

Iceland

Naturetrek Tour report

19 - 27 May 2013



Great Northern Diver



Harlequin Duck



Barrow's Goldeneye



Gyrfalcon

Report & images compiled by Malcolm Stott



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Day 1

Sunday 19th May

UK - Mývatn (72km)

Weather details: Light rain, wind 6m/s temperature 7°C

The group assembled at Heathrow for the flight to Iceland and 3-hours later we descended through grey skies and a windy landing at Keflavik International Airport. Once on board the transfer bus we were soon travelling through a bewildering landscape of ancient lava-fields conceal by centuries old grey mosses, *Racomitrium lanuginosum*. We arrived in the northern capital, with its cosmopolitan ambience, in plenty of time for our onward flight north. The 40-minute flight went without incident and we eventually descended into the quiet regional airport at Akureyri. Malcolm collected the bus and with luggage loaded we travelled through a changing landscape where winter had reluctantly loosened its grip. The blankets of snow-cover now reduced to a patchwork and a mosaic of colourful hues; vivid greens of mosses, russet tones of dwarf shrubs and black lava encrusted with splashed of orange lichens were once more beginning to punctuate a new spring landscape. The evening light was enchanting and had a special quality rarely found outside Arctic regions.

It was getting late and we had been travelling all day, so our plan was to drive direct to Narfastaðir. However, we didn't anticipate on finding a very obliging Great Northern Diver on a small roadside pool, its much larger breeding lake still frozen. This proved to be a photographic opportunity too good to pass! After a magical interlude watching the diver in its splendid breeding plumage and photographing the bird at very close quarters, we resumed our journey. Having checked into our rooms we quickly found our way down to the dining room where we enjoyed the culinary delights of our first Icelandic meal. After supper Malcolm gave a brief introduction to what we might expect in the few days ahead before we enjoyed an evening stroll before retiring.

Day 2

Monday 20th May

Mývatn (128km)

Weather details; Glorious sunshine night and day, winds light with temperature 6°C

After an early morning walk for those suffering from 'light-induced insomnia' we had breakfast before setting out to visit Lake Mývatn, one of Europe's greatest natural treasures. Located in the heart of north-east Iceland about 100km/65 miles south of the Arctic Circle the lake and its surroundings have been shaped by repeated volcanic eruptions and seismic activity down through the ages. We stopped on high ground to gain an appreciation of the landscape around the 36km² lake and it was spectacular; a panorama of surreal lava, pseudo-craters and cave formations, sulphur-streaked mountains, and sweeping wetlands.

Our first stop was by the famous River Laxá, where we had a short walk by the river to admire the handsome Barrow's Goldeneye and Harlequin Ducks in their splendid blue-grey livery, two species along with the Great Northern Diver that have their only European breeding populations in Iceland.

Mývatn is known to birdwatchers throughout the world for its rich birdlife, particularly its abundance of breeding wildfowl. No other site in Europe can boast such a diverse range of breeding ducks as the Mývatn area. 14 of the 16 species of duck which breed in Iceland can be found here; the Common Eider and Common Shelduck are coastal species and are therefore rarely seen at Mývatn. Three other species of wildfowl, Whooper Swan, Greylag Goose and to a lesser extent Pink-footed Goose also breed in the area.

The midges at Mývatn (which means midge-lake in Icelandic) and the River Laxá, the main reason for an abundance birds locally, were thankfully absent. Least we should forget, the midges are the sustaining reason for the wealth of wildfowl and if absent, there would be far fewer breeding birds. For the first part of the morning we followed the erratic shores of Lake Mývatn bird-watching before enjoying a pleasant walk along the tranquil wooded peninsula Hofði. We photographed the brightly-coloured, bizarre-shaped volcanic steam vent tubes that stood in the shallow, placid waters and have stimulated numerous legends over the centuries. Walking through the birch woods we managed to find Ptarmigan and some were very obliging allowing a very close approach as they pecked birch seeds off the snow. We also managed to add Redpoll and Wren to the bird-list this morning.

The geology in this particular area is spectacular, majestic mountains, gaping fissures with pools of hot water, lava-fields of unusual textures, volcanic craters of all possible types, colourful solfataras and bubbling pools of hot viscous mud of amazing patterns and colours. We attempted to take in as much of this unique scenery as time allowed and after a brief visit to the local super-market we started with a brief walk down to the lakes shore at Reykjhlöð to enjoy the sun and the varied of wildfowl gathered close to the shore where a small armada of 28 Slavonian Grebes were assembled.

Next we moved to the fissure at Grjotagja for lunch before visiting the high temperature zone. The Namaskardi area consists, without doubt, one of the most surreal scenarios on the island and is part of the Namafjall fissure, active proof of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge below, the opposing and contrasting forces of which tend to separate the two tectonic plates that form Iceland at a rate of a few millimetres per year. This area was certainly most unusual, the terrain being dotted with numerous holes of gurgling, bubbling grey mud and hissing, steaming fumaroles, typical manifestations of secondary volcanism.

These infernal cauldrons, supplied by surface water that filters into the ground and is heated by the molten rock beneath through deep fissures in the earth's crust, take one's imagination back in time, to the very creation of the universe; paradoxically Iceland is a land which has been formed in very recent times, geologically speaking and I always find it an amazing fact that dinosaurs had been extinct 25 million years before Iceland was created! Before leaving this 'hot spot' we passed through the new Katla Geothermal power-plant en route up to the volcano to the crater Viti.

Our walk through the weird and wonderful lava formation at Dimmuborgir came to a premature end with all the footpaths closed due to 'wet' snow and the potential damage by many feet trampling on the fragile soils. Undaunted we decided to complete our sojourns around the lake in search of a Gyr Falcon. We didn't find a falcon, but enjoyed some wonderfully close views of wildfowl amongst which Common Scoters, Red-throated Diver and two more Great Northern Divers were highlights. The light was exquisite and the landscape compelling to the photographers' eye and we end our day at Mývatn by the bridge over the River Laxá where we had some marvellous views of Harlequin and Barrow's Goldeneye before returning to Narfastaðir in plenty of time to relax before another delicious supper. The daily log followed and Malcolm gave a briefing on likely scenarios for the next day.

Day 3

Tuesday 21st May

Húsavík (126km)

Weather details; bright & sunny with 4m/s wind and temperature 5°C.

A enjoyed a change of landscape this morning as we headed down the Laugar Valley and along the coast to Húsavík for a day whale-watching. We travelled through a frozen countryside where wading birds carpeted lawn sized areas of grasslands waiting for the late spring thaw to arrive. The timelessness of a typical Icelandic fishing village was reflected in Húsavík with its quiet streets, picturesque houses and bustling harbour where we began. First we visited the effluent outlet from the fish processing factory where goods numbers of Fulmars had gathered and squabbled over the waste. A few white-winged gulls were also present enabling us to learn the subtle plumage differences between Glaucous and Iceland Gulls. Next we went to the outer seawall and found a small group of Purple Sandpipers roosting on the rocks and little else present. Malcolm parked the bus by North Sailings landing and there was enough time to explore the town, visit the Whale-watching Museum or simply stroll around the harbour and enjoy the sun before our picnic lunch.

The weather was glorious and the sea flat calm, ideal conditions as we left the harbour on our whale-watching cruise. It took over an hour to sail across the beautiful Skjálfandi Bay, with its dramatic mountainous scenery, before we encountered a Minke Whale and we were lucky to find a pod of 9 engaging Harbour Porpoise. We had a grand-stand seat watching the piracy activities of Arctic Skua as they chased Kittiwakes in an attempt to make them disgorge their fish. Puffins, Black Guillemots and the odd Razorbill bobbed cork-like on the surface and distant snow-covered mountains, highlighted in soft warm sunshine made a very dramatic backdrop to our experience. Unfortunately time passed all too quickly and we started headed back to Húsavík. On the return journey we were treated to a welcome mug of hot chocolate and a cinnamon roll and it was 5 o'clock by the time we returned to the harbour.

On our return journey we took the mountain road through a desolate and barren landscape; a mosaic of sand and stone deserts and endless snow fields before we reached the lake. We returned along the eastern shores and stopped only once to admire a pair of Great Northern Diver before arriving back at Narfastaðir. After another delicious supper we had the daily log before retiring exhausted after a day at sea!

Day 4

Wednesday 22nd May

Mývatn – Varmahið (394km)

Weather details; overnight snow wind 7m/s, temperatures -2°C

Much to our surprise this morning a dusting of over-night snow gave more of a wintry feel to the landscape. We departed Narfastaðir after breakfast to head back towards Akureyri, only stopping briefly to photograph the same obliging Great Northern Diver we found earlier, but in much better light this morning.

While Malcolm purchased fresh provision for lunch the group had time for coffee and a little bird-watching by the harbour. Leaving Akureyri we started the long ascent up the Oxnadalur Valley with a keen eye on the river looking for Goosander, which we managed to find in small numbers. Once we had reached the top we were left breathless, not due to any physical exertion it was pure emotion, a reaction to the stunning and dramatic landscape of high mountains covered in snow and highlighted by some exquisite light!

Once we had descended into the broad, fluvial glacial valley we found began to find numerous Pink-footed Geese present and some sitting on nests in sparse vegetation along the braided glacial rivers. We had our usual picnic lunch before continuing on to the settlement of Varmahið and our hotel for the night. Dropping the trailer off at the hotel we continued in a circular route looking for Barnacle Geese that traditionally feed on the grasslands before completing their long migration to Greenland. Most had already left, but we found a few still lingering and grazing in the fields. We also saw a Merlin briefly carrying prey before it soon disappeared into the vast landscape.

Next we decided to explore the Blöndulón Valley in the hope of finding either an Arctic Fox or Gyr Falcon; either would have been good but the reality was we saw none, so returned back to the hotel. After a delightful supper and the daily log we retired early.

Day 5

Thursday 23rd May

Varmahið – Stykkishólmur (282 km)

Weather details; Sunny with some light rain, wind 5m/s temperature 8°C

Only 30 minutes after leaving Varmahið this morning we found our first Arctic Fox, a blue colour-morph, and we watched the animals for some 10 minutes or so before it eventually disappeared into the landscape.

In euphoric mood we continued onto Blondúos and took an opportunity to break the journey with a little bird-watching by the mouth of the estuary. There were plenty of Eiders on the sea and many Arctic Terns resting on the black sands, further up river about 20 Harlequin were seen as we crossed the bridge resuming our travels west.

A late morning comfort stop at a service station was a much welcomed break before leaving Route 1 and heading down the 'Haunted Valley'. Light rain had dampened the gravel road giving us a dust free journey, but it wasn't until the final leg of our journey that we eventually managed to find a Gyr Falcon. A male was found perched on a piece of lava and stayed long enough for everyone to have reasonable views before it eventually flew off.

We arrived in Stykkishólmur at 4 o'clock and immediately visited the harbour and the office of Sæferðir to reserve tickets for tomorrow's ferry crossing to Flately. Sadly we were to be disappointed since the ferry was still on a winter schedule, which meant a crossing would be impracticable, so we considered an island cruise instead. After a brief walk around the picturesque harbour we arrived at the hotel to do our daily log and have dinner.

Day 6

Friday 24th May

Snæfellsnes (170 km)

Weather details; Sunny with persistent light rain, wind 5m/s, temperatures 6°C

Situated on top of a hill our hotel commanded stunning views of Breiðafjörður and its many islands. The fjörður is Iceland's most expansive area of shallow coastal water, rich in wildlife. The area has greater tides and tidal currents than elsewhere in the country and it has many islands - an estimate of between 2,500 to 3,000 islands depending on tide heights. Its birdlife is unique and one of the most important in Iceland and, perhaps the whole of the North Atlantic. This microcosm is characterised by birds which are wholly dependent on marine life, and many of them nest in large colonies. The area also holds two-thirds of the Icelandic White-tailed Eagle population and to the north perhaps the world's largest Razorbill colony is found on the Látrabjarg bird-cliffs. About one-third of the Common Eiders breeding population in Iceland nest in Breiðafjörður. To experience this very special area we joined a sea cruise through some of the numerous islands this morning looking, not only at birds, but the geology and marine ecology. The sea cruise was very enjoyable and the time passed quickly. Back on board the bus we set off to explore the peninsula in more detail.

Snæfellsnes was immortalised by Jules Verne's classic novel 'Journey to the Centre of the Earth', with its intrepid explorer descending the volcano that, while currently dormant, has scarred the surrounding land with a huge lava field, clearly visible today. The glacier-covered volcano rises 1,446m and is often clearly visible from Reykjavik, but unfortunately for us low cloud and rain kept its wondrous nature a secret. We had a brief visit to see Brünnich's Guillemot. We found a small colony by the lighthouse at Öndverðarnes, where many Razorbill and Common Guillemot were also gathered and we watched strings of Gannets passed-by out at sea.

With rain persisting we decided to retrace our journey back to the hotel. We stopped frequently en-route to Stykkishólmur to search for any vagrant waders, look at white-winged gulls and enjoy the sight and sounds of Knot coming into roost from the nutrient rich feeding grounds. After the daily log this evening some enjoyed the option of local cuisine in a downtown restaurant.

Day 7

Saturday 25th May

Stykkishólmur – Northern Light Inn (60 km)

Weather details; overcast, light rain mid-morning onwards winds 7m/s, temperatures 6°C

This morning we left Stykkishólmur to circumnavigate Snæfellsnes and complete our journey back onto the Reykjanes peninsula, but not ignoring to look for eagles at Hraunsfjörður. At Kolgrafafjörður a white cloud of Gannets were actively plunge-diving onto a shoal of herring very close to the causeway bridge. We couldn't resist stopping to enjoy this spectacle and so close!

Next we visited Grundarfjörður to search for the King Eider that had been present throughout the winter, but we only managed to find Common Eider present in the harbour. As we approached Ólafsvik the strato-volcano was totally concealed in low cloud, preventing us from seeing her dramatic landscape for a second time. By the time we had reached the peninsula's south coast it had stopped raining and the weather had brightened a little, so we eagerly accepted the opportunity for a short coastal walk along the dramatic sea-cliffs between Hellnar and Arnistappi.

Back on the bus we travelled a short distance before stopping by a small wooded area for a damp lunch! We continued along the south coast of the peninsula passing old lava fields and roadside lagoons until we reached Borgarnes where we had a comfort stop. We entered the impressive engineering feat of Hvalfjörður tunnel and were soon on the outskirts of modern Reykjavik. We journeyed onto the old town where the retail therapy group were dropped off by the church, with the remainder going down to the marine lake. With time at a premium we only had a short visit to the northern capital before Malcolm collected the group members from outside the ultra-modern 'Harpa' opera house down by the harbour. Forty-five minutes later we arrived at the Northern Light Inn with little time before dinner.

Day 8

Sunday 26th May

Golden Circle (416 km)

Weather details; overcast with light rain, wind 7m/s, temperatures 8°C

We travelled through ancient lava-fields along the south coast to Selfoss this morning. Joining Route 1 we continued east before taking the road to Gullfoss. The waterfall was spectacular, thunderously cascading in a series of falls before disappearing through the gorge carved out over millennia. Next we visited the Geysir and waited for the white plume of boiling vapour from Strokkur to spout high into the grey sky. The area around the geyser was a mosaic of colourful patterns and the landscape took-on another-worldly appearance.

After lunch we travelled to Þingvellir, the parliamentary plain where two of the earth's great continental plates had been visibly torn apart. We had plenty of time to walk down the deep fissure to the Althing, seat of the Law maker and where the leaders assembled, continuing passed the 'drowning pool' and onto visit the waterfall. We returned through the valley floor following the meandering river complete with Harlequins to the silvery shores of Þingvellavatn where Malcolm had relocated the bus. We watched a pair of Red-throated Divers present on a small roadside pool, but unfortunately Börk was not at home today! We returned to Selfoss stopping frequently along the River Sog searching for any Common Goldeneye but found none although we did see many Scaup and Harlequin along the river.

We dined out this evening at Menam, a Thia restaurant in Selfoss. Safely back at the Northern Light Inn we held our last daily-log before an early night to pack and prepare for departure in the morning.

Day 9

Monday 27th May

Keflavik – UK (71km)

Weather details; overcast strong wind 9m/s, temperatures 8°C

Over breakfast this morning we said our farewells to fellow travellers bound for Greenland before boarding the bus and our first stop at the renowned 'Blue Lagoon'. After a brief visit we continued onto Gunnuhver, the high temperature area where sulphurous steam vapour all but concealed the desolate, yet colourful landscape. Next we paid homage to the Great Auk and took a short walk to the sea-cliffs to view Eldey, its last known breeding site before its extinction in 1844.

Before leaving this area we tried to visit the exhibition in the new geothermal power station, but it was unfortunately closed. We did, however, follow the planetary route and visit the 'Bridge over two Continents' before arriving at the airport to check in, and say our goodbyes before the flight home...

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Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	May								
			19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27
1	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>		1	1		2	3	2	7	
2	Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>	2	3	6	3	4	2	4	3	
3	Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>		52	5		6		2	2	
4	Fulmar	<i>Fulmaris glacialis</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
5	Gannet	<i>Sula bassana</i>			2	2		350	1000	22	
6	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>					14	19	7		9
7	Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotellus</i>					3		5		
8	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus Cygnus</i>	27	15	26	221	211	13	161	287	7
9	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>	27	54	14	512	43				
10	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>					850	328	127		
12	Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>				82	69		32		
13	Wigeon	<i>Anas Penelope</i>	4	20	24	4	4		2	2	
14	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
15	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>		7	3						
16	Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	1	2	2						
17	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	2	13	2	3	5		3	1	
18	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	100s	100s	100s	20	24	6	20	67	
19	Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>	1	9				4	10	16	
20	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	35		64	74	100	600	535	38	121
21	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>		37	10	2	17	6		21	
22	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyernalis</i>			9	4					
23	Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>		4	20						
24	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>	2	100s	100s						
25	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	3	16	8	6	3	5	8	16	
26	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>				7	4			2	
27	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>					1				
28	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		1		1	1		1	1	
29	Gyr Falcon	<i>Falco rusticolus</i>					1		1	1	
30	Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus mutus</i>		24	20	15	11	1	4	8	
31	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	1		2	4	9	160	34	8	4
32	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		6	2	2		2		2	
33	Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	100s	100s	100s	100s	100s	10	6	26	24
34	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	1								
35	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>			8	2	9	43	33		3
36	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>							11		
37	Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>			5		410	115			
38	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		30	2	160	3	113	2		
39	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritime</i>			4						
40	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	20	40	30	64	30			22	6
41	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa islandica</i>	4	14	20	13	10	7	24	7	
42	Redshank	<i>Tringa tetanus</i>		12	10	16	31	2	3	17	1
43	Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓	100s	100s	38	40	11	13	17	5
44	Red-necked Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>		24	9			1	12	1	15
45	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>							1		1
46	Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>	1	1	19	3	2		6	10	1
47	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	May								
			19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27
48	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓	4	18	5	10			
49	Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	✓		30	55	2	100s	100s		
50	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>			10	✓		20		2	
51	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>			2		3	40	90		
52	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>			10	1	5	653	402	1	7
53	Greater Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>			6	12	10	342	148	4	
54	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	3	9	55	350	535	218	201	37
55	Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradise</i>	24	69	230	50	74	200	435	100	380
56	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aaglje</i>			10		35	150			
57	Brünnich's Guillemot	<i>Uria lomvia</i>						40			
58	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>			1			14	4		
59	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>			20		2	16	1		
60	Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>			132		1	160	1		
61	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columbia livia</i>				8			18		
62	Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>				1					
63	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>							1		
64	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
65	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	6	6	8	12	3	2
66	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		2						2	
67	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		3		6	10	10	13	4	2
68	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	1				3		5		
69	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓	✓	3	12	3	9	18	7
70	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓			6	12	30	41	10	22
71	Raven	<i>Corvus corvus</i>	3	6	6	40	38	31	70	12	1
72	Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>		24	1		2	3		2	
73	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>	1	4	1			3			2

Mammals

	Common name	Scientific name	May								
			19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27
1	Arctic Fox	<i>Alopex lagopus</i>					1				
2	Atlantic Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>						2			
3	Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>						1	1		
4	Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>			2						
5	Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>			10						