

SYMBOLS OF NUNAVUT

On May 1, 2000, the Legislative Assembly designated the following to accompany Nunavut's Flag, Coat of Arms and Mace as symbols of Canada's newest territory.

ROCK PTARMIGAN (LAGOPUS MUTUS)

While most other birds migrate south in the early fall, the **Rock Ptarmigan** (*Lagopus mutus*) is truly an arctic bird, living in Nunavut throughout the year. Called *Aqiggiq* in Inuktitut, the rock ptarmigan is found throughout the circumpolar world, earning a place in the art, folklore and diet of indigenous peoples. Distinct from most other birds with its three variations of plumage instead of the usual two, the rock ptarmigan faces its biggest challenge to survival in the winter, when snow and wind conditions make food and shelter hard to find.

Camouflaged by its white winter plumage, the rock ptarmigan uses its long black claws to scratch through the snow to reach buried vegetation such as the low-lying purple saxifrage. Other characteristic features of the bird mirror human adaptations to the harsh Arctic surroundings. A black stripe from the corner of the bill and across the eyes has been compared to a pair of Inuit snow goggles, a unique invention to prevent snow blindness in the glare of the Arctic spring. A rock ptarmigan's feet are feathered right down to the toes, keeping it warm, and acting as a pair of feathery snowshoes to prevent the bird from sinking into the snow. And, in the deep of winter, the ptarmigan will use the snow as a shelter, burrowing deep to escape the bitter wind and indigenous predators such as the fox and marten. Adaptations such as these have earned the rock ptarmigan its place as an Arctic symbol — and as the official bird of Nunavut.



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PURPLE SAXIFRAGE (SAXIFRAGA OPPOSITIFOLIA)

A welcome sight to northerners, the **Purple Saxifrage** (*Saxifraga oppositifolia*) is one of the first plants to flower in the Arctic spring. This plant most often grows in very rocky ground where no other plants seem able to grow. Small, with trailing leafy stems, the branches end in single flowers, which are often so crowded together that there appear to be many more than one on a stem. Called *Aupilaktunnguut* ("something like blood spots") in Inuktitut, the petals of the purple saxifrage are usually a vibrant purple colour, although a single white flower can occasionally be seen. Where many of the plants grow together across the tundra, they provide a vivid purple contrast to the snow that is often still present when they flower.



The purple saxifrage plays a number of roles in Northern culture. The full blooming of the flowers indicates the time of year when young caribou are being born out on the land. The flowers of the purple saxifrage have a sweet taste and are eaten especially in communities where berries are not abundant. When eaten, the flowers can help relieve gastric problems, but, as with all herbal remedies, if eaten in excess can cause complications. The stems and leaves can be used to make tea. According to many Nunavummiut, the tea is best later in the season after the flowers have died. In times when tobacco was a valued commodity, the stems and leaves were often added to store-bought tobacco. As one of Nunavut's hardiest and most reliable plants, it is fitting that the purple saxifrage has been chosen as its Floral Emblem.

CANADIAN INUIT DOG (CANIS FAMILIARIS BOREALIS)

Nunavut has selected the **Canadian Inuit Dog** (*Canis familiaris borealis*) to be the official animal of the new territory. Called *Qimmiq* in Inuktitut, this dog is one of the world's oldest pure breeds and, from archaeological evidence, is known to have been resident in the Arctic for at least 4000 years. This dog has been essential to the survival of the Inuit for generations, being the only draft animal for long-range travel and a willing and capable hunting companion.

The Canadian Inuit Dog is perfectly suited, through long adaptation, to survive in the hostile Arctic environment. They are thick-coated, robust animals of medium size (30 - 38 kg.), with curly tails, upright ears and an overall appearance of strength and stamina. The breed is non-colour specific, with all known dog colours and shades being possible. The breed is free of genetic defects, thrives on a diet of protein and fat and is first and foremost a superb working animal.

