

Pikas at Craters of the Moon Transcript

[BEEPING] [MUSIC PLAYING]

Studying pikas in Craters of the Moon, the size of the lava flows that make up the park, the monument, and the preserve is over 1,000 square kilometers. It's a laboratory that's really quite unparalleled. There's nothing quite like it anywhere else where pikas occur today.

Well, pikas are a type of a rabbit. They're rather small, and they don't have much in the way of big tall ears, so they don't look like rabbits. Many people would confuse them as something other than a rabbit, like a rodent of some sort. Something like a squirrel, or some sort of a rat, maybe. But they don't have a long tail either.

They're actually quite cute and charismatic, and they seem to attract people. There's a lot of interest in pikas right now, especially since they're being talked about in the context of climate change. They live pretty much primarily in rock, rocky talus, or boulder fields, fractured rock. Now we're discovering, or working on, learning about pikas in lava flow habitats, particularly here at Craters of the Moon.

They're an important part of the environment, of the ecosystem. They provide food for weasels and other kinds of animals. We've learned that they actually can influence the environment around their dens in the rocks. They'll actually go out into the vegetation and they'll influence what kinds of flowers and grasses actually grow there. They're sort of ecosystem engineers in their own right, which is rather fascinating.

Looking for pikas out in this Craters of the Moon environment, and as its name implies, it seems unearthly at times out there, especially when it's extremely hot. And in some ways, that's the best time to be there because you can really feel this, really, in your gut, what it's like to be an animal making a living in such an inhospitable environment, such an extreme environment.

It's a real challenge searching for pikas. Even those of us that really do this as a focused research effort, often we'll rarely see them. And what we look for are their telltale signs. The hay piles that they might leave behind, they cache, or hide food, for the winter. And it's usually pretty easy to see. And visitors can actually look for those down inside the crevices of the lava. If you're really lucky and you're paying attention, you might hear their telltale call.

Even down from underneath the lava during the heat of the day, you occasionally can hear them and catch a glimpse of them running around, scurrying. They're actually fairly comfortable around humans when they're active. If you find, or hear, or see some sign that looks pretty fresh, and you've got some time on your hands, you might just take a moment to sit and relax and enjoy the silence that comes into play here when you're out in this kind of a landscape.

And then, with some luck, you might actually hear a pika. And if you're quick, you can get your binoculars in that direction and maybe see one scurrying away with a flower in its mouth. They like to collect sometimes rather pretty flowers out here, some of the wildflowers and grasses.

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The Park Service really is in the business of preserving and protecting our collective heritage as Americans for future generations. Not only natural resources, but also cultural resources, the battlefields, and the historic sites that we also treasure. And so studying pikas and trying to understand an animal that we think might be sensitive to climate change is really part and parcel of trust that's been given to the Park Service. And we really do have a mission as park scientists and Park Service employees to collectively work together to preserve these resources for our children.

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