



ICELAND

"There isn't much I can say about Iceland that hasn't been said before. All the superlatives apply. It's a strange, moody, fantastical place rising from the extremities of everything. A place where the primordial ooze of the Earth comes up against well-paved roads and credit card machines that work every time. If it were possible to have a layover on another planet, perhaps Iceland wouldn't be as popular. But it is extremely popular. Approaching the country from a birding perspective, however, frequently leads us off the beaten path, and deep into the natural wonders. Our route takes us from the Southwest corner up the west coast to the Westfjords, across to the northeast, and back again. The birdlife is at times staggering, with a low diversity but high abundance. Our tour is timed to coincide with the height of the breeding season, when seemingly every bird is in some agitated state of caring for eggs or young, and the whole island is like one big, beautiful blooming stage of abundant growth and fecundity, where the sun barely sets. We had gorgeous weather, with plenty of unseasonable warmth and sunshine.

We all gathered in the late morning at the Keflavik airport, and set out directly on a bit of birding, towards the lighthouse at Gardur. Some of the birds that would become our constant roadside companions were already in evidence, including Eurasian Oystercatchers, European Golden-Plovers, Common Redshanks, Meadow Pipits, White Wagtails, and others. Stopping at the ponds at Sandgerdi, we studied the local gulls, saw our first Graylag Geese, and even discovered a rarity, the tour's first Little Egret! On the "circle dirt" road we spotted several Rock Ptarmigans, Parasitic Jaegers, Common Ringed Plovers, and others. The lighthouse at Gardur is a good vantage point to look for seabirds, particularly Northern Gannets and Manx Shearwaters, the latter being tough away from the southern part of the country. We saw a few. We also saw countless alcids passing by, with promises of many more to come. Common Eiders were abundant here, and Northern Fulmars passed by in review. After a bit of lunch, we made our way up to Borgarnes, where we'd stay the night. Before dinner we had time to explore the fjord here, scanning a distant peninsula for White-tailed Eagle, and sure enough finding one perched on a prominent rock. This bay is also the stronghold for Common Shelduck in Iceland, and we spotted a number of them along the flats. Dinner back at our hotel in Borgarnes, and a much-needed rest after all of our travels.

After a leisurely morning, we packed up and set out for some birding en route to Grundarfjordur, on the northern side of the Snaefells Peninsula. We took a long, dirt-road loop out to the Akur wetlands, finding our first Black-tailed Godwits, lots of Red-throated Loons, many ptarmigans, jaegers, Northern Wheatear, and much more. By lunchtime we were at a little outpost along the road with an excellent cafe, and the glacier on Snaefellsnes increasingly close. Taking the high road over the peninsula dropped us down in Olafsvik, which has excellent birding. A great gathering of gulls, mostly Glaucous and Great Black-backed, near a fish factory, seemed like a good spot to search for the odd lingering Iceland Gull. In little time we spotted a couple. We continued west, through an enormous Arctic Tern colony, out into breathtaking Snaefellsjokull National Park, and to the beautiful bird cliffs at Saxholsbjarg. Here, two kinds of murre, Razorbills, a few Atlantic Puffins, and numerous Black-legged Kittiwakes were close at hand, occupying the vertical towers of rock, while behind us the mossy, flower-covered lava fields and the great glacier gleaming white. Off to the south, I noticed a pod of Orcas feeding, and after some distant views, they suddenly appeared quite close! Watching these magnificent animals from land was a thrill. Already late in the afternoon, it was time to backtrack a bit and head east to Grundarfjordur, where after settling into our hotel we gathered again for dinner.

ICELAND: Bird List...2

The next morning we had booked for a 10am whalewatching boat out of Olafsvik, so we had time for just a brief scan around town, which produced Purple Sandpipers, before heading to the docks. The boat trip was wonderful, a little choppy but the visibility was excellent. Marine mammals included even more Orcas putting on quite a show, and good views of Minke Whales. We returned to land invigorated and hungry, and had a great sit-down lunch by the dock. In the afternoon, after a fine walk into some very old fish huts, we drove around the western part of the peninsula, keeping the glacier in view all the time, to the picturesque village of Arnarstapi. This place is famous for its fantastical columns and archways of beautifully-patterned basalt rock. Those same columns are also home to numerous nesting kittiwakes and fulmars, as well as European Shags. A surprise visit from a Long-tailed Jaeger was a highlight, as we watched the bird circle around the colony before heading off to sea. Just a lovely place to stroll around and to take photographs, and to finish a great day in the field. We crossed back over the mountain to our home base in the town of Grundarfjordur once again.

Next day we were off early for the harbor town of Stikkisholmur, where we boarded the ferry across Breidafjordur, the Broad Sound. On the way we made an emergency stop for a stunning adult male King Eider, before continuing on to the docks. The ferry runs twice, so we were able to walk off at the tiny island of Flatey and spend a number of hours there, catching the later ferry north across the second half of the bay. Flatey is a wonderful spot to have to spend some hours. Every angle reminds one of a postcard. Beautiful houses, a beautiful church, and noisy nesting birds everywhere. One bird in particular, the Red Phalarope, is quite rare in Iceland, and this is a well-known location. So we set our sights on finding this bird, and after some real effort, we succeeded. The soup at the hotel was a welcome respite from the elements, and gradually the group dissipated, each enjoying the island at their own pace, before we all gathered again to board the ferry north. Once reunited with our van, and now in the Westfjords, it was an hour drive of unreal beauty to our remote hotel at Breidavik. Having dined on the ferry, we took just a bit of time to settle in at our lodgings before heading out for the extraordinary evening light at the bird cliffs of Latrabjarg, just to the west. This is one of the great sights on the planet. Staggering, towering, bigger than imaginable, cliffs covered with birds, ocean teeming with wings, raucous calls as far as the wind can carry, wall upon wall of birds, murrens mostly, so many kittiwakes, puffins close enough to touch. We stayed here until after 10pm.

In the morning we had a sleep in, and some of us took the time to explore the scenery around the hotel. Then we were off towards the northeast, with a few stops along the way, for things like a gaggle of bawdy Harlequin Ducks, ever-changing scenery, and an overnight stop at the lovely Holiday Hotel Daeli, near Hvammstangi. The next day we continued our trek, doing a bit of birding at the river mouth at Blonduos, stopping for Pink-footed Geese along the river east of Varmalid, and passing some quality town time in Akureyri. By now it was positively hot! We rolled into our lodgings at guesthouse Brekka, just south of Husavik, with enough time to rest, before heading into town for our evening whalewatch. We boarded the old boat, the evening was splendid, and we had great views of Humpback Whales, and lots of puffins and the like. Once on land again, we dined at a good restaurant by the harbor, and had time after dinner to spy Short-eared Owls and even a family of Gyrfalcons! When the sun never sets, it's hard to quit birding.

The next day we devoted to exploring Myvatn, the famous "lake of the midges". This shallow lake, with its incredibly food-rich waters, is home to thousands of pairs of ducks, notably Eurasian Wigeons and Tufted Ducks, but also Long-tailed Duck, Common Scoter, the only European-breeding Barrow's Goldeneyes, and others. We also experienced our first real forest birding at Hofn, where Eurasian Wrens, Redwings, and Redpolls sing. Just as we were feeling like we were in a familiar European garden, however, we made our way to the most unearthly mud pots, where steaming cauldrons of boiling gray ooze spit and plop against a backdrop of red sand and yellow rivulets of sulfur. We took a very beautiful walk along Laxa, or Salmon River, where we met an exuberant fisherman and a family of Harlequin Ducks, before having a rest up at the hotel, and then went back into town for another fine dinner.

ICELAND: Bird List...3

Our final full day in the northeast was spent touring around Cape Husavik, north and east of town, beginning with a very enjoyable walk along the prominent cliffs on the northern tip. By now we were quite the experts when it came to the birds of Iceland, and a lot of our time was spent marveling, botanizing, and working on photography. We visited the site of a rather confused Black Tern, who had returned for a second season to an Arctic Tern colony, locating him quickly. We then visited a remote colony of Great Skuas, which involved a bit of a hike across a broad plain of volcanic sediment. From here we followed the same river up to where it plummets with great fury at the waterfall of Dettifoss. Not your everyday waterfall, this is simply a spectacle, a marvel, a deafening torrent of violent crashing and endlessly falling water as deadly powerful as steel.

Our final day was a long trek back to the capitol. A few stops along the way, including the humbler but very beautiful waterfall at Godafoss, a forest near Akureyri where we found the country's only Fieldfares, along with a Eurasian Siskin, and a spruce-pine plantation recently colonized by Goldcrests and Crossbills. After a long and of course endlessly scenic drive, we made it into Reykjavik in time for an excellent final meal in the town centre – *Evan Obercian*

Bird List:

Column A: Number of tours this species has been recorded on.

Column B: Number of days this species was seen on the last tour.

Column C: Maximum daily count for this species on the last tour.

x = non-avian species seen on the last tour.

A		B	C	
15	Pink-footed Goose	3	40	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>
15	Graylag Goose	9	250	<i>Anser anser</i>
1	Snow Goose			<i>Chen caerulescens</i>
4	Brant (Atlantic)			<i>Branta bernicla hrota</i>
1	Canada Goose			<i>Branta canadensis</i>
2	Barnacle Goose			<i>Branta leucopsis</i>
15	Whooper Swan	9	75	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>
15	Common Shelduck	1	50	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>
15	Gadwall	3	200	<i>Anas strepera</i>
15	Eurasian Wigeon	3	3000	<i>Anas penelope</i>
4	American Wigeon			<i>Anas americana</i>
15	Mallard	9	100	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
1	Blue-winged Teal			<i>Anas discors</i>
9	Northern Shoveler	2	2	<i>Anas clypeata</i>
12	Northern Pintail	3	8	<i>Anas acuta</i>
1	Green-winged Teal			<i>Anas crecca</i>
15	Green-winged Teal (Eurasian)	8	20	<i>Anas crecca crecca/nimia</i>
3	Common Pochard			<i>Aythya ferina</i>
3	Ring-necked Duck			<i>Aythya collaris</i>
15	Tufted Duck	5	800	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>
15	Greater Scaup	3	10	<i>Aythya marila</i>
1	Lesser Scaup			<i>Aythya affinis</i>
5	Steller's Eider			<i>Polysticta stelleri</i>
12	King Eider	1	1	<i>Somateria spectabilis</i>
15	Common Eider	9	1500	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>
15	Harlequin Duck	2	20	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>

ICELAND: Bird List...4

1	White-winged Scoter			<i>Melanitta fusca</i>
15	Common Scoter	1	4	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>
15	Long-tailed Duck	2	15	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>
3	Common Goldeneye			<i>Bucephala clangula</i>
15	Barrow's Goldeneye	4	30	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>
7	Common Merganser (Eurasian)	2	5	<i>Mergus merganser merganser/orientalis</i>
15	Red-breasted Merganser	9	20	<i>Mergus serrator</i>
15	Rock Ptarmigan	3	8	<i>Lagopus muta</i>
15	Red-throated Loon	5	16	<i>Gavia stellata</i>
15	Common Loon	5	4	<i>Gavia immer</i>
15	Horned Grebe	3	12	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>
15	Northern Fulmar	9	5000	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>
14	Manx Shearwater	1	15	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>
9	European Storm-Petrel	1	6	<i>Hydrobates pelagicus</i>
15	Northern Gannet	5	30	<i>Morus bassanus</i>
15	Great Cormorant	3	300	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
15	European Shag	3	5	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>
1	Gray Heron			<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
1	Little Egret			<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
15	White-tailed Eagle	1	1	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>
1	Eurasian Coot	1	2	<i>Fulica atra</i>
15	Eurasian Oystercatcher	9	50	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>
15	European Golden-Plover	9	100	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>
3	Northern Lapwing			<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>
15	Common Ringed Plover	8	10	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>
15	Whimbrel	9	40	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>
1	Eurasian Curlew			<i>Numenius arquata</i>
15	Black-tailed Godwit (islandica)	8	30	<i>Limosa limosa islandica</i>
1	Bar-tailed Godwit			<i>Limosa lapponica</i>
15	Ruddy Turnstone	1	1	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>
11	Red Knot			<i>Calidris canutus</i>
3	Sanderling			<i>Calidris alba</i>
15	Dunlin	8	50	<i>Calidris alpina</i>
14	Purple Sandpiper	3	8	<i>Calidris maritima</i>
15	Common Snipe	9	100	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>
1	Black-winged Stilt			<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>
9	Eurasian Woodcock			<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>
15	Red-necked Phalarope	8	800	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>
15	Red Phalarope	1	2	<i>Phalaropus fulicarius</i>
15	Common Redshank	9	150	<i>Tringa totanus</i>
15	Great Skua	2	15	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>
15	Parasitic Jaeger	9	20	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>
11	Long-tailed Jaeger	1	1	<i>Stercorarius longicaudus</i>
15	Common Murre	4	6000	<i>Uria aalge</i>
15	Thick-billed Murre	2	30	<i>Uria lomvia</i>
15	Razorbill	4	400	<i>Alca torda</i>

ICELAND: Bird List...5

15	Black Guillemot	3	30	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>
15	Atlantic Puffin	7	2000	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>
15	Black-legged Kittiwake	9	1200	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>
1	Bonaparte's Gull			<i>Chroicocephalus philadelphia</i>
15	Black-headed Gull	9	300	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>
4	Little Gull			<i>Hydrocoloeus minutus</i>
15	Mew Gull	4	30	<i>Larus canus</i>
2	Ring-billed Gull			<i>Larus delawarensis</i>
15	Herring Gull	3	10	<i>Larus argentatus</i>
14	Iceland Gull	2	2	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>
15	Lesser Black-backed Gull	9	150	<i>Larus fuscus</i>
15	Glaucous Gull	7	500	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>
15	Great Black-backed Gull	9	250	<i>Larus marinus</i>
4	Black Tern	1	1	<i>Chlidonias niger</i>
1	Roseate Tern			<i>Sterna dougallii</i>
15	Arctic Tern	9	2500	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>
1	Common Wood-Pigeon			<i>Columba palumbus</i>
8	Snowy Owl			<i>Bubo scandiacus</i>
13	Short-eared Owl	2	6	<i>Asio flammeus</i>
9	Merlin			<i>Falco columbarius</i>
15	Gyrfalcon	2	5	<i>Falco rusticolus</i>
1	Peregrine	1	1	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>
15	Common Raven	9	20	<i>Corvus corax</i>
1	Barn Swallow			<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
15	Eurasian Wren	3	6	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
15	Goldcrest	1	6	<i>Regulus regulus</i>
1	Common Chiffchaff			<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>
15	Northern Wheatear	6	10	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>
14	Eurasian Blackbird	2	1	<i>Turdus merula</i>
15	Redwing	9	60	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>
15	European Starling	4	50	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
15	White Wagtail	9	15	<i>Motacilla alba</i>
15	Meadow Pipit	9	100	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>
1	Lapland Longspur			<i>Calcarius lapponicus</i>
15	Snow Bunting	4	6	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>
1	Common Chaffinch			<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
9	Red Crossbill	1	1	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>
15	Common Redpoll	1	10	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>
4	Eurasian Siskin	1	1	<i>Spinus spinus</i>
4	Fieldfare	1	1	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>

Mammals:

5	Blue Whale			<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i>
11	Minke Whale	x		<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>
13	Humpback Whale	x		<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>
13	White-beaked Dolphin	x		<i>Lagenorhynchus albirostris</i>

ICELAND: Bird List...6

8	Orca		<i>Orcinus orca</i>
1	Pilot Whale	x	<i>Globicephala melas</i>
1	Bottlenose Whale	x	<i>Hyperoodon ampullatus</i>
11	Harbour Porpoise		<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>
3	Sperm Whale		<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>
13	Atlantic Grey Seal		<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>
10	Common Seal		<i>Phoca vitulina</i>
4	Arctic Fox		<i>Vulpes lagopus</i>
1	European Rabbit	x	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>