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Cover: A Southern Rockhopper Penguin *Eudyptes chrysocome* stands on Tussock Grass on Westpoint Island. Painted in poster colors, this artwork is a reproduction of a photograph by Phillip Colla. Thanks to the photographer for the original image. © Pooja Patil.



Sighting of Royle's Pika *Ochotona roylei* Ogilby, 1839 (Mammalia: Lagomorpha: Ochotonidae) in Kishtwar District, Jammu & Kashmir, India

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Pikas *Ochotona* Link, 1795 are small-sized mammals weighing around 100–175 g (Beever 2002). They have rounded ears, short legs, and lack a tail. Pikas are native to Himalaya, the steppes of central Asia, and the mountains of northwestern America (Prater 2005). Unique among the alpine mammals as they gather up vegetation throughout summer including grasses, flowers, leaves, evergreen pine needles, and even pine cones, and create a hay pile to sustain throughout the winter, and maintain fecundity in early spring, rather than hibernating or moving to lower elevations (Huntly et al. 1986; Dearing 1997; Morrison & Hik 2007; Holtcamp 2010). At present there are 30 species of *Ochotona* found globally, with seven species occurring in the Indian Himalayan region (Hoffmann & Smith 2005). Royle's Pika *Ochotona roylei* Ogilby, 1839, is a common species in the Himalayan region (Hoffmann & Smith 2005). Their body length varies 15–20 cm with a head diameter around 7 cm (Alfred et al. 2006). They can be found at 2,500–5,000 m in western Himalaya (Bhattacharya et al. 2009), preferring open rocky grounds, and rhododendron forests (Tak & Lamba 1985). Their distribution directly depends on the availability of forage plant species (Kawamichi 1968). According to IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, the Royle's Pika is classified as 'Least Concern' (Smith & Bhattacharyya 2016) and as per the

IUCN Green Status of Species assessment information it is classified as slightly depleted in 2021 (Bhattacharyya & Dahal 2021). Additionally it is listed under Schedule I of Wildlife (Protection) Amendment Act, 2022 in India indicating highest protection.

During our biodiversity survey assessment on 03 January 2024 in a reserve forest of Upper Dool area (Image 1) (33.341° N, 75.810° E), at an altitude of 2,411 m in Kishtwar, a Royle's Pika was sighted on a rock feeding on stems of herbaceous plants and running around in between the rocks (Image 2). We observed it for approximately 20 minutes. The species was identified based on external characters using a standard field guide (Menon 2014). The site was located within a coniferous forest habitat with huge rocks and boulders (Image 3). The ground cover consisted mostly of dried grasses due to the winter season. Large fallen tree logs were present over the rocks. The dominant tree species in the area were *Cedrus deodara* and *Pinus wallichiana*.

The sighting of Royle's Pika in the study area confirms the presence of this elusive alpine mammal and highlights the ecological significance of relatively understudied regions such as Kishtwar. This observation emphasizes the need for comprehensive biodiversity assessments in these areas, which may harbour species that are otherwise overlooked. To better understand

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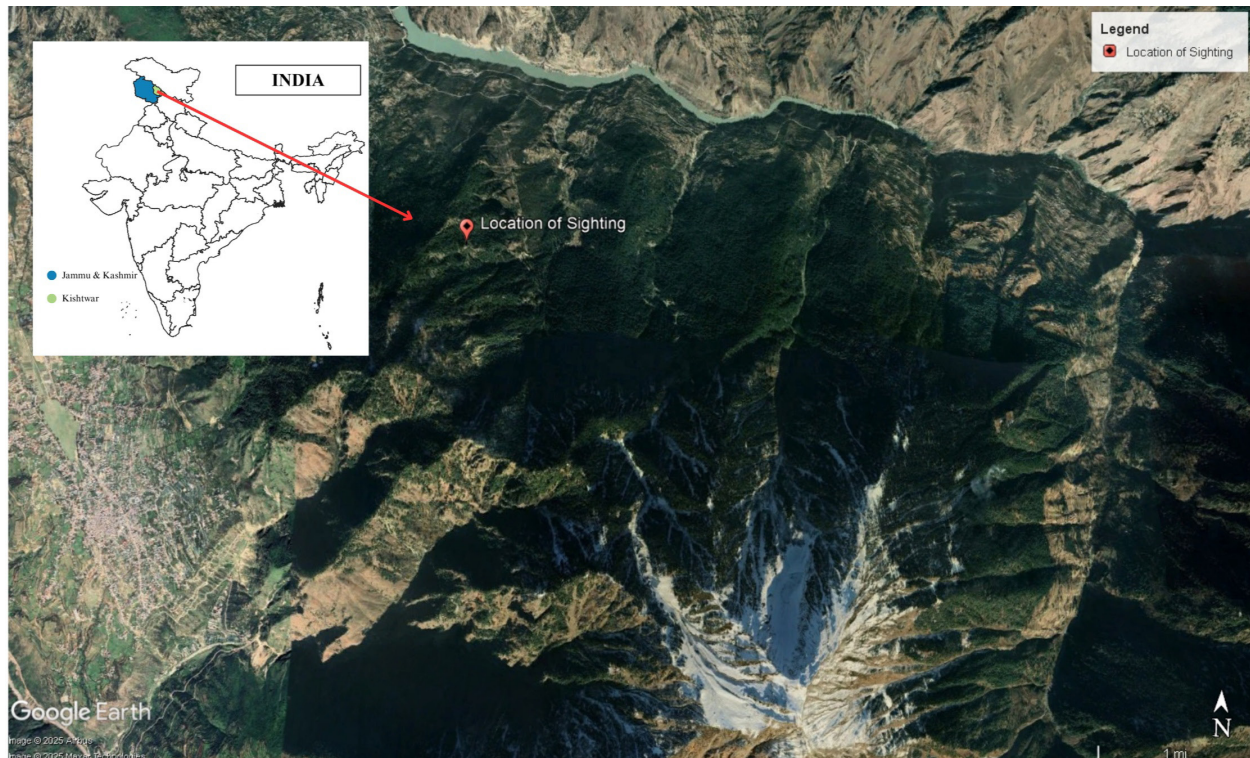


Image 1. Location map of the Royle's Pika *Ochotona roylei* sighting. (Source: Google Earth).



Image 2. Royle's Pika *Ochotona roylei* in Kishtwar, Jammu & Kashmir. © Umar Mushtaq.

the conservation status of Royle's Pika, further research is needed, particularly studies focusing on population trends, habitat preferences, anthropogenic pressures, and the effects of climate change. Given that the Himalaya is among the most climate-sensitive ecosystems globally, characterized by warmer winters,

increased summer precipitation, and accelerated glacial retreat (Shrestha et al. 1999; Kulkarni & Karyakarte 2014), it is possible that such environmental changes are already impacting small mammals like Royle's Pika. These effects may remain undocumented due to limited scientific investigation in the region.



Image 3. Royle's Pika *Ochotona roylei* habitat in the study site.

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