

Bear — Taquka’aq

TAQUKA’AT YUGNITAARAAT, “SUK.”, TAQUKA’AT NIUGNITAARAAT, “SUK.” – BEARS ALWAYS SAY “PERSON.”



Photo: Brown bear mother and cubs, Alaska Peninsula.

The brown or grizzly bear (*Ursus arctos*) is the largest terrestrial mammal in North America. The Kodiak Archipelago is home to more than three thousand of these enormous creatures, which have long been a source of food and raw materials for Alutiiq people. Bears once represented the only large land mammal available to Kodiak hunters, because Sitka deer, elk, and reindeer were introduced in the twentieth century. In addition to meat and fat, bears provided gut for waterproof clothing, bone for tools, teeth for jewelry, and hides for bedding. Inside the warmth of sod houses, people sat on bear hides to sew, make tools, and play games, and in the evening, families wrapped themselves in the plush fur for sleeping.

Bears were traditionally hunted in winter and spring, but not during the salmon season when their meat tasted strongly of fish. Before the introduction of firearms, hunters took bears with bone arrows, slate spears, snares, and deadfall traps. Some were killed in their dens. Others were taken with deadfall traps placed at streams or ambushed along a habitually used trail.

In the early twentieth century, hunters from around the world flocked to Kodiak in search of trophy brown bears, and Alutiiq men became famous for their expertise as guides. In the 1940s, however, the federal government designated much of Kodiak Island as a national wildlife refuge, and bear hunting was seriously restricted. Some of these restrictions have been lifted in recent years, allowing Alutiiq people to once again hunt bears for subsistence purposes.