



O'Hara 2018

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O'Hara's Rockbound Troubadours

You hear their call before you see them — a high-pitched “eek” coming from somewhere in the middle of the talus slope or boulder field in front of you. And if you are patient, eventually you will spot the singer — the North American pika (*Ochotona princeps*). Similar to a small guinea pig in size and shape, with prominent round ears, short legs, and brown-grey peppered fur that helps them blend into their surroundings, pikas can be found throughout alpine rocky areas at Lake O'Hara.



A pika surveys his Lake O'Hara home. Photo: Klaus Exner

And yes, they are undeniably cute — and incredibly photogenic. But you will need a sharp eye and a good camera to catch a pika on film.

Pikas are the smallest members of the order Lagomorpha, which also includes rabbits and hares, and they are sometimes known as conies or rock rabbits. They have sharp curved claws and padded toes to help them scamper through alpine rocks. Excellent hearing and vision alert them to the presence of predators such as golden eagles, weasels, and wolverines.

Pikas are very vocal and use both calls and songs to communicate with each other and to protect their territories. The high-pitched “eek” warns other pikas of the presence of predators — and hikers. Pikas live in loose colonies often connected by burrow mazes beneath their chosen rock field. Individuals are very territorial over their own den and surrounding area.

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Trail Report 2017 - Finishing Up and Looking Ahead

Mother Nature threw some challenges at the Lake O'Hara trails in 2017 — with crews battling avalanches, windstorms and drought to complete several significant projects. 2017 was also a year of looking forward — with the conclusion of the Specific Purpose Agreement and five-year trail plan between Parks Canada and the Lake O'Hara Trails Club, and the development of a new agreement and five-year program.

Once again, we were fortunate to have Foreman Steve Bertollo leading the crew at O'Hara, ably assisted by Tanya Marcotte. A one-time increase to Parks Canada's funding in 2017 added a much-appreciated third person, Shannon Elliott, for the season.

Snow, wind, and heat

For most of the early to mid-season, the priority for trail crew was clearing the unprecedented amount of avalanche debris (snow, ice, broken trees and boulders) that had come down on the Lakeshore, Oesa and lower Wiwaxy trails in late spring.

Late-lying snow also resulted in more trail damage than usual to areas such as Opabin Plateau, as hikers often could not locate the trails or tried to avoid walking in the wet snow. Trail crew put in as much time as possible to define the existing trail tread and keep trail widening to a minimum.

Other “climate” challenges in 2017 included strong winds in late July which brought down an unusually

large number of trees. Exceptionally dry conditions in the latter half of the season made some types of trail work impossible as soils became loose and powdery. Finally, we were forced to cancel the planned October 2017 volunteer work party, as Parks Canada's resources were severely depleted by a host of large wildfires in the region. We intend to continue with this volunteer opportunity project in 2018 and beyond.

In spite of these challenges, trail crew were able to complete most of the projects identified for 2017. Along with carrying out a considerable amount of general trail maintenance (trail and drainage clearing, grubbing and rock removal), notable achievements include:

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O'Hara's Rocky Troubadours (continued)



That's a mouthful! A pika gathers food for winter. Photo: Amar Athal

'Hay' gathering

Pikas do not hibernate, so they spend the short alpine summers at Lake O'Hara finding food for the winter ahead. This frenzied activity consists of gathering large quantities of grasses and forbs in their mouths and leaving these hay piles to dry in the sun, then moving them under a rock or log.

Compared to ground squirrels and marmots, pikas are admirably industrious. But they are not above the occasional larcenous behaviour. Pikas are regularly observed stealing from their neighbour's hay pile, sometimes resulting in an extended chase as the aggrieved party attempts to retrieve its hard-earned larder. When winter arrives, pikas stash their hay piles deeper underneath talus slopes, and remain active beneath the protective winter snows.

Like their rabbit cousins, pikas defecate — they eat their own dung. And while this doesn't sound like an appealing diet, only pellets containing partly-digested greenery are eaten. Normal droppings are not on the menu.

Pikas breed in late May or early June as the snow begins to slowly recede. Pika territoriality is happily at its lowest during this time and males sing to attract mates. Females give birth to litters of two to six. The young are precocious — born furry and active — and weaned within two weeks. After one month, the babies leave their mothers to establish their own dens, and typically live three to seven years.

Pikas in peril?

Pikas are extremely temperature-sensitive and cannot tolerate high temperatures for more than a few hours. Research from the U.S. Rockies suggests that pika populations in some areas are in decline as the result of warming temperatures. Here in Canada, Parks Canada is studying pika populations as an indicator species. Thus far, results seem to indicate that population trends in the Rocky Mountain Parks are neutral.

Julie Timmins and Rhonda Orchar work for the Ecological Integrity Monitoring Unit for Parks Canada and are part of the team monitoring pika populations in the Rocky Mountain parks, including at Lake O'Hara. Along with Parks staff, volunteers count hay piles in designated study areas at Lake McArthur and Lake Oesa.

"In addition to our own counts, sightings reported by hikers are also helpful," Rhonda reports. "Visitor observations of pika, and of grass and forb hay piles within talus slopes or along trails provide valuable information that will assist with ongoing research."

If you spot a pika, please record your observations on the wildlife notice board at Le Relais. And keep your camera handy. If you are lucky, you just might capture an image of O'Hara's singing rock rabbit.

Debra Hornsby

Call for Trail Volunteers

Interested in becoming more directly involved with trail maintenance at Lake O'Hara? The Trails Club and Parks Canada are planning an annual end-of-season volunteer trail work bee, to assist the regular trail crew with a different trail project each season. Volunteers should be:

- in reasonable physical condition
- able to perform moderate physical labour (digging, lifting, pushing wheelbarrows

and raking) in potentially inclement outdoor conditions

- available on weekdays in late September (exact dates TBA.)

If you would like to be on the list of potential volunteers for trail work at O'Hara, please send an email with the subject "Trail Volunteer" to info@lotc.ca with the following information: name, contact information (phone and email), and any relevant trail or other construction experience (not a prerequisite!)

In Memoriam

John Morrison of Field, BC left an indelible mark on Lake O'Hara's trails. As a member of the Parks Canada trail crew at O'Hara for nearly a decade, he poured his heart and body into improving the hiking experience at Lake O'Hara. John worked hard and smart. Some of his notable achievements included the reconstruction of the East Opabin Trail in 2005 and pioneering the use of a self-propelled barge to transport gravel across Lake O'Hara in 2013 to repair a long section of the lakeshore trail.

John passed away March 2, 2018. We thank him for all that he did for Lake O'Hara trails.

Trail Report 2017 (continued)

- **Completion and opening of the trail to the Seven Veils Falls lookout in late June.** By all accounts, this short side trail and viewpoint are a positive addition to the O'Hara experience.
- **Continuation of the volunteer sandbag project on the Lakeshore trail.** This initiative continues to be popular and has resulted in a more even and safe trail tread on a portion of this high-use trail.
- **Addition of more than a dozen new rock steps to the Wiwaxy alpine route.** This rock work is aimed at addressing erosion concerns and improving the hiking experience on this steep route.
- **Continuing to better define alpine routes and junctions.** A concerted effort was put into re-painting faded alpine route markers (there are hundreds of them and re-painting is time consuming!) and adding new signs or paint markers as needed. Particular attention was given to improving the once-confusing connection between Lake Oesa and the Yukness Ledges alpine route.
- **Installing waterbars and other drainage improvements on Linda Lake trail.** This area has long been neglected and was overdue for some attention.
- **Continuing to address drainage issues and braiding on Opabin Plateau trails.** Drainage features were cleared and improved, and



O'Hara trail crew 2017: Steve, Tanya and Shannon get ready for a day of work. Photo: Judy Otton

gravel was placed in some problem wet areas. Rock handrails were built to better define trail alignments.

- **Constructing rock retaining walls along Lakeshore trail.** These were built to contain gravel fill to be added in future years. A better source of gravel (with more clay content) is being sought to help keep the trail surfacing in place.
- **Assessing the feasibility of a proposed new connection between the lower All Souls route and Opabin Plateau.** The terrain for the proposed route is much more difficult than anticipated, and it was decided not to proceed with this proposal from the current 5-year trail plan.
- **Beginning to address trail braiding on the Upper McArthur trail.** Drainage was improved and large rocks placed on redundant trail braids to discourage use.
- **Installing new trail signs.** As part of a park-wide initiative, trail signs at O'Hara are gradually being replaced with the new Parks Canada standard signs.

2018 and Beyond

A new Specific Purpose Agreement and Five-Year Trail Plan (2018-2022) were approved by Parks Canada in early 2018. Once again, the Lake O'Hara Trails Club will be contributing \$20,000 a year to support trail work (up from \$15,000 in previous years), as well as contributing to some material costs such as gravel purchase. The new trail plan was developed by the Lake O'Hara Trails Club with input from trail designer Don Gardner, the O'Hara trail crew and other Parks Canada staff.

The new plan does not call for any major new trail projects. Instead, trail work in the next five years will concentrate on addressing longstanding trail maintenance and environmental concerns. The Lake O'Hara area is in a unique position to be a model for best practices in trail



There's a trail in here somewhere. Avalanche debris on the Lakeshore trail in June 2017. Photo: Judy Otton

construction and maintenance within the mountain parks, and the trail plan reinforces this role. Retaining and building on the unique character of O'Hara's trails and trail experience is another important goal, as is continuing to offer opportunities for visitors to contribute to and engage directly in stewardship of the area.

Trail deficiencies to be addressed over the next few years can be grouped into five key areas:

- Trail widening;
- Trail proliferation;
- Erosion;
- Unstable rock work; and
- Structural failures.

Trail issues have been mapped and prioritized, and specific actions for addressing them have been outlined. However, the new plan leaves room for creativity on the part of the trail crew to adapt the best solutions to specific situations.

As always, your contributions to the Trails Club have made (and will continue to make!) all the difference in maintaining a high-quality trail experience at Lake O'Hara. If you have any thoughts on O'Hara's trails, please send us a message via our Facebook page. See you on the trails!

Judy Otton

Survey says: make great even better

Over the summer of 2016, LOTC conducted a comprehensive survey of Lake O'Hara visitors. Each visitor group was invited to complete a single survey. Returned surveys represented 86% of summer visitors.

Half of the respondents were from Alberta and 72% were Canadian. Americans (17%) were the most numerous out-of-country visitors, followed by Europeans (6%). Nearly half of respondents (47%) were first-time visitors.

87% of survey respondents indicated they were "very satisfied" with their visit. The most frequently cited sources of dissatisfaction were with the camping and bus reservation systems. Nature appreciation, adventure, and spending time with friends and family were the most popular reasons for visiting Lake O'Hara.

Nearly half of respondents provided written comments. Despite high overall satisfaction, these comments indicate a significant number of visitors are concerned about issues such as noise, off-trail hikers, littering, large groups of walk-in visitors etc.

The survey results highlight the following areas for improvement:

- fairer and more user-friendly Parks Canada booking systems;
- better and more accurate information to aid in wayfinding;
- better awareness and understanding of the existing quota system;
- more effective communication about preservation and conservation.

In response to these concerns and to the large increase in walk-in visitors

(2,400 in 2016), the LOTC Board has identified the following priorities:

- lobbying Parks Canada to adopt a "walk-in, walk-out" policy as a first step in managing the incursions of walk-ins on the Lake O'Hara quota effectiveness;
- lobbying Parks Canada to make the process of obtaining a bus reservation more equitable (e.g.: lottery system);
- making improvements to trail signage a priority in the LOTC Five-Year Trail Plan;
- continuing to provide funding to support improved visitor education and communication.

Got a suggestion on how we can improve the Lake O'Hara visitor experience? We'd love to hear from you! Contact us through the LOTC website: lotc.ca

Make a Difference. Leave a Legacy

Be part of O'Hara by becoming a member of the Lake O'Hara Trails Club (\$25 for a lifetime membership) and/or making a donation (fully tax-deductible). Your support will help us to preserve and enhance the Lake O'Hara area through trail maintenance and public education.

For more information on how to join or donate, go to www.lotc.ca. You can also forward your name, address, phone number, and membership fee and/or donation to

Lake O'Hara Trails Club

Box 98, Lake Louise, Alberta, Canada, T0L 1E0

Ask an Expert. Use a Map

Looking to make the most of your time at Lake O'Hara? Before heading out, stop by Le Relais to ask local staff about trail conditions and to purchase the Lake O'Hara GemTrek map. This will help you pick the trails best suited to your interests and hiking ability. Relying on your phone for navigation at Lake O'Hara is not

recommended. While on the trail, take note of the signs at trail junctions to orient yourself. Please do not deface or 'correct' signs with the info you get from an app.

Moving to Nature's Beat

The most rewarding way to experience all that Lake O'Hara offers is to "unplug", and use all your senses to

explore the beauty around you. LOTC discourages the use of earphones and external speakers. Speakers are not an effective deterrent to bear encounters. Better to follow Parks Canada's advice to "call out, clap, sing or talk loudly especially near streams, dense vegetation, on windy days, and in areas of low visibility." Enjoy the trails!



Preservation Through Appreciation

2018 Annual General Meeting

Monday, September 17, 2018, 4:30 p.m.
Bill Warren Training Centre, Canmore, Alberta

All Members Welcome!