

Bags, Boats, Raincoats, Window Panes - All Made from Bearded Oogruk

(Editor's Note: During the first several years of publication of the Tundra Times, Howard Rock wrote a series of articles about the traditional way of life of Arctic peoples. Entitled "Arctic Survival," the series was popular with many readers, including the late Senator E.L. "Bob" Bartlett who entered one of the stories in the Congressional Record. The Tundra Times has received numerous requests for reprinting the stories. Beginning with this issue, we will reprint Howard's survival series. After the series has been reprinted, the entire collection will be made available in book form. — T.R.)

By HOWARD ROCK
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Bags for storing food, waterproof raincoats, and translucent window panes are just a few of the many articles Eskimos make from the Oogruk — the great bearded seal. Oogruk is a giant compared with the hair seal. It weighs up to well over a thousand pounds. Unlike the common hair seal that is spotted with dark gray hair on its back, Oogruk hair is quite uniformly gray except for a slightly darker shade on the back.

The Eskimo has adapted the oogruk into many uses. Its size makes it ideal for certain items needed.

As food, it is considered as one of the most necessary. When stored for future use it is cut in large pieces, laced with rawhide thong into large balls, and put in underground caches. It is also filleted and dried and put in seal skin pokes which have been partially filled with seal oil and stored in cool places.

The outer part of the intestines is scraped off and used for food. There are other uses for the oogruk intestines.

Intestines, up to 75 feet in length, are thoroughly cleaned. The Eskimo housewife lays a smooth flat piece of wood usually on coarse, clean gravel beach. She takes one end of an intestine, lays it on the flat piece of wood, and picks up a scraper. In the present day, this scraper is usually a common table spoon. She scrapes off the outer layer of the intestine

down to the tough inner layer of tissue. The outer part comes off quite easily.

When the whole length of the intestine has been scraped thoroughly, the woman ties one end of it tightly. She then takes the other end and inflates the whole length. When inflated, the intestine is about two and a half inches in diameter.

It is then strung high off the ground from one post to another to dry.

When it is dry, the Eskimo housewife prepares it for the following items.

First she cuts the intestine into four foot sections. Then she slits them and spreads them out. Each section makes a strip of material 5 inches by 4 feet. The woman then sews the sections into a square. When finished, she has a new skylight or window pane. The gut is translucent and yellowish white in color and about as thick as onion skin paper. Daylight can pass through the gut nicely but it is airtight and waterproof.

RAINCOAT

For another useful item, the Eskimo housewife repeats the process she used in making the skylight. After sewing the strips together, she patterns a raincoat for her husband, sewing the pieces together with special water-proof stitches.

In the old days, when the housewife busied herself around the home, she made a nursing bag from oogruk gut with which to feed her babies. She cut about a seven inch section of intestine, tied one end tightly and filled the intestine with warm broth. She then tied the end rather loosely with sinew leaving about an inch between the loose knot and the end. A crosspiece or a disk of wood is fitted over the knot to prevent the baby from swallowing the bag.

To keep her baby quiet while busy working, she put the loosely knotted end into the mouth of her baby and fed it the warm broth.

In modern supermarkets today plastic bags are used to store cranberries, fruits, and vegetables. Centuries before they were invented the Eskimo used oogruk intestine bags to store berries and other food-stuffs.

SKIN NEEDED

The skin of the oogruk has

been, perhaps one of the most needed materials the Eskimo has required in his struggle for survival. He used the skin for many things.

The skin of the oogruk is an ideal covering for the umiak or skin boat. After the hair is separated from the oogruk skin by it having been soaked in oil in a warm room for about a week and a half, several women get together to sew together six oogruk skins for an umiak.

GOSSIPS

This working group of sewers is usually a kind of social gathering during which the women chat and gossip as they sew.

A 24-foot umiak requires six oogruk skins. These skins are sewn together by women using waterproof stitches. Then a group of men drape it on the umiak frame. When the skin is dry, the boat is ready for use by

whalers.

When the Eskimo needs strong rawhide thong for whaling and other needs, he uses a yearling oogruk for that purpose. A yearling oogruk is more resilient and tough and will not snap as easily as older oogruk skin.

Another common and important use of the oogruk is for mukluk soles. The skin is tough, longwearing and waterproof.

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Oogruk . . .

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Oogruk, the great bearded seal, has been one of the great boons of the Eskimo of the Arctic. Without this animal, the Eskimo would not have been able to get some of his most necessary materials for living in the north. Whale hunting would have been almost impossible without this important animal.

Oogruk must be held in high regard by the Eskimo in his long battle of survival.