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THE HAY-MAKERS OF THE HIGH SIERRAS

The Mt. Whitney Pika (*Ochotoma schisticeps albatrus*) is found in the High Sierras of California at elevations ranging from 8,000 to 12,000 feet. These fascinating little animals are found in various places in the Sequoia National Park, but are most abundant at Twin Lakes some ten miles distance from Giant Forest, elevation 10,000 feet.

The presence of the Pikas was first noted in the Twin Lakes basin on July 15, 1906. They had recently taken up residence in a huge rock slide which rolled down the steep mountainside to the east during the previous winter. The colony at first consisted of five animals; it has rapidly increased and now ranks as one of the largest in the Sierras.

The Pikas were quick to grasp the opportunity of building up a community lodge at Twin Lakes and perhaps no more ideal spot could be found in the High Sierras. The rock slide covers over one acre of ground in one conglomerated mass, many feet in depth, with blocks of rocks ranging from a few inches square to many feet in thickness and diameter, thus providing ample shelter with many crevices as runways. Among the cracks of this slide the Pikas have made their home and they forage on the herbage and grasses growing around the nearby lakes. The lower part of the slide extends well out in the lake, thus giving the animals an opportunity to obtain drink during the winter without exposing themselves on top of the snow in inclement weather or to predatory animals and birds.

Perhaps no other animal in California is of greater interest to scientists and lovers of nature than the Pika. This interest is awakened by the Pika's peculiar anatomy as well as by his habits. With the head of a rat, the body and fur of a rabbit and no visible tail, the Pika presents a curious appearance while, on occasion, he can jump like a miniature Kangaroo. They are of social and affectionate disposition and notwithstanding their wild free life on the edge of timberline in the solitudes of God's High Sierras, they seem to be holding their own and increasing in number.

The folkname for the Pikas varies with locality: In some places they are called Conies; in other Little Chief Hares; while in others Straved Rats; but in the Sequoia National Park they are termed the "Haymakers of the Sierras". This name is aptly applied because animals cut and cure grass for hay and store it in their homes under the rocks for winter food.

Their hay-making season is, roughly speaking, between August 20 and September 15, varying somewhat with altitude and the ripening condition of the grasses. This harvest period is a busy time for the animals and practically all members of the colony take part. The one object in view is to store sufficient food supply to tide over the winter. This is no small matter either as the winters in this locality often cover periods ranging from seven to eight months, with snow falling in depths from ten to thirty feet and covering all vegetation.

This is how the Pikas make hay: With their strong incisor teeth they cut off the grass close to the roots and then place it carefully in small bunches for the curing process. The Pikas then take the sheafs of hay and throw them over their shoulders, when they drag them to the "hay-barns" under the rocks. With their snouts and front feet the clever little animals force the sheafs of cured grass back into the crevices of the rocks. As bunches of hay may be observed in the field after the harvest season is over some believe that the animals shear off more grass than they want. But this is usually because the hay has been damaged in the curing process by mountain storms such as occasionally burst forth in the region.

The Pikas are very agile and can run like rats or jump like rabbits. In bounding from rock to rock when closely pressed in pursuit they will often spring a distance of ten feet or more. They have a horror of getting into deep water but in emergency they can swim very rapidly for their limit - a distance of some 50 or 60 feet. They are home loving bodies with but little migratory impulse other than to search for fresh pasture when unfavorable forage conditions arise, or to procure a new home when forced abroad by congested living conditions. The worst enemies of the Pikas are the weasel and some hawks.

The young Pikas are born from June 1 to August 15 in soft nests made of fine hay or grass. Usually four or five are produced at a time and but one litter during a season. The young are born with their eyes shut, which condition lasts until about the 10th day. When first born they have but very little hair. The attachment of the mother to the baby Pikas seems very great. She cares for them with motherly instinct until about the 7th week when they are weaned and left to shift for themselves. The weaning is hastened by the mother's running away from the young upon their approach and hiding among the rocks.

This is a description of the Pika: Length (in inches) 7.25-7.42; tail vertebrae .42-.50; hindfoot 1.10-1.16; ear from crown .65-.68; weight from 1/4 to 3/8 lbs.; color of pelage variable with locality, from brownish gray to buffy white, mixed always with blackish on back.

When once you see these quaint animals you will have a desire for a more intimate acquaintance for the little cliff dwellers are curious and interesting from many points of view. Their industry excels that of most animals. They are home loving creatures, always living in family groups. They have a protective coloring that blends with the rocks of their surroundings. They are polygamous. The sexes are practically alike in size and color. They are social; digitigrade; partly subterranean and partly diurnal. They do not hibernate. They appear to be a family of the very ancient that has come down through the ages as a survival of the fittest to live in a region difficult for other animals to utilize; inhabitants of that marvelous country which seems to be the only remnant still left to give us an idea of a very ancient state of this planet. They were known to the Psalmist, who says "The conies are a little folk but they build their homes among the rocks." an accurate and concise description of the California Pika.

Owing to their extreme shyness the animals usually escape the attention of the ordinary park visitor but those who are gifted with the eyes of an observer may easily see them. Their chirping ventriloquial notes often betray their haunts to the intruder, but they are very wary and the least noise or threatened danger sends them to cover without hesitation. So watch for these interesting little animals, freely existing in the natural haunts given them by the God of the Universe.