

## Lake Person, Mermaid — Nanwam Suugii

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SUUGET ILAIT NIU'UQURTAARAIT NANWAM SUUGI ELL'UNI. – SOME PEOPLE ALWAYS TALK ABOUT THERE BEING A 'LAKE PERSON.'

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Photo: View across Karluk Lake in spring. Karluk Lake Survey Collection, AM620.

Stories of unusual creatures associated with water are ancient and found in many cultures. Greek myths talk of the sirens, birds with women's faces whose sweet songs lure sailors to their death. The Scottish tell tales of the beautiful Selkie, gentle beings who swim the oceans as seals and shed their skins to walk on land as people.

In Alutiiq legends, creatures move between the human and animal worlds by putting on and taking off skins that retain animal characteristics. A boy escapes harm by wrapping himself in an otter skin and swimming away. A swan removes her feathers to become a woman. Bears are descended from people. These tales highlight the Alutiiq belief that all creatures have an inner, human-like consciousness. Inside animals are fundamentally human. It is not surprising, therefore, that Alutiiq Elders tell stories about human-like sea creatures.

Clyda Christiansen remembered Elders speaking of mermaids and relating that people would be turned into beings that were half human and half fish at the end of the world. This legend combines Bible stories with Alutiiq concepts of the universe where the boundaries between people and animals are fluid.

Lucile Davis recalled a creature that lived in Karluk Lake and was associated with sightings of dead people. The creature would appear in the lake, or in the river or swamp below the lake. These were the places where the dead showed themselves to the living, so they would not be forgotten. Here, Lucille's youngest brother Moses saw the spirit of Phillip Vasili, a man who drowned in nearby Larsen Bay. To protect themselves, people said blessings and sprinkled holy water across the area.