

# Saqullkananek Pililuni – BIRDS: AS RESOURCES



Birds are an abundant and valuable natural resource in the Kodiak Archipelago, as sources of both food and raw material. Alutiiq/Sugpiaq people hunted marine birds, waterfowl, and even raptors for their meat, skins, feathers, beaks, talons, and bone. Spring bird eggs have long been a favorite fresh food.

Alutiiq people harvested eagles and geese with fish-baited snares set in feeding areas. They hunted ducks and seabirds from kayaks using special bird darts, or on land with bows and arrows, or braided sinew nets. Seabirds could also be collected at coastal rookeries. Using ropes made of sea mammals skin, hunters repelled down the rocky cliffs, snatching seabirds from their roosts.

Although birds contributed less to the annual diet than foods like salmon or sea mammals, they were of great economic importance. With few land mammals in the Kodiak Archipelago, bird skins were the primary material for clothing. Alutiiq women fashioned long, hoodless parkas from the hides of puffins, cormorants, and even eagles. Alutiiq people did not tan bird skins, but washed, scraped, and chewed the pelts to clean and soften them for clothing. The number of pelts needed for a parka varied by species and garment design. One source reports that it took 150 cormorant neck skins to create a ceremonial parka. Another notes that 10 eagle skins could be made into a coat.

Bird feathers, *culut*, were also used to fletch arrows, stuff mattresses, make brooms, start fires, and decorated a variety of objects, from gut skin raingear and basketry, to hunting hats and ceremonial masks.



Wooden bird carving, AD  
1400–1750, Koniag, Inc.  
Collection, Karluk One Site.



Petroglyph from Cape Alitak,  
Kodiak Island.

## TUNNGAQ – PUFFIN

There are two varieties of puffins—*tunngat*—in the Kodiak region: the tufted puffin (Latin: *Lunda cirrhata*) and the horned puffin (Latin: *Fratercula corniculata*). These stout little birds live in near shore waters, nesting on rocky cliffs. Puffins are small, weighing up to two pounds. Although Alutiiq people ate their meat—which is reported to taste like tuna fish—they also used puffins for raw material. Puffin skins made warm, water-resistant parkas; puffin bone could be carved into small tools like needles and awls; and their bright orange beaks created rattles and decorated clothing.



# Saqullkanat Ikayusqat – BIRDS AS HELPERS

*Center-Rock  
painting of a  
raven's footprint  
from Cook Inlet.*

In addition to providing food and raw materials, birds were a source of information, inspiration, and spiritual support for Alutiiq people. Elders remember that each Alutiiq/Sugpiaq hunter had at least two helping animal spirits, one for land hunting and one for sea hunting. These spirits provided luck and guidance, and were often birds. The frequent use of bird imagery in Alutiiq art, particularly on bentwood hunting hats, symbolizes this relationship.

In addition to luck, birds provided mariners with critical environmental information. Travelers know that birds can help them predict bad weather, find schools of fish, mark currents, avoid rocks, and lead you to land in the fog. Modern fishermen still appreciate seabirds for these qualities.

Birds were also a symbol of prosperity. When migratory birds returned to Kodiak each spring,

signaling the rebirth of the year, children were allowed to take their toys from storage and play on the beach. To beautify objects and honor their spirits, birds were also carved on household objects, particularly spoons and bowls.

The powerful relationship between people and birds also appears in Alutiiq shamanism. Alutiiq shamans were people who interacted with the spirit world to help cure illness, predict the future, and ensure prosperity. They were believed to fly like birds and hear the voice of their spirit helper in the cry of a bird. Owls, in particular, were believed to help shamans, and shamans' gear was often adorned with bird images. Birds also appear on ceremonial masks, illustrating their powerful qualities. Masks helped people communicate with the spirit world.

## QALNGAAQ – RAVEN

Like many peoples of the North Pacific coast, Alutiiq people admired the crafty raven (Latin: *Corvus corax*) for its intelligence. In Alutiiq stories Raven is both a creator and a hero. He appears as a bird, but possesses supernatural powers that assist him in great deeds. He can speak to people. He is



*A curious raven.  
Photo courtesy of Sven Haakanson, Jr.*

strong enough to carry a whale. He can transform himself into other beings. One traditional legend tells how Raven brought light to the world. By tricking a stingy chief in a distant land, he obtained two boxes, one with the moon and stars, the other with the sun. For bringing these priceless possessions to his village, Raven was rewarded with marriage to the chief's two daughters.