

## Ptarmigan — Qateriuk, Qat’riuk, Qateriuq, Qat’riuq

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### AMLERTAALLRIT QATERIUT. – THERE USED TO BE A LOT OF PTARMIGAN.

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Photo: Willow Ptarmigan on Kodiak Island. Courtesy of the USF&WS National Digital Archive.

Alaska is home to three varieties of ptarmigan, two of which live in the Kodiak Archipelago. The willow ptarmigan (*Lagopus lagopus*) inhabits low, wet tundra environments while the rock ptarmigan (*Lagopus mutus*) lives in rocky mountain habitats. Ptarmigans are small birds, weighing no more than a pound and a half. Biologists believe that they are abundant in the Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge. Although the size of the population is unknown, willow ptarmigan are more common than rock ptarmigan.

During the warm season, ptarmigan scatter across the landscape to feed on plants, berries, flowers, and insects. In fall, ptarmigan form flocks, congregating and dispersing repeatedly until winter conditions prevail. During the cold season, the birds live in large nomadic flocks, moving continually in search of food. This is the easiest time of year to hunt ptarmigan.

Ptarmigan are a valued winter resource in Alutiiq homes. When stormy weather makes it difficult to hunt by boat, people often hike into the hills in search of birds. On Kodiak, the official ptarmigan hunting season is mid-August through the end of April. Ptarmigan are not always easy to find, however. Although they may be abundant in places, their populations can fluctuate dramatically. Moreover, they are susceptible to over-hunting.

Although ptarmigan are always a delicious meal, Elders recall eating the birds when they were sick. Because ptarmigan feed on wild herbs, they are thought to have strong medicinal properties. Some Alutiiq people will boil the birds for hours to create a rich, healing broth.