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Press Release

SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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APRIL ARTIFACT OF THE MONTH KOTZEBUE SOUND BIRD NET

Spring in the Arctic brings the beginning of a huge bird migration. Before the coming of guns to the Arctic, a variety of implements were used to take advantage of this bountiful harvest of birds. Bird bolas, spears, bows and arrows and nets were the primary means for hunting birds. The Sheldon Jackson Museum's Artifact of the Month is a net that was probably used in the capture of ptarmigan in the Kotzebue Sound area. The fine sinew netting is attached to three narrow stakes about 1½ feet tall. The stakes were driven into the ground in the form of a triangle surrounding a lure that was shaped like a bird.

Ptarmigan, as with many of the birds and animals of the Arctic at this time of year, are in a heightened sense of awareness toward the opposite sex or what they perceive to be a potential mating partner. Well aware of the bird's preoccupation, Inupiaq and Yup'ik hunters set up decoys that appear to the male ptarmigan as an alluring female. Sometimes an area was cleared of snow, and then a "snow bird" decoy created with brown grass around the neck to simulate the changing plumage of spring was used. The unsuspecting male, having eyes only for a female ptarmigan, fails to notice the finely twisted sinew netting surrounding the decoy. As he dashes headlong toward the waiting enticement he becomes hopelessly entangled in the net, easy prey for the waiting hunter. A quick twist of the neck or blow to the head and the amorous ptarmigan is dinner.

Sometimes the nets were used to surround a decoy rival. The hidden hunter sounds a challenge and the pugnacious territorial defender throws himself at the perceived rival. Once again the waiting hunter fills his hunting bag and heads back to his camp.

Bird nets were used throughout Alaska. Small ones like this usually captured one bird at a time, and others that were 5 to 8 feet tall were used to trap many fowl at once. The larger nets were often used near water where flocks would come to rest and, as they were scared into flight by the hunters, they too became entangled and added variety to the standard diets of seal or caribou.

The net can be seen in the museum gallery April 1 through 30. Winter hours at the Sheldon Jackson Museum are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. Winter admission is \$3. Visitors 18 and younger, Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum, and those with passes are admitted free of charge. The basket can also be views on our website at http://www.museums.state.ak.us/sheldon_jackson/artifact_of_month.html.

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