

Fly — Tengluni

UKSUQ TAIKAN SAQUL'AAT TENGTAARTUT AGLUTENG. – WHEN WINTER COMES, THE DUCKS FLY AWAY.



Photo: A gull in flight over Kodiak Island, AM725.

Birds are special creatures in the Alutiiq world. They can fly the skies, walk the land, and swim the seas. Because of their unique ability to traverse the many layers of the universe, birds are messengers. They facilitate communication between the spirit and human worlds, particularly the sky world. This is where bird heaven lies and where migratory birds fly every winter. Birds can foretell the future and share information through their behavior and by talking with people. Elders warn that if a bird flies into a house, it is a sign of an impending death.

Many Alutiiq hunters once choose a type of bird as their special assistant and bird imagery is widespread in Alutiiq art. Moreover, people wore bird-skin parkas and used bird skins, feathers, and beaks to decorate clothing, hats, masks, and rattles. By incorporating bird parts in clothing, the seamstress transferred some of the animal's abilities to the garment's wearer. Alutiiq lore tells us this could include strength, vision, or even the ability to fly.

Flying is widely discussed in Alutiiq legends and closely linked to the power of bird feathers. In one legend, a boy escapes his murderous uncle through the cunning use of eagle down. One day, the uncle took his nephew to collect bird eggs. They stopped at the top of a high cliff. Below there were many nests filled with eggs. The uncle instructed the boy to collect the eggs. Sensing danger, the boy clutched pieces of eagle down in each hand. As he started to climb down the cliff, his uncle pushed him. However, the eagle down helped him float through the air and land softly. After collecting the eggs, he used the down to fly back up the cliff. He returned home safely thanks to the protection of the eagle down and much to the surprise of his evil uncle.