

NEWS

GUEST COLUMN

'Bigfork's Storm Water Dilemma' on page 14

Keeping Tabs on Glacier's Elusive Pika

Conservation groups seek protection

By BECKY LOMAX
for the Beacon

Lucas Moyer-Horner crams his arm under a truck-sized boulder and pulls out a handful of peppercorn-like pellets. The dark brown scat belongs to a small animal that looks like a fur-covered Russet potato. American pikas inhabit high alpine talus slopes – rugged, steep places most people fear to tread, but Moyer-Horner scampers over like he's in a playground. "Pika get me up high," he says. "Grizzlies or elk wouldn't."

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consin-Madison summer hiking Glacier National He climbed peaks habitats and then ck for signs of the a baseline on the e heat intolerant hearing from the s a starting point of the endearing

ation groups filed District Court in ection of the pika species Act. Its thick gh metabolism and ermitting the pika of snow all winter those same features ny. "They are poor ins Moyer-Horner. , pika populations m the Great Basin with the lowest e most extirpation. disappear as global



No Stone Unturned: Lucas Moyer-Horner romps around large blocky rocks of talus slopes looking for signs of pika. He's from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

temperatures rise.

Moyer-Horner, too, is wondering how climate change will affect pikas as they can't climb much higher to escape heat. With his study supported by the Glacier National Park Fund, he's one of about a half-dozen pika researchers across the U.S. tromping with ears tuned to its high-pitched "eep."

In Lunch Creek basin east of Logan Pass, Moyer-Horner takes a GPS reading at a broad swath of furniture-sized boulders before picking his way up the slope. He stops every few feet to poke his head under a rock ledge. Some are bare; a few contain

scat and hay piles.

Similar to rabbits, pika eat their own scat to glean more nutrients. Their peppercorn-like scat, the result of the second feast, litters their pathways to the world below boulders, where temperatures stay cooler in summer and warmer in winter. Dropping a few pellets in an envelope, Moyer-Horner intends to use the feces to check hormone levels, possible indicators of stress due to global warming.

Starting in mid-August, pikas begin a frenetic race during daylight to gather hay – flowers, grasses, fir clippings, and leafy



Photos by Becky Lomax/Flathead Beacon

Pika are small 6- to 8-inch cousins of rabbits that live in talus slopes at high elevation. This one is from Lunch Creek just east of Logan Pass.

plants. Piled under rocks, their hay dries. Some piles can be quite large – up to several feet wide. Pikas then cart the dried hay below into their rocky kingdom for winter food. "They don't seem to be too picky about what they eat," says Moyer-Horner, as he bags up a small handful of grasses, meadowrue, and a western anemone seed head. "But a pika needs to fill his belly about nine times per day."

In addition to scat, hay piles, and telltale screams, Moyer-Horner is looking for the five-ounce furballs themselves. They skitter to a nearby meadow and grab mouthfuls of greenery, sometimes larger than themselves. They run below rocks and suddenly pop up, curious to survey their surroundings. If threatened, they "eep" a warning to others.

For the pika, climate change is more insidious than an invading short-tail weasel. When exposed even an hour to 80-degree temperatures, pikas may die. Heat may also force them to retreat under their rocks rather than gathering hay, resulting in meager supplies stored in the winter larder. Shrinking snow pack is also

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Aided by three paid assistants and a few volunteers, Moyer-Horner seeks to identify all of the park's talus slopes that may house pikas – a daunting task across one million square acres. He expects to locate two-thirds of the sites by October and survey half of those for signs of pika. His study is also being helped by a bevy of citizen science volunteers trained by Jami Belt, High Country Citizen Science coordinator for the Crown of the Continent Research Learning Center. But funding still needs to gel for the study to continue next summer.

Without any previous population estimates, Moyer-Horner cannot speculate on Glacier's pika status. But he is discovering that 90 percent of the talus slopes in Glacier harbor the round-eared creatures. He's found them as high as 9,000 feet and surprisingly below 4,000 feet along McDonald Creek.

This winter, Moyer-Horner hopes to collate his data into a population estimate. From then on, only time and temperature will tell the pika's fate.

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In August, conserv a lawsuit in the U.S. California seeking pro under the Endangered S insulation, furry feet, h small ears retain heat, to live under mounds without hibernating, bu also make heat its ene heat dissipaters," expl Over the past 50 year have been dying off fr and Sierra Nevadas, elevation sites seeing th Scientists fear more may