

Iceland in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Report

29th May – 6th June 2026



Red-necked Phalarope



Humpback Whale



Slavonian Grebe



Red-throated Diver

Tour report by Marcus John
Photos by Lew Hall, William Purvis, Roger Beck and John Noel



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: Dave Jackson and Marcus John (leaders) with 14 Naturetrek clients

Summary

This tour covered the best wildlife sites in Iceland, but this extraordinary country also offers breathtaking scenery unmatched elsewhere in Europe. We spent three days in the Lake Mývatn area, enjoying the wonderful range of waders and wildfowl which make this such a unique birding destination. In the north-east, we spent an afternoon in Skjálfandi Bay, and had close views of a lunge-feeding Humpback Whale: it was undoubtedly one of the highlights of the whole trip!

We journeyed along the northern fjords, where we had memorable encounters with a Short-eared Owl and an Arctic Fox. We spent two days on the Snæfellsnes Peninsula, including a visit to the beautiful island of Flatey. We completed our tour with a day around the Golden Circle, with an early start meaning we avoided the crowds. It was the perfect way to complete a hugely successful tour.

Day 1

Friday 29th May

London – Keflavík – Reykjavík – Akureyri – Mývatn

The flight from London arrived on time, and we drove straight to the domestic airport in Reykjavík, arriving in good time to catch our late afternoon flight to Akureyri. This is always an efficient service, and we arrived on time, boarded the vehicles, and embarked on our one-hour journey to Mývatn.

The landscape became increasingly snowy as we journeyed east, not just on the mountain tops but right down to the roadside. The temperature hovered around freezing, and snow showers continued as we arrived at our comfortable hotel. The Sel Hotel is the perfect base for our tours, situated right on the southern edge of Lake Mývatn.

After settling into our rooms, we gathered downstairs for an introductory talk from Dave and Marcus, before heading into the dining room for an excellent dinner. Then it was time to get some much-needed sleep, in preparation for a busy day of wildlife watching in the snow!

Day 2

Saturday 30th May

Mývatn – Goðafoss – Húsavík – Vestmannsvatn

The unseasonal cold snap continued today; it remained very cold with wintry showers and a temperature just above freezing. But this did not impact our itinerary, and it turned out to be a special day for wildlife.

Before breakfast, we headed out to walk along the banks of the Laxá, a powerful, fast-flowing river with many rocky rapids. This is a well-known spot for fishing, and there are good paths that lead close to the water's edge. It is the perfect place to watch both the species of predominantly North American ducks which have their only European breeding grounds in Iceland. Several pairs of Barrow's Goldeneye were flying up and down the river, but it was the Harlequin Ducks that really caught the eye. The unique plumage of the males was stunning, and they

were dynamic swimmers. They repeatedly dived headlong into the white water, riding the current and emerging many metres downstream. Nearby, we enjoyed seeing our first Ptarmigan, a male perched in full view as the snow fell around it.

After breakfast, we visited the famous waterfall of Goðafoss; this is a stunning location and looked even better in the snowy weather. Here we had an even closer Ptarmigan, just a few metres from the path. We drove from Goðafoss to Húsavík, a journey of about forty-five minutes. We arrived in time for an early lunch, before boarding our boat for a three-hour boat trip. The boat was a converted wooden-hulled trawler; it feels extra special walking on a wooden deck as we scanned the open ocean for wildlife!

Humpback Whales are regular visitors to Skjálfandi Bay, and we saw at least two individuals when they surfaced quite close to the boat. But all too soon it was time to head back into harbour; we were getting quite cold, so we enjoyed the cakes and hot chocolate served by the crew! The on-board naturalist reminded us to keep watching, because cetaceans could be encountered just off the harbour. Sure enough, we saw a couple of Harbour Porpoises and then our third Humpback Whale. But this individual was much more active, attracting a large flock of seabirds. As we approached, he repeatedly lunged out of the water, feeding on a shoal of fish that were just below the surface: what an amazing sight!

On our return journey, we stopped at Vestmannsvatn lake, where we saw a Black-throated Diver. This species does not normally occur in Iceland, but this individual was paired up with a Great Northern and had presumably followed its mate all the way here: it was the only one of its kind in the whole country!

Day 3

Sunday 31st May

Mývatn – Dettifoss – Hverir – Dimmuborgir

Today the weather finally returned to normal for this time of year, with dry spells, light winds, and a temperature around 11°C. An optional early start (before breakfast) was rewarded with close views of a pair of Slavonian Grebes, and many Red-necked Phalaropes. Other species included Snipe, Golden Plover, Redshank and Black-tailed Godwit.

After breakfast, we drove out to the waterfall of Dettifoss. This is the second-most powerful waterfall in Europe, and reaches peak intensity in late spring and summer, when glacial melt swells the Jökulsá á Fjöllum River and sends water roaring into the canyon below. It is set in a rugged but accessible landscape, with a one kilometre walk out to the best viewpoint.

On our return towards Mývatn, we visited the famous geothermal site of Hverir. This area comprises bubbling mud pools, powerful steam vents and vividly coloured mineral ground. It offers close-up views of active geothermal features in an open, barren landscape: the constantly shifting steam and sulphurous odours create an otherworldly atmosphere.

Our next stop was for lunch at the excellent Café Borgir. Then we walked into the adjacent site of Dimmuborgir, which translates as “Dark Fortress.” Formed by ancient volcanic eruptions and a lava lake, this surreal landscape is filled with jagged pillars, natural arches, and deep caverns. To our delight, Phil spotted a Merlin, which perched

on a rocky crag, though at some distance. We were even more impressed when he later relocated it, this time much closer and revealing itself to be a smart male.

We had time to drive around the north end of the lake and to stop at the Bird Museum, where we had close views of a pair of (live) Common Scoter, before returning to the hotel at 5.00pm. Some of us then opted to revisit the Laxá, where we enjoyed another chance to admire (and photograph) the Harlequins and Barrow's Goldeneyes.

Day 4

Monday 1st June

Mývatn – Akureyri – Sauðárkrókur – Laugarbakki

The Sel Hotel lies immediately opposite the famous Skútustaðagígur pseudocraters and the pretty lake of Stakhólstjörn, adjacent to the main lake of Mývatn. This morning, we took another walk next to the shallow waters of this smaller lake, enjoying the antics of the Red-necked Phalaropes. There is an abundance of wildfowl here, but it was the Long-tailed Ducks that stole the show: several were flying around the still waters, calling and displaying. More surprising was the Short-eared Owl which flew high across the road: it is a scarce breeder in Iceland.

After checking out of the hotel, we drove back to Akureyri, stopping en route for a last look at the beautiful Laxá River. We picked up our lunch supplies before driving on for about half an hour, stopping to enjoy lunch in a lovely picnic site on a wooded riverbank. Redpolls were singing and displaying overhead, and yet another pair of Harlequins flew above the fast-flowing waters.

We had time today to enjoy the scenery, and we took a detour to the town of Sauðárkrókur, which lies on the south-west shore of Skagafjörður Fjord. There weren't many birds in the harbour, but when we walked along the black sand beach, we found our only Iceland Gull of the tour. Despite the name, this species does not breed here, but is a winter visitor, so this was a good find at this time of year.

As we drove through the low-lying farmland, we were stopped in our tracks by a Short-eared Owl. We followed its progress as it quartered the open fields for the next ten minutes, and we enjoyed wonderful views of this special bird.

Our last stop was at Blönduós, where we walked out to view the Blanda Estuary. Here, we had our best views yet of Red-throated Divers: at least five were present. We had time to appreciate their subtle wine-red throats and the intricate black-and-white patterning on their necks. A good range of waders was also present; this is a site which attracts a real variety of birds throughout the year.

Day 5

Tuesday 2nd June

Laugarbakki – Borgarnes – Ytri Tunga – Arnastapi – Langaholt

We only had one night at the hotel in Laugarbakki, so we rose early for a drive along the coast of Miðfjörður. But the weather had other ideas, and our journey was cut short due to a dense sea fog, which refused to lift. However, the early start was amply rewarded when Mike spotted an Arctic Fox! It was close to the road at first, but soon

trotted away across the fields, pausing to look back at us from a safe distance. Thankfully, everyone was able to see this elusive creature, the only indigenous land mammal in Iceland.

We made good time along the ring road before stopping for coffee and supplies in Borgarnes. We had time to check out the nearby estuary, one of the only places in Iceland where Shelducks can be found. Then it was time to head out to the Snæfellsnes Peninsula, considered by most Icelanders to be the most beautiful part of the country.

Our hotel was in Langaholt, a relatively remote location, but just off the coastal road. Close by was the scenic beach of Ytri Tunga, where both species of seal can be found, though we only saw Harbour Seals. We also found a good variety of birds, and enjoyed close views of species like Sanderling and Purple Sandpiper.

Farther along the peninsula lay Arnastapi, where a dramatic coastline is lined with towering basalt cliffs, natural arches, and sea caves, which shelter an abundance of seabirds. We started by walking down to see the iconic Gatklettur (Arch Rock), with a constant flow of Fulmars flying in and out of their precipitous nests. Next, we walked along the top of the cliffs, with wide views across the sea, before walking back inland to watch Kittiwakes bathing in the shallow lake near the car park. Arctic Terns, Redshanks and Snipes were everywhere!

We returned to our hotel with time to relax before dinner, though a few of us decided to revisit Ytri Tunga, where we were able to photograph the waders at close quarters.

Day 6

Wednesday 3rd June

Langaholt – Stykkishólmur – Flatey – Grundarfjörður

We enjoyed a lovely buffet breakfast, with a real variety of home-cooked local food, before setting off for Stykkishólmur, the biggest town on Snæfellsnes. Early drizzle soon cleared as we headed out on the late morning ferry to Flatey. As we crossed the vast fjord of Breiðafjörður, most of us stayed out on deck to watch for seabirds, which included both Black and Common Guillemots.

Flatey is famous for its nineteenth-century charm, and peaceful, time-capsule ambience. The sun broke through the clouds as we arrived, and we basked in warm sunshine throughout our visit. We walked up from the ferry jetty to the village, where we spread out to enjoy both the scenery and the abundant birdlife. Arctic Terns, Redshanks and Snipes were all around, perched on the houses and flying overhead. We stopped to chat to a local man, who gave us a fascinating insight into island life. Then we headed out to the aptly named Lundaberg (“Puffin rock”), where we had close views of Puffins, Black Guillemots and Fulmars (among others) as they flew in and out of their nests. Snow Buntings breed on the clifftops here, and were quite tame. Though we only had a little over two hours, time seemed to stop as we sat and gazed over the ocean.

It is hard to describe the atmosphere on Flatey; there is a tranquillity there which invites rest and contemplation. For most of the group, our time here was the highlight of the whole tour; we only wished we could have stayed longer.

Our return ferry journey was filled with more seabirds, and a distant pod of White-beaked Dolphins. Once back on dry land, we drove along the north coast, and into Grundarfjörður. This road crosses two big fjords where

many seabirds were gathered, including huge flocks of Common Eiders. We checked the harbour before turning inland to return to our hotel, with plenty of time before our buffet dinner.

Day 7

Thursday 4th June

Langaholt – Hellissandur – Svörtuloft Lighthouse – Borgarnes – Gullfoss

The weather continued to be very hospitable, with sunny spells, warm temperatures and light winds. Although we were leaving today to head down towards Reykjavík, we had all morning to explore the farthest tip of the peninsula. Our first stop was at Hellissandur, out on the northwesternmost tip of the peninsula. This tiny fishing village is the self-proclaimed "Street Art Capital of Iceland". What began as a grassroots revitalization project in 2018 has transformed this quiet seaside settlement into an open-air gallery!

Our main destination was the Svörtuloft Lighthouse. To reach this remote location, we had to leave the tarmac and drive very slowly along a rough gravel road; if you want to get away from the crowds, these are the roads to take! The lighthouse is on the westernmost tip of the Snæfellsnes Peninsula. There was nothing here except the bright orange lighthouse and a very convenient seabird viewing platform. The 5.7-metre tower is a renovated version of an earlier lighthouse built in 1914. The reason for our visit, apart from its stark beauty, was to see Brünnich's Guillemot. Iceland has the most accessible breeding sites in Europe, and we enjoyed splendid views as they sat quite close on their breeding ledges. We were able to pick out the key features that distinguish them from Common Guillemots.

We left our hotel around midday and headed back eastwards. We broke our long journey when we rejoined the ring road in Borgarnes, and stopped for lunch. After that, we turned south-east and drove across Þingvellir National Park, the historic heart of the country. We arrived at our hotel in the late afternoon, with time for a quick visit to nearby Gullfoss.

Day 8

Friday 5th June

Gullfoss – Geysir – Þingvellir

The rain returned today but it didn't dampen our spirits; we were determined to make the most of our last full day in Iceland. We started by returning to Gullfoss (literally "Golden Falls"), the most famous in Iceland. A spectacular two-tiered waterfall, it was the site of an epic conservation battle led by local woman, Sigríður Tómasdóttir. Thanks to her efforts, it was bought by the government and rescued from development. It is a spectacular sight as it plunges thirty-two metres in total, creating a majestic display of roaring glacial water.

Next on our agenda was the famous site at Geysir. This geothermal field is one of Iceland's most iconic attractions, where visitors can witness the Strokkur geyser erupt every five to ten minutes, shooting boiling hot water up to twenty metres into the air. We had time to watch it erupt several times: it was just so impressive!

Our final destination was Þingvellir, the site of the ancient Viking parliament. It lies on the mid-Atlantic ridge and features a narrow canyon (Almannagjá) formed by a volcanic fissure, several of which crisscross the area. The Lögberg, or Law Rock, lies on the canyon ridge overlooking the large lake of Þingvallavatn. Here it was that the

early settlers met together to decide on the laws that would govern their new country. This annual event was central to the development of Icelandic society, and this historic site remains the most important in the whole country.

After we had visited the Almannagjá, we drove down to the lower car park to walk along the river that feeds into the lake. In the clear waters, we could watch Harlequin Ducks as they swam underwater. We listened to Redwings singing, and had our last look at Red-necked Phalaropes and Red-throated Divers, before it was time to head back to our hotel for dinner.

Day 9

Saturday 6th June

Gullfoss – Reykjanes Peninsula – Keflavík – London

Given an optimistic weather forecast, some of us rose early and headed back to Gullfoss before breakfast. We were rewarded with the opportunity to photograph the iconic waterfall in brilliant sunshine! After our last Icelandic breakfast, it was time to leave our comfortable hotel and drive out to the airport at Keflavík. However, we still had time to explore the Reykjanes peninsula, and we drove along the southern coast, stopping to admire the view from several locations. We visited the fishing port of Grindavík, which was evacuated during the Sundhnúkur eruptions of 2023-25. Many houses had been badly damaged by the earthquakes that preceded the eruptions; they have been left empty, with huge cracks visible in their walls. The road from here towards the airport has been rebuilt across the recent lava flow: it was a remarkable sight.

We stopped for lunch at a charming bakery/café in Njarðvík, with time to check the birds that frequented the roadside pools here. We reached the airport with plenty of time to check in and catch our flight back to London, which landed slightly ahead of schedule. It had been a hugely enjoyable tour: we had visited several famous locations, but also some more remote places, where the wildlife remains largely undisturbed. We had enjoyed driving through some magnificent scenery, through every kind of weather that an Icelandic spring can provide! The abundant wildlife had not disappointed: from the mighty Humpback Whale to the diminutive Red-necked Phalarope, we had witnessed the best that Iceland has to offer. And all of this came in the convivial company of a lovely group of people!

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Species lists

Birds (H=heard only)

		May - June 2026								
Common name	Scientific name	29	30	31	1	2	3	4	5	6
Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>						1			
Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>							6		
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>				✓					
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>					4		3		
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>					2	1			
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>			✓	✓		✓			
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>			1						
Common Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>			2	2				✓	
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>			✓	✓		✓	✓		
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>		✓	✓	✓				✓	
Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>			6	2					
Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>		4	10	6					
Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓					
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>				1					
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Rock Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus muta</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Feral Rock Dove - I	<i>Columba livia</i>								✓	✓
Horned Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓				
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		
Eurasian Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Red-necked Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>					1				
Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>					12				
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		✓		✓	✓				
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓		
Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>					2				
Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		✓			✓	✓	✓		
Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>					1	5	80		
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>				1					
Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>	1	1	2	2	6	3	3	2	

Common name	Scientific name	May - June 2026								
		29	30	31	1	2	3	4	5	6
Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>		✓				✓	✓		
Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>		✓			✓	✓	✓		
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>							40		
Brünnich's Guillemot	<i>Uria lomvia</i>							6		
Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>		✓				✓	✓		
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>				8	10	6	16	4	
Black-throated Diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>		1							
Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>		5	2	2	1		H	1	
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>					✓		✓		
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>				1			✓		
European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>					✓	✓	✓		
Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>				2					
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>			1						
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>					H				
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>			1	1			3	2	
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>				✓					
Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>			2	1		12	2		

Mammals

Common name	Scientific name	May - June 2026								
		29	30	31	1	2	3	4	5	6
Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>		3							
White-beaked Dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus albirostris</i>						5			
Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>		2							
Arctic Fox	<i>Vulpes lagopus</i>					1				
Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>					✓				