestion. Rabbits, hares, and pikas eat plants that are low in nutrient value and often hard to digest. Because pika food is high in fiber, not in calories, pikas must fill their stomachs every hour to meet their energy needs. Over time, they've developed a specialization that allows them to extract more nutrients from this poor food. With reingestion, pikas are able to eat fecal droppings that still contain untapped nutrients. These edible droppings, produced only at night, are different from daytime fecal material. At night, pikas produce a black pellet wrapped in a gelatin-like substance. These nighttime pellets are reingested and more nutrients extracted. Daytime pellets are expelled outside, away from the burrow, and not eaten.

*Published 1996  
Jane Susan MacCarter*

---

**Wildlife Notes is published by  
the Department of Game and Fish.  
If you are interested in obtaining  
additional copies, please send  
your request to:  
Conservation Education Section  
Department of Game and Fish  
PO Box 25112  
Santa Fe, NM 87504  
(505) 476-8119**

---