

Flea — Saqemkaq

SAQEMKAQ QETGAUWARTUQ. – THE FLEA IS JUMPING AROUND.

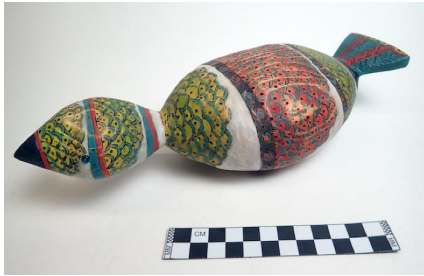


Photo: Sea duck, by Jacqueline Madsen, 2015.
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In Alutiiq, the word *saqemkaq* means flea. People refer to the biting vermin found on both household pets and wild animals with this term. However, *saqemkaq* can also describe the lice found on birds, particularly ducks and eagles. This word comes from the root *saqur-* meaning wing. This is also the root for the word *saqul'aaq*, or duck. Another way to translate Saqemkaq is “duck bug”.

The North American flea is less common in Alaska than in warmer climates, although fleas are present in wild animal populations. Studies show that Alaska’s voles, mice, lemming, squirrels, mink, marten, bears, and other animals can carry these annoying insects. Although flea larvae can lay dormant for many months, adults and their offspring are often killed off by cold northern winters. As such, other external parasites more commonly plague Alaska’s animals. This includes the lice found on wild birds. Port Lions hunters report that harlequin ducks are easy to harvest but seldomly taken because they tend to have lice.

The Alutiiq language has a variety of words for bugs and parasites, illustrating the detailed knowledge of harvesters who encounter these pests. In addition to duck bugs, there are Alutiiq words for sand fleas, snow fleas, and fish lice.