

Daddy Longlegs — Sukunuuk

SUKUNUUT GUANGKUTA MIK'TANGRAATA ALIKTAAPET! – WE ARE ALWAYS SCARED OF DADDY LONGLEGS, EVEN WHEN THEY'RE SMALL!

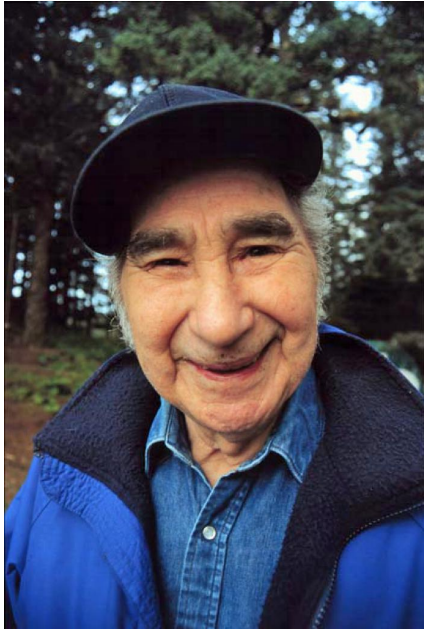


Photo: Elder John Pestrikoff on Afognak Island.
Courtesy of Sven Haakanson Jr.

Daddy longlegs is a common term used to refer to a variety of spider-like creatures: bugs with exceptionally long, thin legs. Among this group are harvestmen, eight-legged arachnids with a two-sectioned body and just two eyes. There are just thirteen species of harvestmen in Alaska, out of several thousand recognized worldwide. These creatures typically live outdoors, frequenting dark, damp places where they hide during the day. Harvestmen are omnivorous. They eat small insects and plant material. Unlike spiders, however, harvestmen have no venom.

The Alutiiq word for a daddy longlegs, *sukunuuk*, literally means “thing that likes damp places.” John Pestrikoff of Port Lions knows this to be true. He remembers a day when he was traveling along the coast of Kodiak. He and a friend had been rowing for many hours when they stopped at an old *barabara* to spend the night. The sod house had a small *banya*, a steam bath in a separate building to the side. The men decided to heat up the *banya* for a relaxing wash. It was an old-fashioned *banya*, where rocks had to be warmed outside. So the two men built a fire near the *banya* door and heated a pile of rocks to carry in.

Pestrikoff took the first turn. He carried some hot rocks into the very small *banya*. It was dark. A heavy piece of canvas covered the low door and there was just enough room for him, the rocks, and a basin of water. He splashed the hot rocks to get the room steaming and started to wash his face. But he couldn't get clean. His face felt rough and dirty. So Pestrikoff kept dipping his hands into the basin and splashing his face. But he wasn't getting clean. Finally, he opened the door and stepped outside. In the basin were hundreds of daddy longlegs that had crawled into the cool water to escape the heat. They had been living in the dark, damp *banya* and had fallen into his basin due to the hot steam!