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Subalpine Rock Slide Mammals

Other mammals inhabit the subalpine rock slides. The Yellow-bellied Marmot (*Marmota flaviventris*) digs a den under piles of boulders anywhere from the Red Fir and Jeffrey Pine Forests at lower elevations to the rock avalanche areas at timberline. Everywhere it keeps an alert eye on its surroundings from a commanding perch atop a large rock or log, whistling a sharp warning to its fellows if intruders appear. In leisure moments, it spreads its body like a pancake on the granite, soaking up the sun.

The heavy bodied, short-legged marmot, about 2 feet long (.6 m), grizzled brown above and yellowish brown below with a mixture of black and white on the face, is the largest of the commonly visible high country rodents. Strictly a vegetarian, it grows fat during the summer months on the tender leaves and stems of grasses, wild flowers, and shrubs, as well as fruits and berries. But these short trips to minigardens within reach of its den always pose risks; predators such as Coyotes, Mountain Lions, or even rare native Red Foxes (*Vulpes vulpes*) may lurk nearby.

As winter approaches, the marmot retreats to its grass-lined den under the rocks. A complete hibernator, unlike bears and chipmunks, which awaken off and on during the winter, it curls up and sinks into a deep sleep. Its heartbeat drops from 100 beats a minute to four; its body temperature falls from 97\sz\F to 40\sz\F (36\sz\C to 5\sz\C); it breathes about once in 6 minutes and lives on its fat.

In other burrows among the talus slopes. Golden-mantled Ground Squirrels hibernate just as soundly. But the sprightly Pikas or Conies (*Ochotona princeps*), snug in their rockbound dens under the snow, move about during the winter, selecting food from the haypiles of grasses, sedges, wild flowers, pine needles, and shrubs which they collected, sun-dried, and carefully stored during the summer.

When winds blow snow away from their entrances, these little mammals emerge to nibble lichens off the exposed rocks or push through snow to nearby meadows, where they feed on the tips of plants extending above the snowline. Even when 15-foot drifts imprison them within their chambers, they occasionally issue thin, high-pitched calls from below.

Resembling roly-poly bundles of grayish tan fur, with a short head, round ears, and no visible tail, the 7-inch-long Pikas (17 cm) fit their high mountain environs to a tee. With an average body temperature of 104°F (40°C) and thick fur, they thrive on cold and cannot tolerate heat. A dozen species of them exist in the mountains of Asia; two kinds occur in North America, one in Alaska and one in the Sierra Nevada-Cascade chain and the Warner Mountains of northeastern California.

In summer, Pikas share the broken rock piles of California subalpine areas with Yellow-bellied Marmots, Bushy-tailed Wood Rats (*Neotoma cinerea*), chipmunks, Golden-mantled Ground Squirrels, and their chief enemies, weasels and Martens. Very territorial, Pikas mark their own rock boundaries with secretions from eye and cheek glands and reinforce ownership with nasal bleats from rocky lookouts. With every bleat, the whole body jerks forward and the ears twitch upward in an all-out effort. The small face often bears a semi-inquiring expression.

Although squat, the Pika is very agile. It can spring 10 feet while bounding from rock to rock, the bare toe pads on its furry feet providing superb traction. It uses this agility in summer to reach nearby rock gardens where it cuts off choice green plants and carries mouthfuls of them back to sunny drying spots near its den. The plants cure like hay and when the Pika later stores them in airy, well-drained quarters, they retain all winter the natural color and fragrance of well-cured hay.

Also known as Rock Rabbit, the little haymaker hops like a rabbit, chews with a side-to-side motion like a rabbit, has a nose like a rabbit, and is indeed remotely related to rabbits.

The true rabbit of the high elevations, the White-tailed Jackrabbit, is primarily nocturnal and not frequently seen. Very large (one and one-half times the size of the common Black-tailed Jackrabbit of lower elevations), the Whitetail turns completely white in winter and develops "snow shoes" on its feet for foraging on snow. Its droppings under matted Whitebark Pines reveal its favorite daytime resting hollows