

Iceland

Naturetrek Tour Report

21 - 29 May 2011



King Eider



Gyr Falcon



Ptarmigan



Snow Bunting

Report and images compiled by Malcolm Stott



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Day 1

Saturday 21st May

UK - Mývatn

Warm & sunny south, snow north, temp -1 deg C

The group assembled at Heathrow for the scheduled 3hr flight to Iceland. The descent into Keflavik provided some spectacular views of the Iceland's southeast coastline and the Westmann Islands, including Surtsey. Having met-up with Edna and Margaret (who arrived a day earlier from Glasgow) we boarded the bus for our 50min transfer to Reykjavik. The weather was glorious, sunshine and temperatures of 8 deg C.

On arrival at the domestic airport there was enough time for coffee before we boarded the plane for our onward flight to Akureyri. During the flight north cloud cover was intermittent and so provided some tantalising views of Iceland's desolate and frozen interior before we landed at Akureyri. In contrast to the weather in the south of Iceland, the north was still firmly in winter's grip with fresh snow and a temperature of -1 deg C! The landscape on our 45 minute journey to Narfastaðir could have been mistaken for a scene out of a winter-wonderland fairy-tale and was quite unexpected!

At the guesthouse we soon settled in and learned of the latest eruption on Grimvötn in SE Iceland. Unfortunately we missed this event by just 4 hours, had it erupted earlier we would have had some spectacular views as we flew along the SE coast to land at Keflavik! We joined guests at an 'old school reunion' dinner and over a delicious buffet supper we were entertained with a few speeches, a lot of singing and much merriment in what was a typical Icelandic social evening. An experience that we all thoroughly enjoyed before retiring to recover for a long day in the saddle!

Day 2

Sunday 22nd May

Mývatn

Snow and cold, temp -2 deg C

By morning overnight snow had left a pristine blanket of white covering the landscape. Undeterred by the unusually late winter weather and very low temperatures, which had not been experienced for at least the last 20 years, we boarded the bus for the short drive to one of Europe's best known areas for breeding wildfowl, Lake Mývatn. Although snow flurries persisted for much of the day, it didn't stop us enjoying some good birdwatching. Our first stop was by the River Láxa, its turbulent waters provided our first views of some confiding Harlequin Ducks and very engaging Barrow's Goldeneye before we arrived at the lake. The strong northerly wind made the lake rather choppy, and when combined with driving snow flurries observations were frustratingly difficult. We did, however, manage to find a sheltered bay that held a variety of species, so we took a dirt track down to the water's edge and had good views of our first Slavonian Grebes, Great-northern Divers, Long-tailed Ducks and the dainty Red-necked Phalarope that appeared to bob cork-like on the choppy water.

After a late morning coffee stop at Skútustaðir we had enough time to stroll around the pseudo craters before continuing on our journey round the lake. We stopped frequently to search for new species and hadn't travelled very far before we saw a pair of beautiful Red-throated Divers on a roadside pool. This was soon followed by an encounter with, perhaps the most celebrated of all Icelandic birds - a Gyr Falcon. The male bird was hunkered down on lava, attempting to seek some shelter from the snow flurries, and provided some extremely close and enjoyable views for a while before eventually taking flight.

Since it was getting near to lunch time we stopped at the supermarket in Reykjahlíð to purchase provisions and visit the new information centre. The latter building provided vital shelter, as we huddled around the picnic table in an attempt to avoid the worst of the driving snow! Full of optimism we continued our birdwatching around the lake using the bus as a mobile hide. On the north side of the lake we left the main road, taking a gravel track that took us close to the water's edge and close to the numerous breeding pools frequented by ducks. It was here that we had some exceptionally close views of more Slavonian Grebes and Red-necked Phalaropes, along with Red-breasted Mergansers and Common Scoter. By the time we returned to the main road it had stopped snowing, so we grasped the opportunity of a potential weather-window to visit the high-temperature area at Namafjall.

Once we had driven over the mountain road, the landscape changed quite dramatically. The yellow, sulphurous hillsides with plumes of white steam escaping from numerous fumaroles and several gurgling pools of boiling mud gave the landscape a surreal appearance. It was an amazing 'otherworldly' experience like no other. Although we attempted to visit the new geothermal power plant on Krafla, the road became impassable by drifting snow, so we decided discretion was the better part of valour and abandoned our attempt in favour of visiting the 'little' rift at Grjótagja instead. Somehow after lunch time simply had run away and we just made Dimmuborgir by late afternoon in time for coffee before the cafe closed. Making the most of the dry weather (no snow flurries) we had time for a brief walk through the weird and wonderful lava formations and even managed to see a very confiding Ptarmigan before leaving this element of the Mývatn National Park. On our return to Narfastaðir we paused briefly by the turbulent waters of the River Laxa for one more time to enjoy the antics of the handsome Harlequin Ducks and the utterly charming Barrow's Goldeneye before arriving at the hotel in good time for supper. And after another gastronomic delight we had the traditional evening birdlog before eventually retiring.

Day 3

Monday 23rd May

Húsavík

Strong northerly winds and snow, temp -3 deg C

Again overnight snow had left, what at first appeared to be a pristine looking landscape, however on closer inspection evidence of fall-out from the ash-cloud was evident this morning. We left the hotel at our usual time and headed for the northern most fishing community of Húsavík, and home of Icelandic whale-watching. Not wishing to tempt fate with the high mountain road in wintry conditions, we made alternative plans to drive down the Laugar Valley and follow the coast road this morning. Normally the numerous water bodies along the valley floor hold good populations of breeding birds, but given the Arctic conditions very few were seen during our drive. On the outskirts of town, we left the main road and descended a dirt track, towards the sea where a few gulls and sea-duck were gathered. After a brief stop we continued onto the effluence outlet pipe by the fish factory where a large flock of gulls had gathered. Amongst the squabbling group of gulls we found both Iceland and Glaucous Gulls and given their close proximity to us and to each other, it provided an excellent opportunity to compare the subtle identification features that separate the two species.

We eventually worked our way round the harbour until we had reached the outer wall and although there were few birds present, we did manage to find a female King Eider before heading into town. While we enjoyed a welcomed cup of coffee, Malcolm visited the supermarket and Tourist Centre to buy lunch and make enquiries about the whale-watching and whether or not the road to Dettifoss was open. Although we were in an optimistic mood, we were not surprised to learn that all whale-watching had been cancelled and the Dettifoss road was closed! Most of us took the opportunity of an informative visit to the Cultural House Museum, while some hardy souls returned to the harbour. We all met up later and, taking what little shelter that was available from the driving snow, in the lee of a warehouse, we had lunch.

Back at Mývatn the Harlequins tempted us to linger by the River Laxa before crossing the bridge and taking a slow drive clockwise round the lake. The weather had turned inclement by the time we returned to Neslönd, so we parked the bus by the water's edge and watched some very confiding Red-necked Phalaropes, Dunlin, Redshank, Ring Plover and a Wheatear feeding in a sheltered bay. More Slavonian Grebes and Common Scoter were present further out on the lake. The 'Cowshed Cafe' proved too much of a temptation to resist for an afternoon coffee stop and we were not disappointed; milk doesn't come any fresher! We completed our journey with more stops for birdwatching and/or photography before returning to Narfastaðir. The traditional birdlog followed another excellent supper before we retired to pack.

Day 4

Tuesday 24th May

Blönduós

Cold and very sunny with temp 1 deg C

We left Narfastaðir this morning, with its fresh-covering of snow, albeit tinted grey from ash-cloud fall-out, bound for Blönduós. En route we stopped briefly at the impressive waterfalls of Goðafoss before arriving in Akureyri, the 'Jewel of the North'. We had enough time to wonder round town or birdwatch by the harbour while Malcolm visited the supermarket. The drive today took us through some of Iceland's most impressive and dramatic scenery.

On leaving the northern capital we were soon ascending the long Óxandalsheiði Pass. The scenery was quiet simply spectacular with high mountains covered with snow and exposed black jagged peaks. Beyond the mountain range we descended into a broad glacial valley and starting seeing many Pink-footed Geese that had recently arrived on their highland breeding grounds. The clear, sparkling mountain rivers were dotted with waders of various species and the roadside lagoons held occasional pairs of Slavonian Grebes.

By late afternoon we had reached Blönduós and before checking-in at our overnight hotel we visited the nearby river-mouth. This area often proves very fruitful for late high Arctic migrants, feeding-up before departing for their tundra breeding grounds and we were not to be disappointed. Small flocks of Knots and a few Sanderlings were present with a large raft of Harlequin Ducks at sea. By the small harbour we found Black Guillemots, Long-tail Ducks and our first mammal, a Common Seal. After checking-in at the hotel we dined out this evening at a local restaurant, the quality of food was excellent, which is to be expected in Iceland.

Day 5

Wednesday 25th May

Stykkishólmur

Warm and sunny, temp 7 deg C

After breakfast a brief walk by the river, while Malcolm visited the supermarket before leaving Blönduós as we continued our journey to Snæfellesnes. In marked contrast to previous days, the sky was blue, the temperature comfortable and the sunshine enhanced the spectacular landscape during our drive this morning. By late morning we were heading south along Hrútafjörður when we saw our first (and only) Arctic Fox running across a lambing field. Perhaps, even more surprising was the good views of a Minke Whale in the fjord shortly afterwards!

A coffee stop by the new service station at Staðarskáli was a welcome break before we continued north along the western side of the fjord. After leaving the main road we drove across a wide expanse of open moorland and descend the 'Haunted Valley', scene of 'Eric the Reds' murderous revenge on his neighbours. We visited a reconstruction of Leifer Eriksson's homestead and enjoyed lunch in the warmth of glorious sunshine. We managed some excellent views and heard the mournful whaling calls of Great Northern Divers, a sound that epitomises northern wilderness areas, before leaving Haukardalur.

We continued our journey through some amazing coastal scenery, along the Breiðafjörður, stopping occasionally to take photographs. It was on one of these stops, overlooking Stykkishólmur, that we had some superb views of a Merlin that landed very close to the bus not once, but three times! Once we had arrived in Stykkishólmur we visited the harbour and the office of Særun to book a sea-bird cruise before checking-in at our hotel. Dinner this evening was at a restaurant in town before returning to the hotel to complete the daily log.

Day 6

Thursday 26th May

Stykkishólmur

Dry am turning wet later, temp 4 deg C

We left the hotel this morning to make a circular tour of the Snæfellsnes Peninsula. Crossing the new bridge at Kolgrafafjörður we had excellent views of a splendid male King Eider thanks to the sharp-eyes of David.

Just outside Grundarfjörður many 'white-winged' gulls had gathered allowing us to use our new skills to separate Iceland from Glaucous Gulls. The coastline between here and Olafsvík was dotted with flocks of Knot in their red summer plumage. Many Dunlin and Ringed Plovers were also present in good numbers. We had coffee in Olafsvík before stopping by the pools at Rif. Few waders were present compared to the large flock of 'white-winged' gulls

Further around the headland we turned off the main road to visit the seabird colony at Önderverðarnes. While Malcolm prepared lunch the group scanned the ledges of nesting auks looking for the high Arctic specialist Brúnnich's Guillemot at one of its most southerly breeding sites. Four individuals were found and seen very well at close quarters, amongst the many Common Guillemots. The season was obviously very late since few, if any, of the auks actually had eggs! Just as we were about to leave the Lighthouse Susanna noticed a black triangular fin at sea and very close to the cliffs! Climbing back out of the bus we watched in amazement and counted at least 15 Orcas in two pods, including one small young Orca. This was a real bonus, appreciated and enjoyed by all! Whilst driving back to the main road several Snow Buntings were seen flitting amongst the lava field. By the time we had reached Arnarstapi for coffee the weather had seriously deteriorated and the return journey over the mountain pass was very wet. Although we stopped several times to birdwatch, we added no new species to our list by the time we reached the hotel. Again we decided to eat out this evening at another restaurant in town, after which we reassembled in the hotel for the daily log.

Day 7

Friday 27th May

Breiðafjörður/Thingvellir

A leisurely start followed breakfast this morning. Once the cases were packed on board the bus we had time to stroll down to the harbour before boarding 'Særun' at 11am for a cruise on the island studded waters of Breiðafjörður. We had some incredible close views of nesting Kittiwakes, Fulmars and Shags before arriving at an island where White-tailed Eagles were nesting. The male was just returning to the nest with a fish, which the female promptly accepted and flew a short distance to enjoy. Meanwhile the male settled down to incubate the eggs and provided a great photographic opportunity. This was a wonderful experience and our timing could not have been better. We didn't ignore the special geological features of the area and we also experienced the strength of the currents in the 'ripe-tide' before trawling for Scallops (and tasting) on our return to the harbour.

We had lunch in a small wooded picnic site on the edge of town before starting our journey to Thingvellir. Driving along the south-coast, the rugged lava fields of Snæfellesnes gave way to a gentler, pastoral landscape of lush-green rectangular fields divided by drainage ditches and spangled with myriads of yellow buttercups. After coffee at Borgarnes we added Shelduck to our increasing bird list before heading inland and taking the mountain road to Hengill. The scenery over Armannsfell was desolate and wild before we descended onto the fertile Parliamentary Plain and arriving at our hotel in time for supper.

Day 8

Saturday 28th May

Thingvellir, Gullfoss & Geysir

Showery, temp 7 deg C

After breakfast we set-off this morning to visit Hvergerði, the market garden town built on a high temperature area before enjoying some of Iceland's most iconic and celebrated landscapes.

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 where we marvelled at the extraordinary event. After lunch we returned to 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 interactive 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 where we saw a nesting Great Northern Diver. 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. Our return to the hotel was via the River Sog. We stopped briefly to welcome couple of Iceland's newest arrivals, when a ewe gave birth to twins, before arriving back at Hengill in plenty of time to pack and enjoy our last supper together.

Day 9

Sunday 29th May

London

Bright & sunny

Bus loaded for one last time before departing the hotel, and its unusual location, to take the new mountain road, following the hot-water pipes, to Reykjavik. We had time for a visit a woollen factory outlet shop before arriving in the modern capital. With 3 hours to spare we had enough time to explore and absorb the atmosphere of this unique northern city on the edge of the Arctic before taking Edna and Margaret to their Keflavik hotel. Once checked-in for the UK flight Malcolm bade farewell...

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Species Lists

Birds

	Common name	Scientific name	May								
			21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29
1	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>		2	2	1	4	1	4	3	
2	Great Northern Diver	<i>G. immer</i>	1	3		2	3	1	4	2	
3	Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>		16	10	2					
4	Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Gannet	<i>Sula bassna</i>	6		1	1	1	✓			
6	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>				1	1	✓	✓		
7	Shag	<i>P. aristotelis</i>					✓	✓			
8	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus Cygnus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>				100					
10	Greylag Goose	<i>A. anser</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>					50	100	✓		
12	Barnacle goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>					3				
13	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>							9	1	
14	Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	✓	40	✓	✓	✓	✓	1	2	
15	Mallard	<i>A. platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
16	Gadwall	<i>A. strepera</i>		6	6						
17	Pintail	<i>A. acuta</i>				1					
18	Teal	<i>A. crecca</i>		✓	2	2	6				
19	Tufted Duck	<i>A. fuligula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
20	Scaup	<i>A. marila</i>	5	8	6	✓			6	6	2
21	King Eider	<i>Somateria spectabilis</i>			f			m			
22	Eider	<i>S. mollissima</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓			
23	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>		20	30	50	70			1	
24	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>		6	40	✓	✓				
25	Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>		5	24		4		1		
26	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>		30	20	24					
27	Goldeneye	<i>B. clangula</i>				1					
28	Red-breast Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	2	5	5	10	10	6	8	6	
29	Goosander	<i>M. merganser</i>					3			1	
30	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>							3		
31	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>	1	1			1				1
32	Gyr Falcon	<i>F. rusticolus</i>		2		1				1	
33	Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus mutus</i>		2	3			1		2	
34	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
35	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		1	2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	2
36	Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
37	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	✓		40	✓	✓	✓	✓		
38	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>				1	1	4			
39	Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>	20		24	12	17	✓	15		
40	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓	3	26	✓	✓	✓		
41	Purple Sandpiper	<i>C. maritima</i>				12	✓	✓	✓		
42	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
43	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	2	12	2	2
44	Redshank	<i>Tringa tetanus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
45	Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
46	Red-necked Phalarope	<i>P. lobatus</i>		12	20	✓	✓	2			
47	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>							1		

	Common name	Scientific name	May									
			21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	
48	Arctic Skua	<i>S. parasiticus</i>		2	1				10	12	2	1
49	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
50	Common Gull	<i>L. canus</i>	2		1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
51	Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓				
52	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>			6	✓	✓			1		
53	Glaucous Gull	<i>L. hyperboreus</i>			6	✓	✓	✓	✓			
54	Iceland Gull	<i>L. glaucoides</i>			3	4	4	✓		2		
55	Greater Black-b Gull	<i>L. marinus</i>			2	✓	✓	✓	✓			
56	Lesser Black-b Gull	<i>L. fuscus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
57	Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
58	Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>							✓			
59	Brunnich's Guillemot	<i>U. lomvia</i>							6			
60	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>				1			✓			
61	Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grille</i>			6	4	6	3		6		
62	Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>						6	1	20		
63	Feral Pigeon/Rock Dove	<i>Columbia livia</i>								10		✓
64	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
65	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
66	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>									H	H
67	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	1	3	1	✓	✓	✓		6	✓	4
68	Redwing	<i>Turdus illacus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
69	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	2	20	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
70	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	12	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5
71	Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>	4			✓	✓			12	✓	✓
72	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>			2	2	1	4				

Mammals

1	Arctic Fox	<i>Alopex lagopus</i>					1					
2	Atlantic Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>				2				3		
3	Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>					1					
4	Orca	<i>Orcinus orca</i>							15			