

SUMMER 2018  
NEWSLETTER



# The American Pika:

## Eehking out a Living on Independence Pass



**IF YOU'VE SPENT TIME** scrambling across the rocky tundra of Independence Pass, you're probably familiar with two distinct sounds from the animal kingdom: the sharp "beep" of a marmot and the squeaky "eehh" of a pika.

The marmot, which looks a bit like a beaver and is about the same size, is easy to spot. The pika, on the other hand, while a member of the rabbit family, is only the size of a guinea pig. And because its fur blends with its rocky environment, the pika is more often heard than seen.



The lucky spotter, though, will be rewarded: with its round ears, whiskers, and often a mouthful of flowers, the American pika, *Ochotona princeps*, is one of the most charming residents of Independence Pass, where it thrives in our alpine environment.

## About pikas

How does a pint-sized critter that relies on plants for food survive in the cold, rocky, windy environment of the Colorado alpine tundra? Especially when it doesn't hibernate or move to lower elevations in winter -- which can last up to nine months on the Pass?

First, a bit like hummingbirds, pikas' hearts and bodies move fast and burn fuel quickly to keep warm. Unlike hummingbirds, they also have a thick coat of fur which helps them retain heat. In addition, they make their homes under the medium-sized rocks known as talus, where winter temperatures are warmer than the air at the surface thanks to the snow that provides a layer of insulation from the cold. Conversely, in summer, the talus provides a cool refuge from the relentless Colorado sun.

How, though, do pikas survive the long winter when the alpine plants that make up their diet have died back? They do it by spending the short summer caching food. Pikas build "hay piles" made up of wildflowers, grasses, sedges, lichens, and evergreen needles. The hay piles are stored under rocks and can be quite large: in one study, the piles consisted of 62 pounds of fresh vegetation per pika.

Needless to say, competition for vegetation during the short summer months is intense. Pikas must vigorously defend their 80-foot-diameter territories. They mark their territory with a scent gland in the cheek. They also use territorial calls—the squeaky "eeehh" that hikers hear. Pikas will even engage in pika-style boxing matches when necessary.

Pikas breed before the busy summer season. They can have up to three litters per year. The females carry the babies for three weeks and wean them six weeks after birth, when they reach the size of golf balls. While juveniles have very low survival rates—weasels, raptors, and the harsh alpine environment all contribute to their loss—those that do survive have been known to live up to nine years.

## Climate change and pikas

In recent decades, researchers have linked climate change to the disappearance of pikas from historically occupied sites including Great Basin National Park, the Sierra Nevadas near Lake Tahoe, and Zion National Park.

Higher summer temperatures may increase the time pikas spend cooling down, therefore reducing the time they can spend foraging. In addition, earlier snowmelt and decreased snowpack may be reducing the insulating snow layer that protects pikas from cold spring nights, causing them to experience acute cold stress when temperatures go below what they typically withstand.

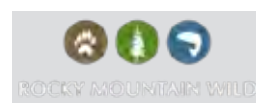
While surveys indicate that pika populations at historically occupied Colorado sites have remained stable, recent research predicts that they may disappear from Rocky Mountain National Park during this century. Scientists are eager to do more research to predict and track the potential impacts of climate change on American pika throughout Colorado, including on Independence Pass.

## You can be a citizen scientist for pikas

This is where YOU come in. The Front Range Pika Project, a partnership of Rocky Mountain Wild, the Denver Zoo, and the White River National Forest, is looking for citizen scientists to participate in a multi-year study of pikas in our region.

Megan Mueller, Senior Conservation Biologist with Rocky Mountain Wild, says, "with the help of volunteers, we will be able to do research across the mountains in the White River National Forest that will improve our understanding of how climate change may impact American pika and alpine ecosystems, and inform future Forest Service management to make alpine habitats more resilient to climate change. The project will give volunteers an opportunity to contribute to research and conservation, hike beautiful places and learn about American pika, alpine ecosystems and climate change."

This summer, scientists will identify plots and train volunteers to collect data on Independence Pass and other alpine locales in the White River National Forest. To participate in the study and get to know our squeaky neighbors on Independence Pass better, please email [frpp@rockymountainwild.org](mailto:frpp@rockymountainwild.org) or [director@independencepass.org](mailto:director@independencepass.org).



# Portals

By Isa Catto

## I BELIEVE IN PORTALS.

The kinds that don't require passwords, only presence. There are famous portals like the ones in the Narnia Chronicles or the Harry Potter series. I have portals of my own: my garden is one and Independence Pass is another.

When I was small my parents would take two days to drive from San Antonio to Aspen. They would haul four children in a packed station wagon up through West Texas, then to Santa Fe for the night, and over the border into Colorado the next morning. Eventually we would summit Independence Pass. We would spill out at the top, next to the sign that still stands today, and try to run the road trip agitation out of our bodies. It was always cold, there was always snow and it always meant we were coming home. There was an old movie of all four kids running at full gallop into snow, though in my case it was a toddle. My mother was belly laughing at some antic, my dad invisible behind the movie camera. That film got lost somewhere along the way, but that memory remains in perfect suspension, a treasured reminder of a family formation that no longer exists. My parents loved the Pass and the hikes tucked up and down along its curvature. Their gratitude for this place is expressed in the Alpine Garden just below the Top Cut dedicated in 2013 to their eleven grandchildren.

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dence. You can step over a threshold and reemerge a different soul. I get up to the Pass as often as I can, especially when I need to quit myself. In the summer, I often pass the director of the Independence Pass Foundation, Karin Teague, pulling up invasive weeds, or at least her small truck on the side of the road, as I wind up 82 to a favorite hike. I am delighted that I can step away from cell service, from the to-do list, from a world that reveres data, status and a crisp resume.

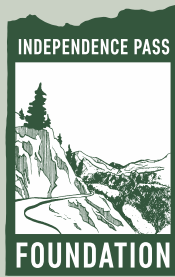
And it is here I can escape the clatter of egos. When I am feeling compressed I see this world as a place of scarcity and my creativity is sapped, but when I step into the wilderness, I am once again in a place of abundance. I often hit the trailhead with a full backpack and stuffed mind, and always emerge with a clear head filled with flowers, color, wonder and space — with a reminder of how so much is just noise. I marvel that even though I am insignificant in, and to, the high alpine landscape, I pull so much power from it. It is a guaranteed reboot.

There is of course a long and illustrious list of artists who celebrate the spiritual vitality and necessity of wild places, but this is a conversation that we should never quit holding. Nor should we take access to these places for granted or forget to thank all the exceptional people and non-profits, like IPF, who work to preserve these portals not only for us, but for the planet.



Isa on pass between Independence & Lost Man Lakes circa 1975 | Photo Henry Catto





# 2018 Summer/Fall Projects

1.

## Linkins Lake Trail.

On July 21, IPF will partner with Roaring Fork Outdoor Volunteers, Wilderness Workshop, and the Aspen-Sopris Ranger District/USFS to build a rock turnpike on the 1/10-mile stretch between the high point of the trail and Linkins Lake to prevent degradation of this wetland environment. Time permitting, we will also build a rock crossing over the Roaring Fork River on the upper Lost Man Trail. To volunteer please sign up at [wildernessworkshop.org](http://wildernessworkshop.org) or [rfov.org](http://rfov.org).



2.

## Top Cut Assessment.

IPF will engage consultants to review past work, the current state of the road cuts, and determine whether and where further stabilization and/or revegetation efforts are needed.



3.

## Biogeography Study of the Pass.

IPF is partnering with Colorado State University, the Aspen Center for Environmental Studies, the Aspen Global Change Institute, and Wilderness Workshop to understand, monitor, anticipate, and address changes to forest and alpine ecologies as a result of climate change.



4.

## Lincoln Creek monitoring.

IPF will assist the Aspen-Sopris Ranger District/USFS in monitoring use, breaking down illegal campsites, and cleaning up dispersed campsites along the Lincoln Creek corridor.



5.

## Noxious weed control.

IPF will continue its efforts with volunteers and the Pitkin County Weed Board to beat back invasive species and keep native plants thriving.



6.

## Mountain Boy restoration.

In what we hope will be the culmination of a three-year effort, IPF will work with youth, other volunteers, and the Buena Vista inmate work crew to dislodge the remaining rebar, t-stakes, and metal cable—remnants of a miles-long snow fence abandoned in the 1960s—from the Mountain Boy tundra. The heavy debris will be hauled out by mules provided by the Forest Service in September.





# To our generous donors — thank you one and all!



**Please stay on the trails,** even when muddy, this is a popular area and thousands of people walk these trails each summer. The beautiful alpine plants you see are easily damaged by all of our human footsteps and can take hundreds of years to regrow.

independencepass.org



## 8. Citizen Science.

In partnership with Colorado Mountain College, the Aspen Global Change Institute, and local botanists, IPF will continue its plant cover composition and phenology studies to better understand the native plants of the Pass and add to the body of scientific knowledge regarding the effects of climate change and other natural phenomena on alpine flora.

## 9. Tree Plantings.

IPF will continue its decades-long partnership with the Aspen School District planting native evergreen trees with school children throughout the corridor to stabilize road cuts, improve habitat, and help restore the Pass to its original, natural beauty.



## 10. Pika Study.

IPF will support the Front Range Pika Project by helping identify plots on Independence Pass, recruiting and training volunteers, and collecting data on the presence and health of pikas in our region. See lead story on reverse.

## 7.

### Summit Sign Installation.

IPF will install a newly-fabricated interpretive sign at the summit of Independence Pass depicting the wildflowers at the summit and the importance of staying on the trail.

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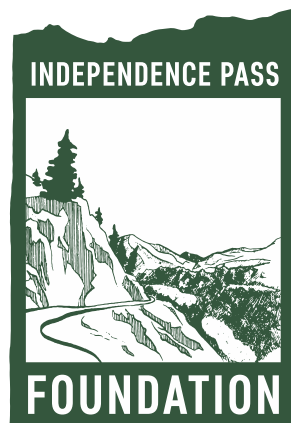
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