

# Saqullkanat Ikayusqat – BIRDS AS HELPERS

Center-Rock  
painting of a  
raven's footprint  
from Cook Inlet.

In addition to providing food and raw materials, birds were a source of information, inspiration, and spiritual support for Alutiiq people. Elders remember that each Alutiiq/Sugpiaq hunter had at least two helping animal spirits, one for land hunting and one for sea hunting. These spirits provided luck and guidance, and were often birds. The frequent use of bird imagery in Alutiiq art, particularly on bentwood hunting hats, symbolizes this relationship.

In addition to luck, birds provided mariners with critical environmental information. Travelers know that birds can help them predict bad weather, find schools of fish, mark currents, avoid rocks, and lead you to land in the fog. Modern fishermen still appreciate seabirds for these qualities.

Birds were also a symbol of prosperity. When migratory birds returned to Kodiak each spring,

signaling the rebirth of the year, children were allowed to take their toys from storage and play on the beach. To beautify objects and honor their spirits, birds were also carved on household objects, particularly spoons and bowls.

The powerful relationship between people and birds also appears in Alutiiq shamanism. Alutiiq shamans were people who interacted with the spirit world to help cure illness, predict the future, and ensure prosperity. They were believed to fly like birds and hear the voice of their spirit helper in the cry of a bird. Owls, in particular, were believed to help shamans, and shamans' gear was often adorned with bird images. Birds also appear on ceremonial masks, illustrating their powerful qualities. Masks helped people communicate with the spirit world.

## QALNGAAQ – RAVEN

Like many peoples of the North Pacific coast, Alutiiq people admired the crafty raven (Latin: *Corvus corax*) for its intelligence. In Alutiiq stories Raven is both a creator and a hero. He appears as a bird, but possesses supernatural powers that assist him in great deeds. He can speak to people. He is strong enough to carry a whale. He can transform himself into other beings. One traditional legend tells how Raven brought light to the world. By tricking a stingy chief in a distant land, he obtained two boxes, one with the moon and stars, the other with the sun. For bringing these priceless possessions to his village, Raven was rewarded with marriage to the chief's two daughters.



A curious raven.  
Photo courtesy of Sven Haakanson, Jr.