

Magpie — Qallqayaq, Uguusiq

QALLQAYAT TEGLENGARTAARTUT. – MAGPIES LIKE TO STEAL THINGS.



Painting: Magpies, by Lena Amason. Acrylic and oil on birch wood. Purchased for the Alutiiq Museum collections with assistance from the Rasmuson Foundation.

Magpies are a member of the crow family, a group that includes crows, ravens, and jays. There are just two species of magpies in North America, the black-billed magpie (*Pica hudsonia*) found in Alaska and the western United States, and the yellow-billed magpie (*Pica nuttalli*), indigenous to California. The black-billed magpie is common in central and western Alaska. This large black-and-white bird inhabits shrub thickets and open forests but can live in urban areas. Its most distinctive feature is a black, wedge-shaped tail that is nearly as long as its body. Magpies live in groups and eat everything from bugs and seeds to baby birds, road kills, and garbage.

Magpies are known for their boisterous “mag, mag, mag” call and their bold, confident personalities. These characteristics have made them the subject of stories and jokes in many cultures. Both the Tlingit and the Alutiiq people use the word magpie as a nickname. For example, a difficult person or a talkative person may be called a magpie.

To Alutiiq people, magpies are an annoyance because they steal drying food. Many people cover their fish racks with netting to keep the birds away.

Alutiiq artists also use the magpie’s black feathers to decorate crafts, as they have a beautiful iridescent green or purple sheen. However, because magpies are protected under the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act, their feathers may not be bought or sold.