

# Iceland

Naturetrek Tour Report

24 May - 1 June 2008

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Humpback Whale



Icelandic scenery



Whooper Swans



Iceland scenery

Report & images compiled by Sinclair Dunnett



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Helen Juhos  
Jim Miller  
Sandra Oxley

## Summary:

The weather was some of the best I've experienced in thirty years of travel to Iceland. We had almost uninterrupted sunshine from Days 1-6, with a little rain on Days 7 & 8, not interfering with outdoor activities at all. Out of the wind it could feel very warm, in fact the warmth was mostly sun-heat and temperatures were typically from 40's to low 60's F, with a cool, even fresh, wind most of the time. After a period of several years when Gyrfalcon sightings were mostly of birds in flight, or in the distance - or both! - we were rewarded this year with a prolonged, good view of a perched tiercel (male falcon). There was fairly good reason to believe this was half of a breeding pair so, heeding the requests of Icelandic conservationists, we are not mentioning the locale of this sighting. Other memorable sightings Merlin, Short-eared Owl, and there were four species of cetacean on our whale outing. The main disappointment was no decent prolonged view of the Snow Bunting. The last memory was of an earthquake on Thursday the 29<sup>th</sup> of May!

Thursday 22 May - Sinclair Dunnett, flew Glasgow/Keflavík with Jim Miller. Overcast and cool on arrival in Iceland, brisk NE wind.

## Day 1

**Saturday 24th May**

Departed Reykjavík 1000. Group arrived at Akureyri Airport on time at 1820hrs. Drove to Mývatn and Hotel Reynihlið arriving 2020hrs. Birds en route included pairs of Great Northern Diver on Ljósvatn and Másvatn, Ptarmigan and Harlequin Duck.

## Day 2

**Sunday 25th May**

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 and saw Horned Grebe, Tufted Duck, Mallard, Teal, Pintail, and Gadwall. We then went to the dramatic geothermal area of Námafjall for an hour before returning to the lake and going round it widdershins (anti-clockwise) against the sun.

We had lunch at a spot where we have had Gyr Falcon in the past but no luck today. However we did see 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 Harlequins may be in view at any one time. We spent over a half-hour here and also at Helluvað observing the Harlequins and Barrow's Goldeneye. Skútustaðir produced fewer birds than usual but clients enjoyed the walks by the pseudo-craters. We continued to Dimmuborgir to view the fantastic lava shapes. No plants were in full flower but we did get a Bearberry in fruit. Three clients climbed the tephra ring crater of Hverfjall.

## Day 3

Monday 26th May

Sunny all day, milder than Sunday

We left the hotel at 0820 and headed to Husavík for the whale-watching cruise on MV *Bjössi Sör* (1000-1315hrs). We got our first cetacean, a Minke Whale, twelve minutes after leaving the harbour, and had views on and off for almost a half-hour! A Hump-backed Whale further west in Skjálfandi followed twenty minutes later, plus Harbour Porpoise. The skipper had spotted something towards Flatey and this turned out to be two Humpbacks, giving us views from 1145-1215. On our return trip to the harbour some clients briefly saw White-beaked Dolphin - four species of cetacean in one trip! Birds observed included Arctic Skua, Arctic Tern, Puffin, Black Guillemot, and a Gannet.

The tourist office in Husavík confirmed the road to Dettifoss was still closed "worst snow here for 20 years", so we drove a little east of the town and during our lunch of smoked salmon clients spotted several Knots in breeding plumage. We returned to the hotel by routes 85 and 848. The west side of Mývatn rewarded us with good views of two Great Northern Divers and six Common Scoter. Then back to the Reynihlið at 1800hrs.

## Day 4

Tuesday 27th May

Sunny most of day

We loaded our luggage, left the Reynihlið at 0930 and drove down the west side of Mývatn for the last time, thence by Mávvatn to Goðafoss, the fine waterfall where Þorgeir the Law-giver threw his household goods (statues of the Norse gods) in the year 1,000. Saw many Ptarmigan on the way. We lunched in the beautiful valley of Fnjóskadalur and had our usual walk in Dalsmýnni. Richard spotted a pair of Gyr Falcon in flight high on the east side of the valley; one landed but we couldn't locate it. We had a short stop at the folk museum of the old parsonage of Laufás, and arrived at Akureyri at 1700 and spent an hour birding by the shore and the Botanic Gardens. Redpoll, Oystercatcher, and Common Gull were added to the list before checking-in to the Hótel Norðurland at 1800hrs.

## Day 5

Wednesday 28th May

Another day very warm in sun, cool in light north wind.

Left the hotel at 0740. In Öxnadalur, less than a half-hour out of Akureyri, Richard spotted a drake Goosander, and after back-tracking a bit we got excellent views of two more. This was a good sighting, we occasionally leave Iceland without any sightings of this most handsome sawbill.

We made our usual stop at Kotagil where some *Silene acaulis* was in flower. There is now a new road in this part of Iceland and the most dramatic part of Kotagil is less easy to access. We then had a coffee/comfort stop at Varmahlið before stopping for lunch at the usual sylvan picnic spot just west of the 721 turn-off, near Hóp. After lunch we stopped briefly at the site of Iceland's last execution. Wild flowers were later this year than "normal", but Sue did find one *Dryas octopetala* in flower at one of our stops.

We continued west and south with a stop at the Staðarskali Roadhouse, then turning north up the west side of Hrutafjörður before continuing west by Laxárdalsheið (route 59), an area famous for its hauntings. We went past Drangur, the site of the over-enthusiastic revenge killings which resulted in Eric the Red's outlawry to Greenland. We carried on to Stykkishólmur where we arrived at the Hótel Stykkishólmur at 1730hrs.

## Day 6

Thursday 29th May

Overcast in morning, sunny for most of day after that.

Drove along the north side of the Snæfellsnes Peninsula and turned north by a minor road. An advance notice told us this route would take us to one of Iceland's oldest wooden churches, and there was also a tourist information "I" sign. Keeping watch for large raptors above the bluffs to our west, we stopped after some miles at a museum with the "I" sign. A lady appeared and, without telling us what was in the museum, told us the fee was kr 500 (> £3). We said our main interest was looking for birds and she said, "All the land round here is ours" and the implication seemed to be that we would have to pay even to park there. The road to the church was now blocked by a garbage truck...so that was out!

We got excellent views of our first Red-throated Diver from a causeway, close enough to see the crimson throat patch, and watched it doing a rolling preen. Some clients had wished to get help sorting out gulls, and the pools by Grundarfirði gave us good opportunities to run through a number of species. Here and elsewhere during the day we got Herring; Greater & Lesser Black-backed; and Burgomaster (Glaucous) Gulls, plus Kittiwake.

We had our picnic at a table just east of Olafsvík, from which we got our first Purple Sandpiper of the trip. Then we crossed to the south side of the peninsula and headed for the cliffs. Here we got Brünnich's & Common Guillemots plus Fulmar and lots of Kittiwakes on the cliffs, with Razorbill, Puffin and Black Guillemot on the sea. We had broken up into several parties, Jim Miller had been on his own, lying by the cliff top and sketching some dramatic rock formations. When he rejoined us he told us he had felt an earth tremor. On our return to Stykkishólmur we found that there had been a 6.1 earthquake centred near Selfoss in south Iceland. Twenty-eight people received minor injuries, buildings were cracked (but did NOT collapse), and the frangible contents of many buildings were destroyed! We arrived back at the hotel at about 1800hrs.

## Day 7

Friday 30th May

Overcast in morning, sun later, then light rain

We left Stykkishólmur at 1000, driving east and then south. We stopped at Borgarnes from 1215-1300hrs, where clients watched Eider with their young. We turned east by route 50 and got good views of a & Merlin, followed soon after by long views of a Short-eared Owl hunting. Lunch was at a campsite south of the road, with Redwing and Redpoll for company, plus various waders. We also got our first Trailing Azalea *Loiseleuria procumbens* here.

The old whaling station at Hvalfjörður yielded a particularly good haul of waders with Purple Sandpiper, many Knot (returning to summer plumage), Oystercatcher, Sanderling, Ringed Plover, Dunlin, and Turnstone. We stopped by a small waterfall on the south side of Hvalfjörður and here some clients watched Merlin attacking a Redshank, until the latter made good its escape. And so to Þingvallavatn, the lake to the south of Þingvellir. From the viewpoint at the west end of Almannagjá most clients elected to walk to the Hótel Valhöll, where we arrived about 1730.

## Day 8

Saturday 31st May

Overcast for much of day, cool; but little rain

We left the hotel shortly after 0900 and drove west but there was no sign of Red-throated Diver on their usual pool; we did find them shortly afterwards on the main lake, along with our first Red-necked Phalarope in a few days. We drove to the car park east of the “Drowning Pool” and I walked to said pool with clients, who then continued to the top while I drove round. Plants seen included Roseroot *Sedum rosea* (now apparently re-genused as *Rhodiola rosea*)

We stopped at the dramatic red quarry of Burfell and the crater of Kerið before continuing to Selfoss where we had a short break. Then east and north-east and a last picnic lunch by the river below Gullfoss. We then visited Gullfoss between 1500-1600 and Geysir from 1615-1715. Our evening meal was at the pleasant Restaurant Lindin, with its “Wild and Sweet” theme.

## Day 9

Sunday 1st June

Departed Hotel Valhöll for Reykjavík. We dropped the four clients who were staying an extra night at their hotel and then made our way to Keflavík and our return flights home.

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## Species Lists

Birds (H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	May/June										
			24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1		
1	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>						1			2		
2	Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>	4		2								
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>						✓	✓				
7	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
8	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>		2									
9	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
10	Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
11	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
12	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	✓	✓	✓								
13	Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>		2									
14	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		✓	✓					✓			
15	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
16	Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>		✓	✓			✓					
17	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
18	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓				
19	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>		✓	✓								
20	Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>			6								
21	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>		✓	✓	✓							
22	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
23	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>					3						
24	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>								2			
25	Gyrfalcon	<i>Falco rusticolus</i>				2							
26	Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus mutus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓				1			
27	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>				✓				✓	✓		
28	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		✓	✓			✓	✓				
29	Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
30	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	✓							2			
31	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>								6			
32	Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>			✓			✓	✓				
33	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓	✓					✓			
34	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>						6	✓				
35	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
36	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
37	Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
38	Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
39	Red-necked Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>		✓	✓						4		
40	Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓				

	Common name	Scientific name	May/June								
			24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1
41	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	
42	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>				✓					
43	Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>			✓		✓	✓			
44	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓		✓			✓			
45	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>						✓			
46	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucooides</i>			2						
47	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>						2	✓		
48	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		✓				✓	✓	✓	
49	Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
50	Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>						✓			
51	Brünnich's Guillemot	<i>Uria lomvia</i>						✓			
52	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>						✓			
53	Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>			✓			✓			
54	Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>			✓			✓			
55	Feral Pigeon / Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓		✓						
56	Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>							1		
57	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
58	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
59	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		H							
60	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	
61	Redwing	<i>Turdus illacus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
62	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>						✓	✓	✓	
63	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
64	Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>			✓				2		

## Mammals

	Common Name	Scientific name	May/June								
			24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1
1	Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>			3						
2	Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>			3						
3	White-beaked Dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus albirostris</i>			✓						
4	Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>			2						

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