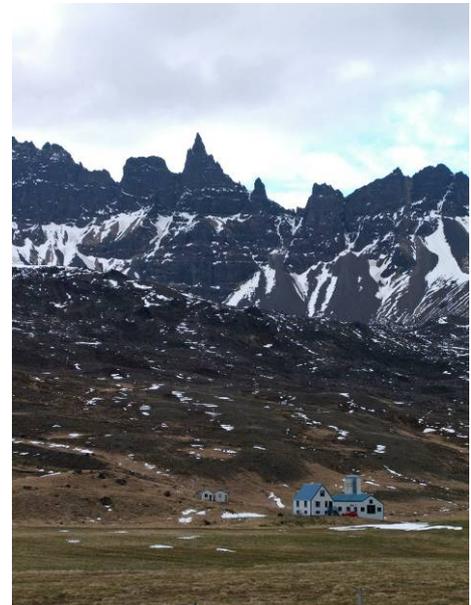


Iceland

Naturetrek Tour Report

27 May - 4 June 2006



Images and report compiled by Sinclair Dunnett



Naturetrek Cheriton Mill Cheriton Alresford Hampshire SO24 0NG England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour leader: Sinclair Dunnett

Tour participants: Michael Baker
Susan Baldock
Stephen Bentley
Colin Hughes
Jennifer Inglis
Malcolm Inglis
Carol Jones
Mary Jones
Caroline Older
Jeremy Older
Vivien Pike
Maurice Willis

A few days before this trip started Húsavík, in the north of Iceland, received a dump of 80cm of snow. Fortunately most of this had gone by the time of our arrival but it was still one of the chilliest starts I have known to a late May Iceland trip.

Day 1

Saturday 27 May

An eventful drive north to Akureyri with good views of Arctic Fox and Gyrfalcon. The former looked very odd, most of its body had moulted into summer coat but its brush was still in thick winter pelage and looked almost half the diameter of the body. Dry all the way, overcast but bright.

Group arrived at Akureyri Airport a little late at 2040hrs. Drove to Mývatn and Hotel Reynihlið, arriving 2300hrs. Little birding en route, some fog higher up around Mávvatn, clearing at north end to show two Great Northern Diver. Roadside display showed temperature of 3°C.

Day 2

Sunday 28 May

Chilly, overcast much of day, then brilliant sunshine from 1730hrs.

After a briefing left the hotel at 0940 for initial birding at the usual spots by Mývatn just south of the hotel: Horned Grebe, Scaup, Tufted Duck, Mallard, Shoveler Pintail, Teal, Common Scoter, Greylag Goose, Snipe, Golden Plover, White Wagtail, Redwing.

We then went to the dramatic geothermal area of Námafjall for an hour before returning to the lake and going round it as last year - widdershins (against the sun). Lunch at a spot where we had had Gyrfalcon in the past but no luck today, though excellent views of a Great Northern Diver and Red-necked Phalarope. Lots of waterfowl though from Teal at the lower end of the scale to Whooper Swan.

We stopped just short of the bridge near the efflux of the lake at a spot where the River Laxá is tumbling through small rocky islands and up to a dozen Harlequin may be in view at a time. We spent over a half-hour here and at Helluvað observing the Harlequin and Barrow's Goldeneye.

The part of Mývatn just west of Skútustaðir (of the pseudo-craters) produced a rich haul of birds including excellent views of Horned Grebe, Ringed Plover, and several score of Dunlin in breeding plumage.

We continued to Dimmuborgir of the fantastic lava shapes. Few birds here and there were no plants in flower, things seemed a least a fortnight behind last year.

Doing the lake counter-clockwise meant we could offer even more flexibility and eight clients elected to walk to the tephra ring crater of Hverfjall after we had all gone to Kirkjan and then returned to the car park before driving to the north-west corner of Hverfjall.

Day 3

Monday 29 May

Sunny much of day, overcast in evening.

Left the hotel at 0900 and headed down the west side of Mývatn enjoying views of many of the birds we had seen on previous days. Drove by Mávratn to Goðafoss, the fine waterfall where Þorgeir the Law-giver threw his household gods in the year 1,000. Here we had excellent views of two, and later one, Ptarmigan.

We left Goðafoss at 1150 and drove to Husavík harbour, lunching swiftly on smoked salmon before boarding MV Náttfari, departing at 1330hrs. We spotted our first cetacean at 1352hrs - a Hump-backed Whale¹ - and for the next ninety minutes there were few periods of more than a minute or two that there was not a cetacean in view.

Turning west we got extended views of several White-beaked Dolphin, at times swimming close to and under ship; also up to five Minke Whale. Met Simon Cohen on the trip, new chairman of our local bird club in Inverness!

There were three whale researchers on the Náttfari, a youth from Baltimore (USA) and two young women from Bavaria and north Italy. They gave us a vivid account of the unseasonably heavy snow, falling for several days but heaviest on Thursday night (25/26 May) when the total depth was about 80cm - > 30"! However it thawed rapidly on Friday and Saturday. Nevertheless there is far more snow around than normal at this time of year. South of Husavík harbour were waders scattered along the tide line, a few Sanderling returning to summer plumage, also a solitary Turnstone and at least five Iceland Gulls, immature.

Back to the Reynihlið Hotel at 1900hrs. Group meal.

Here Marcus Kohler, who guides regularly for Naturetrek, came running over to introduce himself and exchange intelligence. What a trip for meeting folks!

An area heated with geothermal hot water was being prepared in front of hotel, apparently to make life easier for smokers - I gather smoking is not actually banned indoors at the moment, but there seems to be a semi-voluntary ban.

Day 4

Tuesday 20 May

Sunny most of day, roadside sign said 10°C but it felt much warmer in sun.

We loaded our luggage, left the Reynihlið at 0940hrs and drove down the east side of Mývatn for the last time. Various birding stops and then a coffee/comfort stop at Goðafoss roadhouse .

Little on the large lake Ljósavatn itself but we did stop at the elevated area near its west end. Though plant life is several weeks later than normal, we did some *Silene acaulis* in flower, also Common Whitlow. Clients found several dead birds including Whimbrel and Golden Plover. In the absence of obvious wounds (and spent shells) I am inclined to think these birds were sheltering in the lee of the high bank and got overwhelmed and suffocated by drifting snow.

We entered the beautiful valley of Fnjóskadalur and had lunch a little beyond the private wood on its south side. The birch woods here - some of the most extensive natural woods in Iceland - were still devoid of leaves. Most clients went for a walk afterwards. Little new though some thought they had a brief glimpse of Gyrfalcon. We then stopped at the folk museum of the old parsonage of Laufás.

Arrived Akureyri 1730hrs. North of the causeway we saw many waders: Oystercatcher, Black-tailed Godwit, lots of Dunlin plus poor views of Purple Sandpiper.

Day 5

Wednesday 31 May

Sunny forenoon, overcast & some showers later.

Departed 0745hrs and stopped at Kotagil where we had Fulmar, *Silene acaulis* and Alpine Lady's Mantle. Break at Varmahlið. Short stop at Blönduós to view the striking modern Lutheran Church before continuing west and stopping at Gauksmýrartjörn. This is an area of restored wetland and is extraordinarily rich in bird life - Black-tailed Godwit, Snipe, Red-necked Phalarope, Scaup, Tufted Duck, Horned Grebe. As usual, we didn't see any new species, but it is a delight to see such a variety in such a small area.

We came to the east side of Hrútafjörður, allegedly the most boring stretch of road in Iceland, but it was made bright for us by the wildlife of the day - a superb Arctic Fox, still mainly in winter pelage. It was first spotted by a client and I backed up so we could all view it - it had a bird - Arctic Skua? - in its mouth?

We had lunch at the Staðarskali roadhouse before continuing south with a stop at Grábrók, a fascinating series of small craters linked to eruptions as recent as 3,000 years ago.

At Borgar Fjörður we had our first Cormorant of the trip. As usual, the beach near the old whaling station at Hvalfjörður yielded good birding with Purple Sandpiper, many Knot (returning to summer plumage), Oystercatcher, and (on the grass nearby) Starling.

Passing Geysir shortly before arriving at our hotel, I was delighted to get a spout from the Great Geysir, the first time I've seen it spout in 29 years of visits to Iceland.

Arrived Hótel Gullfoss just before 2000hrs and had an excellent if slightly disjointed meal.

Day 6

Thursday 1 June

Overcast most of day, sunny periods, a few showers; cool.

Departed at 0930hrs and explored the Geysir hot spring area for an hour. The Great Geysir is evidently erupting again, though not particularly impressive.

We continued to the south coast and lunched in view of the sea at Stokkseyri, getting views of Great Skua and various other birds seen before. Further west at Eyrarbakki we had our usual views of Cormorant, various waders, and *Mertensia maritima*. More Iceland Gulls were also spotted.

We drove north by the east side of Þingvallavatn, the lake to the south of Þingvellir. Geese and Redwings but nothing new birdwise. We walked through Almannagjá, the cleft at Þingvellir, and had various plants including *Sedum rosea*. Back to Hótel Gullfoss at 1840hrs and had an enjoyable soak in the Jacuzzi before dinner.

Day 7

Friday 2 June

Overcast morning, bright & brilliant later.

We left at 0900 and were at the great double cascade of Gullfoss by 0915, spending an hour at this dramatic site, having it very much to ourselves.

On to Fluðir and then up the Þorsa valley with a stop at the viewpoint of Gaukshöfði. The clients found an apparent plucking site, with pellets and bones, near the top. Persistent calls from a cliff nest proved to be young Ravens. We then turned to two of Iceland's less well-known but extremely beautiful waterfalls. The first of these was Hjálparfoss, where we lunched.

Next we went to Stöng. This settlement-period farmhouse was buried in 1104 by ash from Hekla, and excavated in 1939 by an archaeological team headed from Copenhagen. We then continued to Gjárfoss, a beautiful fall dropping in a double cascade in an amphitheatre of twisted rocks.

Hekla, most famed of Iceland's volcanoes, had been obscured by low cloud during the morning; but by late afternoon it had cleared and the upper half was brilliant white in the westerly sun. The glacier of Langjökull was also clear and brilliant as we returned to our hotel. 252km

Day 8

Saturday 3 June

Brilliant sunshine, cool.

We left Hótel Gullfoss at 0845 and stopped to bunker at Geysir. I had had a request for Redpoll and indeed we found several here. We reached Reykjavík domestic airport at 1045hrs, in good time for three clients flying to the Westman Islands. Some of us drove to the peninsula at the west end of the city and observed the usual swan, tern, ducks, and immature Iceland Gull. Then took the clients to the city and arranged an RV time of about 1700hrs at the Hallgrímskirkja. Several had seen more Redpoll in the old cemetery.

From here we went to the (domestic) airport and met the Westmen, a little late at 1810hrs, then headed out to Keflavík and its eponymous Hótel.

Day 9

Sunday 4 June

Loaded the luggage just before 0900 and then drove the short distance to the beginning of the path for the Hafnarberg cliffs. We were at the cliffs from just after 1000 till hrs.

Kittiwakes were the most conspicuous bird on the cliffs, and there were rather few auks. We had a lot of searching to find even one Brünnich's Guillemot but did eventually get the full quota of five species of auk. Other seabirds included Great & Arctic Skuas, Gannet, and Fulmar Petrel.

The path to and from the cliffs yielded Whimbrel but not the usual Snow Bunting.

A last lunch by Hafnir harbour before taking the clients to the airport. This harbour gave us, i.a., Purple Sandpiper, Sanderling, and many Eider.

The letter Þ is pronounced something like 'th' as in the word 'thin'

A version of this report will eventually be on the web at
www.PuffinExpress.co.uk/NTOS.htm#icelandrep

Species

Birds

Common name	Scientific name	May 2006					July 2006			
		27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4
Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>	✓	✓							
Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>		✓	✓		✓				
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>			✓		✓	✓			✓
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>					✓	✓			✓
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>					✓			✓	
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	✓	✓	✓						
Common Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		✓	✓		✓				
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>		✓							
Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>		✓							
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓			✓	
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>	✓	✓					✓		
Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>		✓	✓		✓				
Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>		✓	✓						
Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓					
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Merganser	<i>Mergus merganser</i>					✓				
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		✓				✓			
Gyr Falcon	<i>Falco rusticolus</i>	✓			?					
Rock Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus muta</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓			
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		✓			✓	✓			✓
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓			
Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>			✓		✓	✓		✓	
Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>					✓				
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>			✓						✓
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓			✓				✓
Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>				✓	✓				✓
Red-necked Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓				
Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>						✓			✓
Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>			✓		✓	✓			✓
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus canus</i>						✓			
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>						✓		✓	✓
Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>				✓			✓	✓	
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>			✓			✓		✓	
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>			✓					✓	✓
Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Common name	Scientific name	May 2006					July 2006			
		27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4
Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>									✓
Brunnich's Guillemot	<i>Uria lomvia</i>									✓
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>									✓
Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>									✓
Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>									✓
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>				✓					
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>			✓		✓	✓		✓	✓
Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓		✓	✓
Common Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>								✓	
Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>						✓			

Mammals

Common name	Scientific name	May 2006					July 2006			
		27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3	4
Arctic Fox		1				1				
Minke Whale				5						
Humpback Whale				2						
White-beaked Dolphin				3						