

Iceland

Naturetrek Tour Report

22 - 30 May 2010



Red-throated Diver - Alan Bevis



2010 Group by Malcolm Stott



Humpback Whale - Malcolm Stott



Redwing - Geoff Tweddle

Report compiled by Malcolm Stott



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Day 1

Saturday 22nd May

UK - Mývatn.

Warm & Sunny

The group assembled at Heathrow for the scheduled 3hr flight to Iceland. The flight was uneventful, even as we began our descent into Keflavik there was no sign of a volcano or an ash-cloud. However, these circumstances were about to change. A message left at Keflavik arrivals urged a speedy departure for Reykjavik airport as it was about to close because of the ash-cloud! Having met up with Jonathan (the final group member) we boarded the coach for our transfer to the domestic airport in Reykjavik. As we approached the capital all became much more evident; a film of pollution was clearly discernable against the distant horizon and the acrid taste of volcanic activity was detectable in the atmosphere! We arrived at Reykjavik in time to board a rescheduled flight north to Akureyri before the airport was closed!

On arrival at the northern capital our bus was parked at the airport ready for the onward journey north-east to Mývatn. It was a glorious evening, the landscape and distant snow-capped mountains were awash with wonderful light; this was Iceland at her finest! Although it was getting late, we couldn't resist the temptation to stop at Goðafoss where we had the first of many Ptarmigan on route to the hotel. After a delightful evening meal most of the group retired after the long day of travelling, while a few made the most of the incredible soft-pastel, evening light for a walk to the lake shore to enjoy Slavonian Grebes, amongst many other birds before bed.

Day 2

Sunday 23rd May

Mývatn.

Warm & sunny after a misty start

After a leisurely breakfast we left the hotel at 0900hrs for the short drive to Hofði, a tranquil wooded headland on the shores of Mývatn.

The 'drumming' and 'chipping' of snipe was, perhaps a little bizarre in woodland but nevertheless a joyful sound to the ears! Wrens, Redwings and Redpoll were also very vociferous in the woodlands. Hofði also offered some amazing views of Slavonian Grebes, a close encounter with a Great Northern Diver and enjoyed a host of other species. The mournful wailing song of the loons was very atmosphere, punctuating the still, fresh morning air and, perhaps epitomising the wilderness elements we were experiencing.

The tefra crater Hverfjall proved a challenge not to be ignored by some members of the group, others decided to explore the weird lava formations at Dimmuborgir and chance their luck at finding a Gyr Falcon, while Malcolm returned to Reykjavíð to buy provisions for lunch (being Sunday the shop didn't open until midday). We enjoyed our first 'al fresco' lunch in a corner of the car-park at Dimmuborgir with some stunning panoramic views over the lake. We continued our sojourns around the lake after lunch, stopping just outside Skútustaðir where we had some incredibly close views of Slavonian Grebes, Long-tailed Duck and the dainty Red-necked Phalaropes. We watched a food pass between a pair of nesting Arctic Terns before moving on to the River Laxa. The turbulent waters of this most celebrated Salmon river provided some stunning views of the handsome Harlequin Ducks and the utterly charming Barrow's Goldeneye. After a brief walk along the road next to the river we continued our circumnavigation of the Lake. We stopped frequent to either photograph the wealth of wildfowl or simply admire the stunning scenery before arriving back to the hotel at 6 0' clock. We had the customary bird log before enjoying a delicious meal at the bistro across from the hotel.

Day 3

Monday 24th May

Húsavík.

Warm and sunny

We left the hotel at the usual time this morning - our destination was Húsavík, home of Icelandic whale-watching. First we travelled across a barren, desolate landscape that had a stark beauty of its own, where the Apollo crew trained for their epic Moon landing. The road eventually descended the plateau into a fertile green valley where glasshouses utilise geo-thermal energy to grow salad foods. The picturesque fishing town was flooded with glorious sunshine and the colourful harbour was very photogenic. We boarded one of the traditional 'clinker' built ships and were soon leaving the harbour heading out across Skjálfandi Bay. To say the scenery was spectacular somehow doesn't seem to do it justice. The snow-covered mountains glistened in the morning sun and looked very dramatic. The light was perfect, every photographers dream, and our expectations were high as we sailed out into open water. Guillemots and Puffins bobbed like corks on the steel-blue sea, while Fulmars and Arctic Terns wheeled overhead. We didn't have to wait too long before we encountered a pod of 4 Harbour Porpoises. This experience was soon followed by a close encounter with a Humpback Whale, so close we could actually smell it's 'fishy breath'; memory cards were full in no time! We sailed further out across the Bay to enjoy some spectacular scenery before a Minke Whale distracted us, but it proved very difficult to follow. Our time whale-watching had passed all too quickly when the ships engine raced into action and we were heading back to the tiny harbour at Húsavík while enjoying a welcome cup of hot chocolate and cinnamon cake. It was a wonderful experience to be able to spend time with these 'Gentle Giants' of another world!

Back on land reality was soon to kicked-in when we realised the supermarket was closed, having been given a reassuring guarantee that it would be open despite it being a Bank Holiday! So Malcolm allocated each 1000IKR and we went to scavenge lunch before leaving town.

With the Dettifoss road still not open after winter, we headed for the Laugar Valley in the hope of finding a Gyrfalcon or perhaps even an Arctic Fox. Sadly neither obliged nor did it matter, the day will be memorable for some spectacular scenery, glorious weather and of course that encounter with the Humpback Whale!

Day 4

Tuesday 25th May

Blönduós

Cloudy start clearing pm, warm and very sunny

We left Mývatn this morning, but not before visiting the extraordinary landscape of sulphurous mountains, bubbling mud pots and hissing fumaroles at Namafell. Today's drive would take us through some of Iceland's most impressive and dramatic scenery of high mountain passes, still covered with snow, in contrast to the lush-green glacial valleys. First we had time to stroll the streets of Akureyri, 'Jewel of the North' before taking lunch at the impressive Botanical Gardens. Ascending the Óxandalsheiði pass the scenery was quiet simply spectacular and the descent beyond, into a broad highland valley, was equally impressive. Many Pink-footed Geese had congregated on the valley floor and were busily feeding-up before nesting. The clear, sparkling mountain rivers were dotted with waders of various species and the roadside lagoons held occasional pairs of Slavonian Grebe.

By late afternoon we had reached Blönduós and before checking-in at our over-night hotel we visited the nearby river-mouth. This area often proves very fruitful for high Arctic birds, feeding-up before departing for their Arctic breeding grounds, and we were not to be disappointed! Present amongst the flock of Arctic Terns were two Arctic Skuas and on the coast, and in resplendent summer plumage, Knot were busy feeding and joined by Purple Sandpiper and Sanderling. On the sea and quite close to the shore we counted a raft of 36 Harlequin Ducks and many more were seen flying up the river. Wow, this had been a very memorable day in more ways than one! After checking-in at the hotel, with its fine views over the bay, Alan thought he had seen two 'blows' – whale-watching from the comfort of your hotel bedroom, whatever will Naturetrek come up with next! This evening we dined out at a local restaurant, the quality of food was excellent and quantity very sufficient. The bird log followed before returning to the hotel and time to enjoy a short stroll in the evening sun before retiring.

Day 5

Wednesday 26th May

Stykkishólmur

Warm and sunny

An early morning walk in brilliant sunshine produced Atlantic Grey Seals and a Minke Whale for some, confirming Alan's suspicions of the previous evening. Some were lucky to enjoy the same from their hotel bedroom windows! After breakfast we loaded the trailer, Malcolm slipped off to do the shopping while the group enjoyed a walk along the river before boarding the bus for our drive to Stykkishólmur. We had another day of leisurely motoring along an empty highway, absorbing some of Iceland's best wilderness landscapes, before a comfort stop at the new service station at Staðarskáli. After leaving the Ring Road we drove across a wide expanse of open moorland and descend the 'Haunted Valley', the scene of 'Eric the Red's' murderous revenge on his neighbour. We visited a reconstruction of the notorious Viking, and enjoyed lunch in the warmth of glorious sunshine. We managed some excellent views and heard the mournful whaling calls of a Great-northern Diver before leaving Haukardalur.

A change of scenery, from rolling heaths to fertile green fields and distant jagged mountains capped in snow, marked our arrival on the Snæfellsnes Peninsula. Crossing one of the numerous bridges, a pair of very confident Ptarmigan provided a photo opportunity we simply couldn't ignore! The light was incredible and getting better by the hour, so we decided to check-in at the hotel while Malcolm disappeared to seek more information on the maritime elements for tomorrow, and return to collect us for an evenings' drive to Rif to see the defunct volcano Snæfelljökull; the glacier made famous by Jules Verne in his classic novel 'Journey to the Centre of the Earth'. Although we did well to resist the temptation to stop and bird-watch at every opportunity, the flock of 300 Knot in summer plumage on the edge of Ólafsvík proved a temptation too far! Eventually we arrived at what we considered to be the perfect place to photograph the extinct volcano and it was truly stunning, beautifully lit by the soft evening sun. We stopped at the hotel in Ólafsvík for supper before the return journey to Stykkishólmur and bed; full of contentment of a wonderful day in so many different ways!

Day 6

Thursday 27th May

Stykkishólmur

Cloudy, cold breeze am, bright and sunny later

We boarded 'Særun' at 1100 am for a cruise amongst some of the 2300 islands of Breiðafjörður. We had close views of nesting seabirds before visiting an island where White-tailed Eagles were nesting. Geological elements were not ignored and the basalt columns were very impressive. After trawling for Scallops (and tasting) we experienced the strength of the currents in the 'rip-tide' before returning to the harbour. We had just enough time to enjoy a delicious lunch of smoked salmon before we boarded the Baldur ferry at 3pm for the 1.5hr crossing to the small island of Flatey. Normally this tiny island is a cacophony of noise from the hundreds of breeding birds, but for some reason the evocative sounds of nesting waders was absent this year. An abnormally late breeding season is perhaps the most obvious explanation and a fact underlined by the late presence of Brent Geese, Knot and a few Sanderlings on the island. Nevertheless, it was still quite a memorable experience with singing Snow Buntings claiming territories from the roofs of many colourful houses and the swarms of dainty Red-necked Phalaropes along its shores. However its star attraction, the Grey Phalarope proved to be very elusive. Perhaps this was due to the high tide and lack of feeding areas around the shore rather than any other factor because we did manage to scope 4 distant birds on an adjacent island. All too soon our time on this magical island had passed and the ferry arrived to collect us for the return journey to Stykkishólmur. Tired, but elated with our visit to Flatey we retired early to review the many memory cards full of precious images and clear them for a fresh start in the morning!

Day 7

Friday 28th May

Thingvellir

Beautifully sunny

Curtains were drawn in the breakfast room this morning in an attempt to block out the strong sunlight that streamed through the windows! This morning we took a leisurely drive, circumnavigating the peninsula, birdwatching and experiencing the spectacular scenery especially the celebrated Snæfellsjökull glacier. On our drive we encountered more Brent Geese and Knot, flocks of 'white-winged gulls' and rafts of Eider Ducks.

After several stops we eventually arrived at Önderverðarnes bird-cliffs where we had exceptional views of the Auks on their nesting ledges and in particular the high Arctic speciality, Brünnich's Guillemot. During lunch many Gannets were seen passing, but no Orcas were observed this year. Driving along the south-coast, we left the rugged lava fields for a gentler pastoral landscape of lush-green rectangular fields divided by drainage ditches and spangled with yellow buttercups. A breeding pair of Red-throated Divers on a roadside lake offered an exceptional opportunity for the photographers and a joy for everyone to see this wonderful bird so close.

We managed to add Shelduck to our increasing list at Borgarnes before heading inland and taking the mountain road to our destination at Thingvellir. Everything was going so well, when Brian enquired if we had sufficient spare wheels should we need them! He spoke too soon, in fact about 2 minutes too soon, before we experienced a double blow-out at the highest point on this remote mountain road! After a little puzzling we eventually found where the tools were kept and soon had the wheels off and replaced one with the spare. We continued very slowly on our journey, nursing the bus over the stone road, until we reached the National Park. We were all pleased and relieved to reach our hotel this evening, if a little later than expected. While we checked-in to the hotel and enjoyed a delicious meal, Malcolm took the bus to Selfoss to have replacement tyres fitted, but not before he managed a third puncture. How unlucky was that! Sufficient to say he arrived back at the hotel by 9am the next morning!!

Day 8

Saturday 29th May

Thingvellir

Overcast am, brighter later

With new tyres fitted our confidence was restored and we set-off this morning to enjoy some of Iceland's most iconic and celebrated landscapes. Our first stop was at the site of Iceland's' first parliament, the birth place of Christianity in Iceland and the parting of two of the Earth's great tectonic plates at Thingvellir. After visiting the inter-active information centre we walked between the fissures that lead to the Althing while Malcolm drove the bus to the lower car-park. Back on board the bus we travelled the short distance to the site of the former hotel, which burnt down last year, and found another pair of nesting Red-throated Divers on a small lake before taking a short walk along the shores of Thingvallavatn. A visit to this remarkable area leaves one 'touched' by a little piece of heaven; its serene atmosphere is overwhelming and its wilderness amplified in the evocative sounds of bubbling Whimbrels, the plaintive calls of Golden Plover and the whaling cries of Great-northern Divers, of which there were 5 individuals.

Crossing over on to the Eurasian Tectonic Plate we travelled over expanses of moorland before descending the hill into Laugarvatn, where Malcolm stopped for shopping before finding a suitable lunch spot. The spectacular Gullfoss was our next destination and the 'Queen' of Icelandic waterfalls didn't disappoint.

Next we visited the phenomena that gave its name to the World, Geysir and marvelled at the extraordinary event. Back on the bus we returned to the hotel for our last night, but not before first stopping to photograph a group of beautiful Icelandic horses.

Day 9

Sunday 30th May

London .]

Bright & sunny

Bus loaded we departed the hotel and its unusual location and took the new mountain road to Reykjavik. We had time for a little bird-watching and lunch on the Reykjanes Peninsula before saying our farewells to Jonathan and depositing the bus at Keklavik before our return UK flight. The flight was uneventful and we arrived back to London much richer for our experience of this remarkable country.

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Species Lists

Birds

	Common name	Scientific name	May								
			22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
1	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>					1	2	2	2	
2	Great Northern Diver	<i>G. immer</i>		2			1		2	5	
3	Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>	30+	60+	20	16			2		
4	Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
5	Gannet	<i>Sula bassna</i>	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓		
6	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓								
7	Shag	<i>P. aristotelis</i>					✓	✓	✓		
8	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus Cygnus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
9	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>		1		500	✓				
10	Greylag Goose	<i>A. anser</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>					250	140	400		
12	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>							9		
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	2		1					
17	Teal	<i>A. crecca</i>		10	✓	✓	✓				
18	Tufted Duck	<i>A. fuligula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
19	Scaup	<i>A. marila</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓					
20	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
21	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>	20	20+		60+	40+		4	4	
22	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>		3	2	2					
23	Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>	2	10+	✓	✓					
24	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>	✓	✓							✓
25	Goldeneye	<i>B. clangula</i>		2	✓	✓					
26	Red-breast Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
27	Goosander	<i>M. merganser</i>					2		1	3	
28	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>						1			
29	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		2	1						1
30	Gyrfalcon	<i>F. rusticolus</i>		1							
31	Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus mutus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	1	
32	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	2	2	1	3	10+	✓	✓	✓	✓
33	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		2	2	6	4	4	2		
34	Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
35	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>			1	10	30+	✓			
36	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>				1	40				
37	Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>			6	12	300	✓	✓		
38	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		6	✓	✓	✓	✓			
39	Purple Sandpiper	<i>C. maritima</i>				1	12				
40	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
41	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
42	Redshank	<i>Tringa tetanus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
43	Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
44	Common Name	Scientific Name	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
45	Grey Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus fulicarius</i>						4			
46	Red-necked Phalarope	<i>P. lobatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
47	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>						2			

	Common name	Scientific name	May								
			22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
48	Arctic Skua	<i>S. parasiticus</i>	2		3	6	12	✓	15		2
49	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
50	Common Gull	<i>L. canus</i>				✓					
51	Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓		
52	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓		✓	✓		✓			
53	Glaucous Gull	<i>L. hyperboreus</i>			1	1	50+	4	✓		
54	Iceland Gull	<i>L. glaucoides</i>			1	2	30+	2	✓		
55	Greater Black-b Gull	<i>L. marinus</i>			1		✓	✓	✓		✓
56	Lesser Black-b Gull	<i>L. fuscus</i>	✓			2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
57	Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
58	Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>			30			✓	✓		
59	Brünnich's Guillemot	<i>U. lomvia</i>			1				✓		
60	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>					✓		✓		
61	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grille</i>			20		3	✓	✓		
62	Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>			✓			✓			
63	Feral Pigeon/Rock Dove	<i>Columbia livia</i>	5								
64	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
65	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
66	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		10							3
67	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		2	2	6	✓	✓	✓	✓	1
68	Redwing	<i>Turdus illacus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
69	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
70	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
71	Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>		15	✓	✓	✓				
72	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>	2	1				6	✓		

Mammals

1	Atlantic Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>			1		5+	2	1		
2	Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>			2		1				
3	Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>			1						
4	Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>			4						