

## Doon Watch Nature Series for Dehradun Live Hindustan Times by Sanjay Sondhi

Published on 8 January 2009

### Endearing Pika

While this column is largely about Doon and its environs, every once in a while, I hope I am allowed to provide my readers a peek into the natural world beyond Dehradun. As I had mentioned in my last column, I ushered in the new year in Kedarnath Musk Deer Sanctuary in the Garhwal Himalayas. Amongst the most memorable moments was trekking up to Tungnath at an altitude of close to 12,000 feet, with white, crystal-like snow flakes peppering my jacket. On the last day of our stay, at Chopta, we woke up to a white morning, with over 3 inches of snow having fallen overnight!

While we had many wonderful sighting of birds and animals at Kedarnath, one of the commoner animals at higher altitudes (above 9,000 feet) was the Large-eared Pika (*Ochotona macrotis*). Pikas or Mouse Hares, as they are also called, are small, endearing creatures that look like rabbits without a tail.

My first encounter with the pika was in Kedarnath WLS over two decades ago. Walking through a grassy meadow, I somehow felt that I was being watched. I looked around me, and saw nothing. A few minutes later, out of the corner of my eye, I espied the movement of a small animal near a pile of rocks. I pivoted quickly but saw nothing. Now intrigued, I stopped walking and waited. A few minutes later, from a different pile of rocks, a few meters away, a brown head nosed out of a burrow. I waited with bated breath. A few more minutes passed before the cute animal emerged completely. The pika emerged from its burrow, and peered at me through its endearing eyes. I fell in love with this creature immediately! The pika watched me for a few more minutes, twitching its large ears every now and then, before deciding that I was harmless. It proceeded to munch on grass near the burrow, keeping an alert eye on me.

Pikas are very inquisitive animals. Often, they will venture quite close to you, if you do not move. However, any sudden movement will send the pika scurrying for cover into a hole nearby. Minutes later, the pika will emerge from a different hole, and curiously check you out again. Pikas lives in existing burrows under the ground. These burrows are often connected, allowing the pika to pop in and out of different holes. When alarmed, the pika will utter a squeaky “peek” call note.

Unlike many other larger mammals at high altitudes, pikas do not hibernate in the winter. The pikas we saw in Kedarnath were stockpiling food before the onset of the winter, when the food availability decreases.



Endearing animals like the pika keep my love affair with nature going. My son, Yash (who took the picture here), too, fell in love with the pika when he saw it for the first time at Kedarnath. Amidst the hustle and bustle of our daily lives, spare a moment to dwell on nature's wonderful creatures and what we can do to save them.

Sanjay Sondhi is a Dehradun based naturalist. Feedback on this column is welcome at [doonwatch@gmail.com](mailto:doonwatch@gmail.com)

© Sanjay Sondhi

Making a difference: Take your next holiday in a wildlife sanctuary or national park and learn to experience nature firsthand. Once you've seen your first tiger, elephant or perhaps even your first pika, join the growing voices who want India's forests and wildlife to be preserved.