

Iceland

Naturetrek Tour Report

26 May - 3 June 2007



Iceland - November-2007



European Shag



Red-throated Diver



Iceland - November-2007

Report and photos 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
Participants:	Brian Davis Sue Davis Nick Hames Peter Hames Irena Henderson Patrick Henderson Anne Ledwith Dave MacMillan Janet Macpherson Kirsty Macpherson Ben Moon Jo Moon Carol Pritchard Jan Pritchard Jill Rothwell Simon Simpson

Overview

I have made many visits to Iceland since November 1978, and it's not often I see a new vertebrate. However this year all the group had excellent views of Barnacle Goose, and clients added Swallow to the checklist. Clients also saw Swift, which I last saw in Iceland at least twenty years ago. On the minus side the visit was disappointing for raptors. We hoped that itinerary re-design and a boat trip in Breiðafjörður would bring us Sea Eagle, but this was not to be.

The weather was good for most of the trip, and we had several wonderful days.

[Friday 25 May. Guide, Sinclair Dunnett, flew Glasgow/Keflavík with J & K Macpherson. Sunny and cool on arrival in Iceland.]

Day 1

Saturday 26th May

Mývatn/Hótel Reyhlið

A pleasant drive north to Akureyri with clients Janet & Kirsty Macpherson. Rest of group arrived at Akureyri Airport on time at 2000hrs. 406 km Reykjavík-Akureyri

Drove to Mývatn and Hotel Reyhlið, arriving 2220hrs. Birds en route included a pair of Great Northern Diver on Mývatn; Ptarmigan; Barrow's Goldeneye; Common Scoter; and Harlequin Duck. 102 km Akureyri-Mývatn

Day 2

Sunday 27th May

Mývatn/Hótel Reyhlið (69 km)

Chilly morning, brilliant sunshine most of day.

After a briefing we left for initial birding at the usual spots by Mývatn just south of the hotel: Horned Grebe, Scaup, Tufted Duck, Mallard, Teal, Greylag Goose, Snipe, Golden Plover, White Wagtail, Redwing. A bonus was a small group of Knot in breeding plumage, by the lake shore - we usually see these passage birds by the sea rather than inland.

We then went to the dramatic geothermal area of Námafjall for just under an hour before returning to the lake and going round it widdershins (against the sun). Lunch was at a spot where we have had Gyrfalcon in the past but no luck today. However we had lots of waterfowl, 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 half an hour here and at Helluvað observing the Harlequin and Barrow's Goldeneye.

Skútustaðir produced fewer birds than usual but clients enjoyed the walks by the pseudo-craters.

We continued to Dimmuborgir of the fantastic lava shapes. No plants in flower but we did get a fine view of a tiercel Merlin, perched at two different points: first against the light, and then with the light in our favour. Two clients climbed the tephra ring crater of Hverfjall.

The "Bláa Lonið" [Blue Lagoon] has become famous in south Iceland. Mývatn Nature Baths is a similar concept - several shallow pools of geothermally heated water, rich in salts which allegedly benefit your skin, psyche etc. Ten of us made a visit to these baths and found them extremely pleasant.

Day 3

Monday 28th May

Mývatn/Hótel Reyhlið (204 km)

Sunny all day, milder than Sunday.

Left the hotel at 0900 and headed to Husavík. Visited the fish-drying racks just west of the town and got a Great Skua, then proceeded to the beach of lava sand just west of the harbour. This produced a good haul of waders including Knot and Sanderling in double figures, and one Turnstone. These three species all breed north of Iceland and one of the many advantages of starting this trip in late May is getting several species of wader in full breeding splendour.

We drove a little east of the town to have our lunch of smoked salmon before boarding MV Náttfari. The scheduled departure time of 1330hrs was delayed by about fifteen minutes while waiting a crew member. We got our first cetacean - a Hump-backed Whale - shortly after leaving the harbour and tracked it for at least half an hour, though it rarely gave us much of a view. The crew spotted a Minke briefly but it was a pair of White-beaked Dolphins which were the cetacean highlight of the trip. The return journey, close to Lundey, produced a good haul of birds: Arctic Skua, Arctic Tern, Puffin, Black Guillemot. Two Great Skua were also seen during the day.

There was a notice in the Náttfari telling passengers that they were members of “Blue Flag”, or at least subscribed to their philosophy. Blue Flag seems to have been involved initially with beaches. To get their endorsement, boats had to do various things, including non-use of disposable items. I presume this explains why their very welcome hot chocolate is always served in robust china mugs.

The late departure, and later return as the crew worked hard to get better views of wildlife, meant that it was impractical to do a circular tour via Dettifoss. We did however go some distance north and east of Husavík to cliffs rumoured to harbour Brünnich’s Guillemot. We saw none of those, but did get a small flock of Barnacle Geese as a bonus - maybe some of the few which breed in Iceland? Back to the Reynihlið Hotel at 2010hrs.

Day 4

Tuesday 29th May

Akureyri/Hótel Norðurland (324 km)

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

Most of us had early breakfast and left the hotel at 0800 to visit Dettifoss, mightiest waterfall in Europe. Had good views of Pinkfoot and our first cock Snow Bunting.

We loaded our luggage, left the Reynihlið by noon and drove down the east side of Mývatn for the last time. Drove by Máváttn to Goðafoss, the fine waterfall where Þorgeir the Law-giver threw his household goods in the year 1,000.

I had planned to lunch at the café at Goðafoss roadhouse but, for the first time in my acquaintance with it of almost 30 years, it was not in operation. This involved an irritating 20 minute backtrack to the very helpful café at Laugar.

We entered the beautiful valley of Fnjóskadalur and had our usual walk, stopping afterwards at the folk museum of the old parsonage of Laufás. Arrived Akureyri 1840hrs.

Day 5

Wednesday 30th May

Stykkishólmur/Hótel Stykkishólmur (389 km)

Sunny forenoon, overcast later.

Our departure from Akureyri was delayed till 0845 by the need for a brief medical check on one client. This had the serendipitous advantage of giving us excellent views of Redpoll in the trees by the hospital.

Made our usual stop at Kotagil where - in the four days since we had come north - much more *Silene acaulis* was in flower. Coffee/comfort stop at Varmahlið before continuing to Blönduós where most got out to view the striking modern Lutheran Church while two went to get the prescription filled. Lunch by the usual sylvan picnic spot a little east of the site of Iceland’s last execution.

We continued west and south, then turning north and up the west side of Hrutafjörður. We turned west by Laxárdalur, a route famous for dramatic hauntings. Of more immediate interest to us, it yielded Arctic Poppy, Dwarf Birch, and Northern Whitlow Grass.

It was some years since I had been at Álftafjörður, but it still held its high concentration of Whooper Swan. We counted at least 75, and also observed light-bellied Brent Goose. Snow Bunting and Red-throated Diver were other memorable sightings of the day. Arrived Stykkishólmur 1805hrs.

Day 6

Thursday 31st May

Stykkishólmur/Hótel Stykkishólmur (253 km)

Our boat trip in Breiðafjörður lasted just over two hours, from 1100-1315. We had a beautiful, calm, sunny outing and saw a number of the common sea birds but not, alas, Sea Eagle. Dramatic rock formations and tide rips were other features.

We drove to Helgafell for our picnic lunch before continuing west to the bird cliffs near the west end of Snæfellsnes. The itinerary redesign justified itself with views of all five species of auk including Brünnich's Guillemot. Other seabirds observed during the day included Arctic Skua, Gannet, Cormorant, and Fulmar Petrel, and on our return journey to Stykkishólmur we observed Glaucous and Iceland Gulls.

Day 7

Friday 1st June

Þingvellir/Hótel Valhöll (203 km)

Departed Stykkishólmur at 0930.

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.

Most clients walked through Almannagjá, the cleft at Þingvellir, to reach the Hótel Valhöll while I drove round with the luggage.

Þingvellir is Iceland's ancient parliament site, a dramatic and beautiful location. It draws many visitors during the day - car, tours buses - but in the morning and evening it's wonderfully quiet and peaceful. The lake of Þingvallavatn - just a few steps from the hotel - is not as famous for birdlife as Mývatn, but is excellent in its own way. Many Greylag and their goslings adorned the lake and its banks, and Red-breasted Merganser were much in evidence.

Day 8

Saturday 2nd June

Þingvellir/Hótel Valhöll (220 km)

Rain in morning, dry later, cool; strong SE wind.

Morning walks from the Valhöll produced the usual Merlin. Wren were heard, but not seen.

We set off at 0930 after breakfast and had excellent views of a pair of Red-throated Diver not far from the hotel before continuing on to the main features - primarily scenic - of the day. We spent time at Gullfoss - "The Golden Falls"; the hot spring area of Geysir; the fine crater of Kerið and the polychromatic quarry of Burfell. Evening meal was had at the ever-popular Lindin Restaurant at Laugar before returning to Hótel Valhöll.

Day 9

Sunday 3rd June

185 km

Heavy rain overnight; some showers at Valhöll before we left but dry, though overcast & cool, when we reached Reykjavík.

Loaded the luggage and got away at 0930 reaching the city within the hour. Dropped two clients at Hótel Borg before making our way to the eminence of Hallgrímskirkja. Most clients left the bus there for a three-hour wander in the city, three elected to go out to Keflavík early by the FlyBus.

Clients observed Swift and Swallow, both relatively rare birds in Iceland.

(Tuesday 5 June - return flight from Iceland to UK had empty seats, admittedly in a larger aircraft than for outward journey.)

The letter Þ is pronounced something like 'th' in thin

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Species Lists

Birds

	Common name	Scientific name	May					June			
			26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3
1	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia Stellata</i>					2		2	2	2
2	Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>	2	2					1		
3	Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓				
4	Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
5	Gannet	<i>Sula bassana</i>			1			✓			
6	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			C			✓	✓		
7	Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>						✓			
8	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	75+	75+	✓	✓	✓
9	Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>			7+						
10	Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>					25				
11	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>				8+					
12	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
13	Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
14	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
15	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>		✓		✓					
16	Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	1	3+	✓						
17	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				
18	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
19	Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓			
20	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
21	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓		4	2	
22	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyernalis</i>	2	✓	1						
23	Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>	4	✓							
24	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>	✓	✓		✓					
25	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
26	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		1		C				2	
27	Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus mutus</i>	6		3	✓			✓	2	
28	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
29	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		✓	2				✓	✓	
30	Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
31	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>			✓			✓	✓		
32	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>			10+						
33	Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>		2	20+				30+		
34	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓	✓			✓	✓		
35	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>							8+		
36	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
37	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
38	Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
39	Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
40	Red-necked Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>		6+		✓	✓			1	
41	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>			2						
42	Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
43	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
44	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	1			✓		1			
45	Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>			✓		1	✓	✓		
46	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>			✓	3	✓	✓			

	Common name	Scientific name	May						June		
			26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3
47	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>						✓	✓		
48	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>						✓			
49	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
50	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	
51	Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
52	Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>			1			✓			
53	Brunnich's Guillemot	<i>Uria lomvia</i>						20+			
54	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>						✓			
55	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>				4		✓	✓		
56	Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>			✓			100+			
57	Feral Pigeon/Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓								
58	Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>	1		2						
59	Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>									C 2
60	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>						C 3			
61	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
62	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
63	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>									H
64	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>			✓			2	1		
65	Redwing	<i>Turdus illacus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
66	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	
67	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
68	Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>							✓		
69	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>						✓			

C = seen by Client(s) only

H = heard only

Cetaceans

1	Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>			1						
2	White-beaked dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus albirostris</i>	3		2						
3	Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>			1						