

Barren Islands — Qukami Qik'rtat

QUKAMI QIK'RTAT CARWARTUU'UTAARTUT. – THE BARREN ISLANDS HAVE STRONG RIP TIDES.



Photo: View from Ushagat Island in the Barren Islands group.

The Barren Islands are a mountainous cluster of islands at the far northern end of the Kodiak Archipelago. These six small pieces of land cover just 318 acres and include Ushagat, West Amatuli, East Amatuli, Nord, Sud, and Sugarloaf. The largest, Ushagat, is less than eight miles long and four miles wide. All of the islands have steep topography, with rocky cliffs and few good landing places. They are also known for their powerful tides, unpredictable weather, and abundant birdlife. Recent studies suggest that more than 400,000 sea birds inhabit the Barrens, including colonies of pelagic cormorants, murrelets, gulls, kittiwakes, fork-tailed-storm petrels, puffins, and rhinoceros auklets.

The names applied to these remote islands have both European and Alutiiq origins. The term Barren Island comes from Captain James Cook, a British explorer who sailed through the area in May of 1778 and remarked on the landscape's naked appearance. Captain Dixon is credited with naming Sugarloaf in 1779, and Spanish sailors are believed to have added the name Amatuli to the map. Nord and Sud, the names for the smallest islands, are from the French terms for North

and South.

In contrast, Ushagat, which appears on a Russian map dating to 1852, is likely from the Alutiiq language. Other Alutiiq place names for the islands have been lost to time, but today, Elders call the group Qukami Qik'rtat carwartuu'utaartut. The Barren Islands have strong rip tides and islands in the middle. This refers to their location between Kodiak and the southern tip of the Kenai Peninsula and their importance as a stopping place for paddlers traveling between the archipelago and the mainland. Mariners also know they can find moorage here in poor weather. However, the islands were more than a stopping place for travelers. Archaeological sites with sod house remains suggest Alutiiq that people lived in the Barrens, and historic sources indicate hunters traveled here to harvest birds.