

What the heck is a Pika, anyway?

Pikas are lagomorphs, meaning they are small mammals closely related to rabbits & hares. Unlike Surly Pika racers, they are not especially burly (about the size and shape of a Russet potato), but they are much surlier than rabbits, hares, or potatoes. In fact, the American pika's scientific name (*Ochotona princeps*) means "Little Chief Hare." The U.S. is home to two species of pikas: the American pika, which lives in western mountain ranges (including the Wind River Range!), and the collared pika, which lives in Alaska and northern Canada. Several other pika species live in Asian mountain ranges, Japan, and the Tibetan Plateau.



If you are lucky, you might glimpse (or, more likely, hear) a pika on the course! Pikas typically live in high-elevation boulder fields ("talus"), but they prefer rockslides where the boulders are about the size of beach balls. They are active during the day, but they can't tolerate very warm temperatures and so instead take refuge under the rocks where it is cooler. During the warmest parts of the summer, you are most likely to see pikas in the morning and evening.

Why are pikas so surly? Pikas live alone and are very territorial (read: surly). Although scholars have long debated the origin of this surliness, many agree it is due to their winter survival strategy. Unlike most alpine mammals, pikas neither hibernate nor migrate to summer range. Instead, they make a huge cache of food (typically grasses and wildflowers), called a haypile. Building a haypile is a lot of work: pikas spend up to 55% of their summer days picking plants and dragging them under the rocks. By fall, some will have made 5,000 trips to the meadow and amassed 60 lbs of food! While, that amount of snack bars and energy gels may be just enough to sustain your Surly Pika team during the race, for a pika, it's like hoarding for the apocalypse every summer. In fact, scaled to a human pika (like yourself), it would be like purchasing 20,000 lbs of food, making 5,000 trips to the store, and running home with the equivalent of 2 large heads of lettuce in your mouth on each trip! In addition, many of these plants are actually quite toxic, but the toxins have antibacterial properties. During storage, the toxins act as a natural preservative, helping to keep the food fresh during the long, cold winter! Given how important these haypiles are to their survival, you can understand why pikas are so surly: they must defend their winter preparations not just against their neighbor pikas, but also against marmots and pack rats. Even bighorn sheep have been observed stealing from hard-earned pika haypiles! (Moral of the story: watch your snacks!)



How can I recognize a pika? If pikas are present in a rockslide, they are easy to identify. By **sight**, pikas look a little bit like guinea pigs. They do not have a visible tail, but they do have fluffy grayish to cinnamon-brown fur, and large "Mickey Mouse" ears with a white rim around the outside. Unlike squirrels, pikas don't sit on their hind legs and handle food with their front paws— instead, they typically clip plants at the base and suck them down like a string of licorice (Yum!). They also make fiercely squeaky alarm **calls** (eep!) to warn their neighbors about predators and to defend their territory. On the talus, you might also find a **haypile** (fresh, green clippings packed between rocks and often on top of leftovers from previous years). Finally, pikas make the cutest **scat** of all mammals: round, brown pellets about the size and shape of a peppercorn, usually found below a large boulder. These latrine sites may also have large white smears on the rock from urine.



I've spotted a pika – can I report my observation to scientists? Please do! We pika scientists may be surly (and like you, interested in self-inflicted suffering), but many research projects rely on volunteers to report where they see and hear pikas. The easiest way to share your observations (including pictures or sound recordings) is via the iNaturalist American Pika Atlas: <https://www.inaturalist.org/projects/asc-pika-project>. You can also visit <http://www.pikawatch.org> to get involved in any active citizen science projects near you!