

Iceland in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Report

31 May - 8 June 2019



Slavonian Grebe



Gullfoss



Snaesfjalljokull



Brunnich's Guillemot

Report and photos compiled by Andrew Bray



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour participants: Andrew Bray (Leade) with seven Naturetrek clients

Summary

This was a tour that covered the north, the west and the Golden Triangle. We spent time at Mývatn and the Snaefell peninsula before travelling to the Golden Circle where we saw more volcanic activity.

Day 1

Friday 31st May

We were collected from Akureyri Airport and drove to the hotel at Skútustaðir to the Hotel Sel Mývatn. The Mý in Mývatn means flies but it was cold and windy that night so they weren't a problem!

Day 2

Saturday 1st June

We did an early morning bird walk around the skútastaðagigar (pseudo craters). These craters were formed when the hot lava covered the water. The water boiled and the steam found cracks in the lava to burst out forming craters. There were plenty of birds to see from Snipe and Redwing to Arctic Terns and Great Northern Diver. After breakfast we went to the Laxa River and found Barrow's Goldeneye and Harlequin Duck. The next stop was the Fugalsafn (Bird Museum) where there were two Pochard and five Common Scoter on the approach, with Shoveler seen from behind one of the buildings (it was out of the wind). We then drove to Húsavík with a stop for the Gyr Falcon on its nest and a couple of crossings of the Laxa River. We did not see anything new. The whale watching trip was on the schooner Opal. The electric motor powered us out and most of the way back before the diesel engine kicked in. The boat rolled and pitched for the 3½ hrs for which we were out at sea.

We eventually found a Humpback Whale which showed on both sides of the boat. We also saw the massive blow of a Blue Whale but we were not fast enough to see it as they can keep down for a long time and come up on a course that is totally different to the one they were on when they dived!

After we staggered back onto dry land we did a quick shop for tomorrow's lunch and then visited the garage next door for a bite to eat and a drink. It was then back to the Laxa River where nothing noteworthy was seen so we drove back to the Gyr Falcon site where we saw one in flight. It was getting cold so we drove to the viewpoint overlooking Mývatn, and from there it was back to the hotel for a warm shower and dinner.

Day 3

Sunday 2nd June

We carried out an early morning bird walk along the edge of the pseudo craters where Red-necked Phalaropes were at our feet and Slavonian Grebes sailed past us very close. A Gyr Falcon flew past. After breakfast we stopped the minibus just down the road to the east as another Gyr Falcon was spotted sitting on top of one of the craters. It was then on to Höfði where the walk in the forest produced Redpoll, Common Goldeneye and we heard Wrens. It was then a short distance to Dimmuborgir where the Yule Lads (mischievous creatures from Icelandic mythology) live. We went to the cave and saw the pinnacles formed when the area was under water. It was a short hop to Vogajós (Cow shed cafe) where we had a break before another short journey to the parting of the tectonic plates by Reykjahlíð. Here we went down to the bottom of the fissure and found rope and a ladder into the water behind rocks. There was also a geocache there.

We then drove past the very blue lake; the colour caused by cyanobacteria which is not toxic here. Lunch was served from the back of the minibus at the car park and despite the wind and snow some people did eat from the table and benches. It was now very chilly, so we drove to the Krafla Fires stopping to look at a Gyrfalcon's nest which was unoccupied on both the outward and return journeys so presumably the pair must have moved. We walked out to the boiling water and to a crater where walked on rocks younger than ourselves! We then drove to Hverir where boiling mud and fumaroles were the order of the day. The place reeked of sulphur! Our last stop of the day was at Mývatn Baths where two of the group took a plunge in the hot waters whilst the rest of the group sat around; only the leader had a drink. It was then back to the hotel for dinner which included a buffet.

Day 4

Monday 3rd June

Our first stop today was at Goðafoss. Here the Chieftain, when the Parliament voted that Christianity was to be the religion in 1,000AD, threw his pagan gods into the water. It is a very impressive waterfall. Our next stop was Akureyri where we bought more picnic supplies, and it was then on to Gásir where there was a medieval village that only existed for part of each year, the only permanent building being the church. Here there were plenty of Eider plus Cormorants, Dunlin and Common Gull. There were six Shelduck in the bay of the Eyjafjörður Fjord.

We then drove to the Oxanadalur Valley where we found Arctic Poppy and lots of Pink-footed Geese. It was then a long drive to Blönduós for lunch at a camp site. No matter where the minibus was parked the brisk wind still managed to blow on the table! We then had a long drive to Borgarnes where we stopped for fuel and, for some, a hot drink. Outside were a Lesser-backed Black Gull and a few Starlings. It was then an hour drive to our hotel at Stykkishólmur where we had a very lovely meal after a break.

Day 5

Tuesday 4th June

Today we had a slightly earlier start of 8.25am and we headed for the ferry across to Flatey. This is an island that is a stop for the ferry as it crosses Breiðafjörður. The island is a mecca for birds and is mostly out of bounds due to nesting Eider Ducks. There were lots of Redwings and Snow Buntings that were so close to us. We found a spot that was not very windy and watched the birds after walking through the village and visiting the church. The paintings on the wall of the church were done by a Spaniard in 1964. We caught the ferry back at 1315hrs and although the wind was strong the ferry was very stable.

Back on dry land we split up to walk around the town and visit the church. We ate early at a small fish restaurant by the harbour called Sjavarpakkihus. Back at the hotel we updated our bird list. By the fire exit at the end of the hotel corridor was a Ringed Plover with four chicks.

Day 6

Wednesday 5th June

It was a very windy day – much more so than any of the preceding days. Our first stop was at Kirkjufell which rises dramatically from the ocean. We then stopped at various points along the route especially when there were plenty of Glaucous Gulls standing around in a lagoon with other gulls. The stony track was quite steep so we drove out another way. We had a drink at Oláfsvík as Rif, just up the road, had no coffee shop that we could see. It was then onto the lighthouse at Öndverðarnes and we stopped just short of this and had a walk that produced a few Common Guillemots besides the hundreds of nesting Kittiwakes along the whole cliff. We drove to the

mini lighthouse and sheltered by it as we looked out to sea. We then drove to the Svörtuloft lighthouse which is cliff based. Here we saw our first Brunnich's Guillemot plus Razorbill and lots of Common Guillemots.

Afterwards it was another picnic lunch at Skarðsvik on the beach out of the wind. The table was in the wind but it wasn't as strong here. We worked off lunch climbing the steps of Saxhóll Volcano which erupted 3,000 to 4,000 years ago. We then stopped at Svalpufa-pufubjarg to look at the birds and take photos of the Lóndrangar which were two large pinnacles at the edge of the cliffs. We had coffee in Arnarstapi and photographed the monument to the troll Barður who was a legend in that area. We also visited the gorge of Rauðfelder Canyon though did not get far as the stream was in full flow. It is very narrow with steep sides. The whole peninsula is dominated by the Snaefellsjökull which we all saw as the clouds lifted. It was then back to the hotel taking a road over the mountains before turning east. It was a late meal this evening, but nobody minded as it was so delicious.

Day 7

Thursday 6th June

We left in windy conditions again and were soon at Borgarnes where we did some shopping and filled up with fuel. It was then through the Hvalfjörður tunnel which is 6 km long and the bottom is 540ft below sea level. We travelled to the outskirts of Reykjavik but turned left and stopped to take some photos of Icelandic Ponies. It was not too long before we arrived at car park 5 for Thingvellir. where we had a good walk around visiting the church and up to the Law Rock. We then walked up to the Visitor Centre and viewed the rift from the top. It is at Thingvellir that the American and Eurasian plates are pulling apart by 2cm per year, and it was at this place that the Parliament (Althing) was established in 960AD. Here the early descendants settled their differences and today it is still used for major celebrations. We had lunch at the end of a tour of the site.

We did see a Wren by one of the rifts and in the stream there was a pair of Harlequin Ducks. A Mallard joined us for lunch! We then travelled to Ulfljótsvatn where we saw some more Great Northern Divers and we visited the Ljosifoss Power Station. The River Sog was dry so we continued to Gesyir where Strokkur eventually gave us a good blow. There had been some weak blows while we waited. It was an early finish at the hotel! That night we had a very tasty supper.

Day 8

Friday 7th June

Today we started at Gullfoss. The sun was shining and the waterfall was very impressive on the River Hvitá. We read about the love story where the farmer's son waded across the river to see the girl and they were married. There is also a memorial to Sigríður Thómasdóttir who fought against the hydro scheme for the falls, leading tourists to the waterfall from 1875. She lost in the courts but eventually won the right to have the falls declared a national treasure. She is credited with being Iceland's first conservationist. It was then on to Skálholt to the site of the first Bishop's Palace and was the first site of modern Christianity in Iceland.

It was then a long drive to Selsjalandsfoss and a walk behind the waterfall. We could see the Eyjafallajökull on the way that caused so much disruption to air traffic when it erupted in 2010. We also saw Mt Hekla which has caused extensive damage to Iceland over the centuries with its eruptions. We stopped for coffee in Hella on the way. We also had lunch by the stream from the waterfall before driving back to Selfos where we visited the Knarrarósviti Lighthouse and saw our first Red-throated Diver.

It was then a short drive to the Flói Bird Reserve where there were lots of divers and other birds. It was back to the hotel for packing and an earlier dinner.

Day 9

Saturday 8th June

We left at 8am and drove direct to the airport via Sellfoss and Reykjavik. We filled up just before the airport. The airport was very light on passengers and we were soon through the security and passport control.

The tour ended with everyone seeing marvellous spectacular scenery. We had 64 species of bird, although no rarities, as well as waterfalls, glaciers and mountains. We saw thermal pools of water and mud and walked on land younger than all of us. It was truly a tour that took in many sites and despite the wind and a bit of snow it was Iceland in Spring.

Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek e-mailing list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers. Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk to sign up.

Social Media

We're social! Follow us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and be the first to hear about the launch of new tours, offers and exciting sightings and photos from our recently returned holidays.



www.facebook.com/naturetrekwildlifeholidays



www.twitter.com/naturetrektours



www.instagram.com/naturetrek_wildlife_holidays



Dettifoss

Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted)

	E – endemic, I = Introduced		May/June								
	Common name	Scientific name	31	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	20	✓	20	✓	8	6	✓	✓	10
2	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>				✓					
3	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	20	✓	✓	✓		8	✓	✓	✓
4	Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>				6					
5	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>		2							
6	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>		✓	✓	10					
7	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	10	✓	✓	✓					
8	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		20	10	10	50	15	30	10	
9	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	4	14							
10	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		2							
11	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	20	✓	✓	30		10	20	10	2
12	Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>		4	4						
13	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	20	✓
14	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>	1	6		3		2	2		
15	Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>		11			4				
16	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>		12	4		1				
17	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>			2						
18	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>	6	30	16	10					
19	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	2	8	4		4	3	4	2	
20	Rock Ptarmigan - E	<i>Lagopus muta islandorum</i>	1		1	1			2		
21	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>								9	
22	Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>		1	1				5		
23	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>		✓			✓	✓		✓	
24	Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>		4	6	4					
25	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		2			2	10			
26	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>					✓	4			
27	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>				6		1			
28	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	1			1	10	15	2	20	1
29	Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	2	20	10	10	3	15	20	10	2
30	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		1			20	3			
31	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	4	20	20	10		1	4	10	2
32	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	10	40	20	10		1	4	40	3
33	Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>		1							
34	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		4		2					
35	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>				8	1				
36	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	10
37	Red-necked Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	30	
38	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	10	40	10	20	✓	✓	10	✓	4
39	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>		1			✓	✓			
40	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	10	✓	✓	✓	3	✓	20	6	✓
41	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>				✓					
42	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	1			2	✓	✓	10	✓	✓
43	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>		2			2	30			
44	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		✓		✓	✓	10	20	10	
45	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>				✓	✓	✓	10	20	✓
46	Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	8
47	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>								5	

	E – endemic, I = Introduced		May/June								
	Common name	Scientific name	31	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
48	Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>		2		1		5		1	
49	Brunnich's Guillemot	<i>Uria lomvia</i>						16			
50	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>						✓			
51	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>						20			
52	Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>		5			10	2			
53	Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>		✓			✓				
54	Rock Dove - I	<i>Columba livia var. domestica</i>	2								
55	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>				1					
56	Gyrfalcon	<i>Falco rusticolus</i>		2	2						
57	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		20	10	52	1	20	5	20	2
58	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			h				1	3	
59	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	6			9	5	20	6	10	6
60	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>				1			2		
61	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus coburni</i>	10	✓	✓	✓	20	10	✓	✓	10
62	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		1	3				1		1
63	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	3	6	4	4	6	10	4	8	3
64	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		20	6	4	6	5	5	10	4
65	Common Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>			3						
66	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>		1	1	1	20				

Mammals

Atlantic Grey Seal, *Halichoerus grypus*

Humpback Whale, *Megaptera novaeangliae*

Common Seal, *Phoca vitulina*

Blue Whale, *Balaenoptera musculus*

Plants

Mountain Avens, *Dryas octopetala*

Wild Pansy, *Viola tricolor*

Moss Campion, *Silene acaulis*

Thrift, *Armeria maritima*

Comon Moonwort, *Botrychium lunaria*

Marsh Marigold, *Caltha palustris*

Alpine Cinquefoil, *Potentilla crantzii*

Alpine Lady's Mantle, *Alchemilla alpina*

Dwarf Willow, *Salix herbacea*

Bog Bilberry, *Vaccinium uliginosum*

Alpine Bartsia, *Bartsia alpina*

Hairy Stonecrop, *Sedum villosum*

Rowan Tree, *Sorbus aucuparia*

Larch, *Larix spp*

Birch, *Betula spp*

Wood Sorrel, *Oxalis acetosula*

Icelandic Poppy, *Papaver croceum*

Sea Campion, *Silene uniflora*

Fleabane spp, *Pulicaria spp*

Hawkweed-leaved Treacle-mustard, *Erysimum-hieracifolium*

Common Scurveygrass, *Cochlearia officinalis*

Nootka Lupin, *Lupinus nootkatensis*

Violet, *Viola spp*

Water Avens, *Geum rivale*

Lady's smock, *Cardamine pratensis*

Alpine Rock Cress, *Arabis alpina*

Meadow Buttercup, *Ranunculus acris*

Dandelion, *Taraxacum spp*

Woolly Willow, *Salix lantana*

Angelica, *Angelica archangelica*

Bilberry, *Vaccinium myrtillus*

Common Butterwort, *Pinguicula vulgaris*

Wild Strawberry, *Fragaria vesca*

Alpine Rock Cress, *Arabis alpina*

Juniper, *Juniperus spp*

Wood Anemone, *Anemone nemorosa*

Northern Green Orchid, *Platanthera hyperborea*

Wild Thyme, *Thymus serpyllum*

Common Mouse-ear, *Cerastium fontanum*

Silverweed, *Argentina anserina*

Red Campion, *Silene dioica*,

Roseroot, *Rhodiola rosea*

Tufted Saxifrage, *Saxifraga cespitosa*
Arctic Poppy, *Papaver radicatum*
Tree leaved Willow, *Salix phylicifolia*
Groundsel, *Senecio vulgaris*
Dwarf Birch, *Betula nana*

Cotton Grass, *Eriophorum angustifolium*
Meadowsweet, *Filipendula ulmaria*
Dwarf Willow, *Salix herbacea*
Stone Bramble, *Rubus saxatilis*



Ferry to Flatey



Strokkur



Common Redshank