

# Iceland

Naturetrek Tour Report

23 - 31 May 2009



Naturetrek Group Photo 2009



Slavonian Grebe



Humpback Whale



Arctic Fox

Images and report compiled by Malcolm Stott



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## Day 1

Saturday 23rd May

Keflavik - Myvatn (560km)

Overcast with occasional showers

The Flight from London, via internal transfer for a flight from Reykjavik, arrived at Akureyri on time at 1820hrs, where Malcolm was waiting to greet us. Within 2 minutes of leaving the airport we were on our first Icelandic 'twitch' to the city lake. Malcolm had spotted an Icelandic rarity there on his way past to collect the group from the airport, so would it still be there? Although we saw our first Slavonian Grebe, Long-tailed Ducks, Scaup, White Wagtails to name a few, the Coot had definitely disappeared as most rare birds have a habit of doing! Given it had been a long day, and under darkening clouds, we headed across the causeway and north, eventually arriving at the Hotel Reynihlid by 8:15pm.

## Day 2

Sunday 24th May

Myvatn (93km)

Strong SE winds, cold with some light rain

A pre-breakfast walk to the Lake produced some memorable views of Slavonian Grebe, Barrow's Goldeneye, Wigeon and other waterfowl, while a Merlin was seen hunting pipits behind the hotel.

After an initial briefing we departed the hotel at 9:15am to spend the majority of the day bird-watching around the Lake. Our first stop was the wooded peninsula of Hofdi and here we had good views of Great Northern Diver, and managed to see Wren and several Redpolls to the accompaniment of Snipe incessantly drumming overhead and Redwings in full song. We also managed to find Myvatn Wallflower and a few other species despite it being early in the season and the handicap of no flowers or fruiting bodies to aid identification.

Next we walked around the pseudo craters at Skutustadir and enjoyed a welcome cup of coffee in the hotel close-by before moving on to the River Laxa. A slow drive by the river produced some excellent views of many Harlequin Duck and more Barrow's Goldeneye. A brief stroll along the road added Red-necked Phalarope and Dunlin to the list before returning to the bus and continuing our clockwise journey round the Lake. A gathering of 40 or so Red-necked Phalaropes, feeding by the waters-edge, made great viewing while Malcolm prepared lunch.

Later in the afternoon we left the lakeside and travelled inland to experience the geological aspects of the region. First we visited the strange landscape of hissing fumaroles, boiling mud pots and the sulphurous atmosphere at Namafjall before heading off towards the white plumes of steam rising from the Krafla range that marked the location of Iceland's modern geothermal power-plant. Passing the generation plant and its labyrinth of pipes, which appeared to have a firm grip on the landscape, we eventually arrived at Vitti, an explosion crater from the 1725 eruption. Next we travelled through an old lava field to look at the 'natural' bathing pools of Grjotaga before arriving at Dimmuborgir for our last stop of the day. Whilst attempting to locate a Merlin we stumbled across a female Gyr Falcon at her eyrie! Gyr Falcons are a fully protected species in Iceland, so we left her to incubate her clutch in peace.

We returned to the hotel at 6:30pm on what had been a truly magical and very memorable first day in this remarkable country. After the bird-log and a cold beer we enjoyed a delicious evening meal before retiring, and the sun still shining!

## Day 3

Monday 25th May

Myvatn – Husavik (153km)

Strong southerly wind am, calmer with slight rain pm

We departed the hotel at 8:30am and headed north to Husavik, a picturesque fishing town, for today's whale-watching. Although it was debatable whether or not the boat would sail, given the strength of wind, by the time we reached the harbour the sea was calm. About half an hour into the sailing we encountered two Humpbacked Whales, perhaps a mother and calf, and since they were very obliging we stayed with them for some 40 minutes before heading towards Lundi (Puffin Island) in search of Minke Whales. After two and a half hours at sea we returned to Husavik, renewing acquaintance with the two Humpbacks Whales on our return journey. Birding highlights during the sailing included a raft of Long-tailed Ducks, a Great Skua and more surprising this far north, a Gannet.

There was just enough time for a brief visit to the Whale Museum, while Malcolm did some shopping before having a late lunch on the outskirts of town. The chosen picnic site, above the cliffs, provided to be an excellent opportunity to do a little sea-watching, which was very rewarding. We added Glaucous Gull, two more Bonxies and our first Arctic Skua, before while John found a small flock of 20 Storm Petrels 'treading water' out at sea and even more amazing were two Little Auks that should have been much further north in Arctic Waters! Malcolm also found a Minke Whale. A visit to the Tourist Information Centre, before leaving Husavik, confirmed the road to Dettifoss was indeed closed in both directions, so we return to the hotel via the Laugar Valley and the western shores of the Lake.

## Day 4

## Tuesday 26th May

Myvatn – Akureryi (168km)

Bright and sunny for most of the day

Making the most of the beautiful weather we split in to two groups this morning. For their challenge the hikers climbed Hverfell (tephra crater) and managed to find a fine specimen of Purple Saxifrage in flower, while the rest of us continued birding around the western shores of the Lake adding Snow Bunting and Pink-footed Goose to the bird list.

Each having had a very successful morning we then drove to Godafoss, a suitably impressive location (and windy enough) for a lunch of smoked salmon and danish pastries – delicious! We then continued on to Akureryi, making frequent stops to bird-watch, and found two new species on the town lake - the Coot that Malcolm first located on day one and a Common Goldeneye, before arriving at our city hotel by 4:00pm. Late afternoon and early evening gave us plenty of time to venture out and explore this northern jewel of Iceland before retiring.

## Day 5

## Wednesday 27th May

Akureryi - Stykkisholmur (476km)

Light rain early morning, bright and sunny most of the day

We left the hotel at 8:15am, after an early breakfast, for our journey west. After an initial technical fault with the tachograph we were finally departed a grey, wet Akureryi by 8:45am. Heading up the Oxnadalur Valley the cloud lifted and we were soon blessed with blue skies and sunshine all the way to Stykkisholmur – wonderful! Today was a long drive, but at a relaxed pace, with plenty of stops for birding. The morning drive was through some very impressive glacial landscapes, the broad valleys of Oxnadalshéidi produced our first flocks of Pink-footed Geese.

A comfort stop at Blonduos was followed by a minor detour to a cliff-top over-looking Hunafjörður where we chanced our luck in search of any whales that may have been present. Although no whales were seen, we did see an Atlantic Grey Seal and another Glaucous Gull.

After lunch at Olaslundan, we continued on our journey westward adding Goosander to the list before crossing the 'haunted' mountain road. We paused briefly in Haukurdalur to stretch our legs and marvel at the ease and agility in which Harlequin Duck swam against the strong currents. With Stykkisholmur in view we stopped for photographs since the scenery was so dramatic. Arriving in the harbour town we first enquired if there would be an Eagle Cruise later this evening. Sadly there was not, which was a great pity since the evening light out on the Breidafjörður was just amazing! We eventually checked-in at the hotel and had time to relax before an evening meal.

## Day 6

## Thursday 28th May

Breidafjörður am/Snaefellsnes pm (212km)

Rain early morning clearing with sunny periods most of the day

After booking the 'Eagle Cruise' we spent the first part of the morning on the Stykkisholmur peninsula searching for Red-throated Divers and we successfully managed to locate one bird. Back at the harbour the 'Saerun' sailed at 11:00 am and within half an hour we were enjoying good views of an adult White-tailed Eagle. As the boat sailed between various small islands we enjoyed close views of a selection of seabirds and geological features before returning to harbour at 1:40 pm. A visit to the local supermarket followed by lunch down by the harbour before travelling west along the Snaefellnes Peninsula to Rif. Our first stop, by the causeway, to look at 'white-winged' gulls produced an immature White-tailed Eagle – two in the space of 3 hours, marvellous!

Keen to reach the seabird colony on the western point we resisted the temptation to stop and scan most birds, that is until we arrived at Gundarfjordur where a flock of 60-70 mainly Glaucous Gulls were gathered. A quick lesson in gull identification followed, if only they would oblige and stand next to each other life would be made much simpler! That sorted, we continued on to the Lighthouse at Svortuloft and within a short walk of the bus we managed to add Common Guillemot and its' high-Arctic cousin the Brunnich's Guillemot to the bird list along with Razorbill to complete the set of auks.

On our return journey we made a brief stop at Rif where an Iceland Gull was conveniently standing next to a Glaucous Gull! This gave us the opportunity to look at the field characteristics of both and compare the subtle differences in size and head profiles in the field. Having been unable to find a suitable restaurant in Olasvik and Gundarfjordur, we decided to return to Stykkisholmur for a late dinner.

## Day 7

Friday 29th May

### Stykkisholmur – Thingvellir (309km)

#### Wet and blustery conditions persisted until early evening

We departed a grey, rather damp Stykkisholmur at 9:30am for our drive SE to the Parliamentary Plains and the Althing. Descending the mountain road to the south our spirits were lifted when Julian spotted an Arctic Fox making its way towards the road, crossing just behind the bus, then pausing for photographs. Following a comfort stop at Borgarnes we crossed the causeway, turning off the main road, and headed inland towards the mountains. Borgarnesfjordur has been the home of a small population of breeding Shelduck for the last 30 years and we managed to add this species to the growing bird list.

We continued our journey through a barren and desolate landscape before descending into the 'rift' valley where the lush vegetation masked the many stress-fissures that dominate this area. After a stop at the Information Centre we searched for a sheltered spot in which to have lunch. Today this took the form of a rather bijoux hut where fishermen record their catch; at least it was drier than al fresco!

Next we ascended the American tectonic-plate and visited the new Interpretive Centre. This is perhaps, without doubt, the most important iconic landscape in Iceland being the birth place of 'parliament' and the home of Christianity in Iceland, not surprisingly everyone elected to walk from the view point arriving at the hotel, via the Althing, where Malcolm had the luggage unloaded and arranged a welcome cup of tea and coffee.

## Day 8

Saturday 30th May

Gullfoss, Geysir and Thingvellir (195km)

Overcast early morning eventually clearing with sunny intervals during the afternoon

This morning we visited two of Iceland's most celebrated landscapes, Gullfoss (the Golden Waterfall) and Geysir, before returning via Selfoss to spend more time at the Thingvellir. Lunch today was by Iceland's first hydro-power station on the River Sog, where several species of duck were present on the small lake, including a pair of Goosanders.

Back at Thingvellir we split in to two groups; the hikers set off to explore and enjoy this unique area, while the rest of us continued bird-watching around the lake. Our target species was Purple Sandpiper, which had so far managed to elude us, and we didn't have to wait too long before a bird was seen. During the short walk many birds including Golden Plover and Whimbrel, Ptarmigan and in particular Arctic Terns were very vociferous in making their presence known. Before returning to the hotel we had time to sit quietly and simply enjoy a pair of Red-throated Divers a sleep in the warmth of the afternoon sun.

This evening we all sat down and enjoyed a delicious meal, enjoyed each others' company and reflected on our experiences in this amazing land before retiring to pack for the last time on this tour.

## Day 9

Sunday 31st May

Thingvellir – Reykjavik (111km)

Mainly sunny with a few light showers

We enjoyed a breath of fresh air and felt the warmth of the sun before breakfast and loading the bus for our final journey. By 9:00am we were leaving the tranquillity of Thingvellir for the atmosphere of a modern capital. First we stopped at a factory shop, but unfortunately it was closed (Bank Holiday Weekend), before arriving in downtown Reykjavik. We had a short guided bus tour of the main shopping area before Malcolm parked the bus by the marine lake. We had 3 hours in which to enjoy and explore this vibrant, cosmopolitan capital before our onward journey to Keflavik and a late afternoon flight back to the UK. The flight was on schedule and we descended into a sunny Heathrow at 8:15pm. Baggage collected and farewells said before we melted into the crowd for our onward journeys home....

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## Species Lists

Birds (H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	May									
			23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	
1	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>		1	2	2			1		2	1
2	Great Northern Diver	<i>G. immer</i>		1	2	2						
3	Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>	1	✓	✓	✓						2
4	Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	✓		✓		✓			✓	✓	
5	Storm Petrel	<i>Hydrobates pelagicus</i>			✓							
6	Gannet	<i>Sula bassna</i>			2					✓		
7	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>							✓			
8	Shag	<i>P. aristotelis</i>						1	✓			
9	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>					1	✓				
11	Greylag Goose	<i>A. anser</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
12	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>								7		
13	Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
14	Mallard	<i>A. platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
15	Gadwall	<i>A. strepera</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					
16	Pintail	<i>A. acuta</i>		2								
17	Teal	<i>A. crecca</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					
18	Pochard	<i>Aythya farina</i>	1									
19	Tufted Duck	<i>A. fuligula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
20	Scaup	<i>A. marila</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
21	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
22	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
23	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>	2	✓	✓	✓	✓					
24	Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>		6	✓							
25	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓					✓	
26	Goldeneye	<i>B. clangula</i>					1					
27	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
28	Goosander	<i>M. merganser</i>						1			2	
29	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>							2			
30	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>	1	1	1							
31	Gyrfalcon	<i>F. rusticolus</i>		1	1							
32	Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	1				1					
33	Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus mutus</i>	2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	
34	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
35	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		1	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
36	Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					
37	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	✓		✓	✓						
38	Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>			2				✓			
39	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		1	✓			2	1			
40	Purple Sandpiper	<i>C. maritima</i>										2
41	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
42	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
43	Redshank	<i>Tringa tetanus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
44	Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
45	Red-necked Phalarope	<i>P. lobatus</i>	1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	
46	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>			3	2						
47	Arctic Skua	<i>S. parasiticus</i>	2		✓	✓		2	2	1		

	Common name	Scientific name	May								
			23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31
48	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
49	Common Gull	<i>L. canus</i>	1				✓	✓			
50	Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>			✓	✓		✓			
51	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>			✓	✓	✓			✓	
52	Glaucous Gull	<i>L. hyperboreus</i>			3		1	✓	✓		
53	Iceland Gull	<i>L. glaucoides</i>						5	2		
54	Greater Black-b Gull	<i>L. marinus</i>					1	✓	✓		
55	Lesser Black-b Gull	<i>L. fuscus</i>			3	2	4	✓	✓	2	
56	Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
57	Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>						✓			
58	Brunnich's Guillemot	<i>U. lomvia</i>						✓			
59	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>						✓			
60	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grille</i>			✓			✓			
61	Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>			✓			✓			
62	Little Auk	<i>Alle alle</i>			2						
63	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
64	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
65	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		2		1				1	
66	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		1	1	2	1	3			
67	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
68	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
69	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
70	Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>		✓	✓						
71	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>			1	2					
72	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>			H						

## Mammals

1	Atlantic Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>					1				
2	Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>			1						
3	Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>			2						