

A day with the pikas of Ladakh



The summer of 2019 at Ladakh was silent. It was drier, and I would say, warmer than all my visits. From capturing landscapes and visiting monasteries, I was pulled towards wildlife in the land of high passes. I got hooked to the depth of these valleys, its people, the traversing scenes, the azure skies, and raining stars, setting me free, time and again.

A summer month at the valley filled with sand dunes, by the Shyok River, threw

some surprise showers. Nubra Valley turned silver as the clouds poured, and the swirl of winds blanketed the valley.

The pika, a fluffy mammal of the hare/rabbit family of this region, pulled me towards the music of melting glaciers.

The rocky patches by the stream is where we find one of the two pika species of this region, the Nubra Pika. The cute ashy one popped out of a huge rock and disappeared almost instantaneously. Then came the wait for the next three hours, and then the pika and I played hide and seek around the rocks. Well, I burnt a few calories running around them.

Nubra Pika or *Ochotona nubrica* in scientific terms, belongs to the Pika family of

the Ochotonidae. Found in the higher altitudes of Pakistan, India, Nepal, and China, this pika lives in rocky caves. Nubra Pikas feed on shrubs and plants found around their homes. They are incredibly active during the day and slow down during the twilight.

Unlike marmots (land squirrels in the Himalaya), the pikas do not hibernate and are seen through the summer and winter months in Ladakh.

The Ladakh Pika or *Ochotona ladacensis* is another pika species found at a similar altitude. The Ladakh Pika was again a pleasure to watch around the Tso Kar Lake. The burrows dug beneath the carpet of green grass, a secret tunnel, is where the Ladakh Pikas maneuver.

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