

Undiscovered Iceland

Naturetrek Tour Report

24 May - 1 June 2017



Jokulsarlon ice lagoon



Arctic Tern



Red-necked Phalaropes



Selfoss waterfall

Report compiled by Marcus John
Images courtesy of Val Perrin



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Introduction

This tour to Iceland is timed to coincide with the return of a range of very special birds to their Icelandic breeding grounds. We enjoyed close views of iconic species like Harlequin Duck, Barrow's Goldeneye and Great Northern Diver. But Iceland offers much more than this; it combines stunning landscapes and extraordinary geological phenomena with a real sense of wilderness. It is a privilege to spend time watching Red-throated Divers on their nests, whilst diminutive Red-necked Phalaropes spin and feed at your feet, wary only of the occasional Arctic Skua as it flies overhead.

Our route took us along the scenic south coast of Iceland to reach Skaftafell, calling in at the towering waterfalls of Seljalandsfoss and Skogafoss. One of the highlights of the tour was our visit to the awe-inspiring Jokulsarlon glacier lagoon, where white and blue icebergs break off the glacier and float out past a black sand beach. Habitats are surprisingly varied, from the birch woodland of Skaftafell National Park to the isolated headland of Ingolshofdi, home to an important Great Skua colony and thousands of Puffins. After three nights here, we headed up the east coast to Djupivogur, a charming fishing village with a superb wetland, which lies within walking distance of our hotel. Then we drove across the highlands to reach our ultimate destination at Lake Myvatn. Here, the shallow waters provide bountiful food; the variety of birds is matched by their abundance and close encounters with iconic species are all but guaranteed. Finally, a memorable whale watching trip from Husavik completed a superb tour.

Day 1

Wednesday 24th May

Our flight from the UK went smoothly. We landed on time at Keflavik International Airport and picked up our big green minibus for the drive to the comfortable Northern Light Inn. The drive across the rugged lava fields gave us a little taste of Icelandic birds including Arctic Tern and Common Eider. Claude, Peter and Anne also found a pair of Ptarmigan just outside the hotel! We enjoyed an excellent dinner but everyone was tired after a day's travelling, so we all headed back to our rooms for an early night.

Day 2

Thursday 25th May

After a satisfying buffet breakfast, we packed our bags and drove through the fishing port of Grindavik. When we stopped to check a roadside lake we saw our first Red-necked Phalaropes, in the company of summer-plumaged Sanderling and Turnstone. After a coffee break in Hveragerdi, we drove on to the waterfall Seljalandsfoss, which cascades down between green grassy slopes. The cliffs here are home to dozens of nesting Fulmars and, on the fast-flowing river, we had close views of a superb drake Harlequin Duck.

Our next stop was the more powerful waterfall of Skogafoss; we were grateful when the sun came out to brighten the scene. Some of the group climbed up the steps to enjoy the view from the top. We all enjoyed our sandwiches as we watched and listened to displaying Snipe, Oystercatcher and Whimbrel.

The long drive to Hotel Hali took us across the awesome "Skeiðarársandur", the largest glacial outwash plain in the world. It is formed by meltwater flowing from Europe's largest glacier, Vatnajokull. We broke the journey

with a visit to Reynisfjara, near Vik. We walked out on the famous black sand beach with crashing surf, impressive basalt columns and tall sea stacks. As well as the inevitable Fulmars, we saw Puffins, Guillemots, Razorbills and several Great Skuas. After that, we travelled through intermittent drizzle to arrive at our hotel at 7.30pm. Roadside birds included Whooper Swan, Barnacle Goose and Arctic Skua.

When we arrived at our hotel, we were greeted by lots of Arctic Terns, Snipe and Redshank. Our rooms overlooked a coastal lagoon where several Red-necked Phalaropes were feeding and Red-throated Divers drifted past - what an ideal location! After an excellent dinner and a quick recap on the day's sightings, it was time for bed.

Day 3

Friday 26th May

After a delicious buffet breakfast, we drove back west along the ring road (stopping to admire a pair of Red-throated Divers in a roadside pool) and turned down the track to the embarkation point for our tractor ride. We climbed aboard the trailer and set off for the isolated headland of Ingolfshofdi, which is a national nature reserve. It was an amazing journey across six kilometres of vast black sands to the rocky headland, which is effectively an island between sand and sea. Hundreds of Fulmars were wheeling around the cliffs as we climbed up a steep sand bank to the grassy top, where we could get incredibly close to several pairs of Great Skua. Up to 3,000 pairs of Puffins also breed here and there were burrows everywhere in the short turf. We walked around the cliff tops to get closer views of this charismatic species. More than once, Puffins emerged from their burrows and flew off from under our feet, before heading out along the cliffs. After a couple of hours exploring this unique place, we climbed back into the trailer and drove back across the sand. Despite the cloudy weather, it had been a fascinating visit to this extraordinarily atmospheric location.

We continued westward and stopped for a hot lunch in the roadside cafe near Skaftafell, where we enjoyed the excellent burgers, hot soup and sandwiches. We briefly stopped to photograph the twisted wreckage of a road bridge that had been destroyed by glacial floods in 1996, before arriving at Skaftafell National Park. A light rain was falling as we walked out through the birch trees to visit the glacier snout. An unusually tame Ptarmigan was the avian highlight, offering fantastic photographic opportunities as it posed on rocks, only a few metres from the path! Singing Redwings were abundant, as were Common Snipe. We enjoyed our first close look at a glacier before returning to the park centre for a hot drink.

On our drive back along the ring road, we again saw Barnacle Geese, Red-throated Divers, two species of skua and several species of wader. Walking up to the hotel dining room from our annex, we could watch displaying Snipe, Redshank and Arctic Terns, while several Scaup joined the other wildfowl on the lagoon; the sheer abundance of birdlife is a real feature of this tour!

Day 4

Saturday 27th May

We had an early breakfast in order to arrive early at Jokulsarlon, the famous iceberg lagoon. As we approached, the sun broke through the mist to illuminate dozens of icebergs of all shapes and sizes, spread right across the expanse of water. We spent some time walking along the lagoon shore to appreciate the beauty of the bergs, in their various shades of white and blue, some opaque, others translucent, a few small ones almost completely transparent. Common and Grey Seals dived for fish, whilst Eider swam close to shore, the males immaculate in

the bright sunshine. Dozens of Arctic Terns flew over the lagoon, occasionally harassed by both Arctic and Great Skuas. Several Snow Buntings flitted around the car park, the males sitting up on low rocks to sing, seemingly oblivious to the tourists!

We walked together to the nearby beach, where many more icebergs were strewn across the black sand - a photographers' paradise! Out at sea, the Arctic Terns were joined by dozens of Kittiwakes and an immaculate adult Sabine's Gull, which is as rare here as it is in the UK.

Our next stop was the nearby lagoon of Fjallsarlón, where we boarded two zodiacs for a short cruise. There was only a slight breeze and the sun shone from a blue sky as we made our way slowly between icebergs and out to the glacier itself. It was a very peaceful and relaxing experience, especially as this lagoon is little visited compared to its more famous neighbour.

Dark clouds gathered as we drove further westward, a real contrast to the morning sunshine. Consequently, it was rather cold and grey when we arrived at Skaftafell, so we ate lunch before tackling the steep walk up to Svartifoss, the "Black waterfall". This took us through scrubby birch woodland, which was teeming with singing Redwings. A pair of Arctic Skuas flew low across the trees, flushing a still white Ptarmigan. The waterfall itself is very striking; a narrow cascade that falls over a cliff of black columnar basalt.

As we drove back along the ring road towards our hotel, we stopped briefly at the picturesque stone and turf church in Hof, built in late 19th century and the last to use traditional construction. A bright Redpoll, feeding on a dandelion, was a real bonus here! Finally, we stopped once more at Jokulsarlón, where the sun was still shining. The incoming tide and a brisk onshore wind made it possible to photograph Arctic Terns as they fed in the narrow channel and we also found our first Great Northern Diver. It was a perfect way to complete a truly memorable day.

Day 5

Sunday 28th May

This morning we packed the minibus ready for the long drive around the coast. Before heading east, we made a short return visit to Jokulsarlón, where the photographers appreciated a cluster of large icebergs on the beach and the rest of us found five male Harlequin Ducks sat close on the rocks - wonderful!

Our next stop was in the small town of Hofn, situated in the south-eastern corner of Iceland. Here we shopped for lunch supplies before scanning the wide, shallow bay for waders and wildfowl. Lots of Dunlin and Ringed Plover were quite close, whilst hundreds of Eider were spread across the whole bay. Val also spotted a line of about twenty Atlantic Grey Seals, loafing on a sand bar.

Although it was a long drive, the scenery between Hofn and Djúpivogur was impressive, when we could get a glimpse through the low mist. Good numbers of Whooper Swans were gathered in flocks on the coastal lagoons. Apart from a short stop for lunch at a roadside picnic area, we made our way straight to Djúpivogur.

After checking into our charming hotel by the harbour, we went for a walk through a large wetland area just behind the town. Several large pools held a selection of ducks including Shelduck, Wigeon, Scaup, Shoveler and several pairs of Long-tailed Duck. A little further on, we found a nesting Red-throated Diver on a tiny islet, only

50 metres from the shore where we stood (there were at least eight in total). In the same pool, we had our first sighting of Slavonian Grebe, in pristine breeding plumage. Snipe, Black-tailed Godwit, Whimbrel and Ptarmigan were all calling and displaying, whilst Red-necked Phalaropes chased each other in the shallow margins. One brightly coloured female swam within five metres of where we stood, giving us our best views yet of this beautiful little bird. The variety and abundance of breeding birds in a relatively small area was impressive.

After an excellent dinner, we strolled around the misty harbour, where we saw one Iceland and three Glaucous Gulls (three different ages). We scanned the seaweed-covered rocks but couldn't find any Purple Sandpipers. However, we did find a nice flock of Turnstone, some in their colourful breeding plumage. As the mist cleared, Peter's sharp eyes picked out a distant Black Guillemot, our first of the tour.

Day 6

Monday 29th May

After another good buffet breakfast, we drove across the Djupivogur wetlands and out to the beach. A wide sweep of black sand stretched out in both directions; a wild but beautiful location. Dozens of Eider and Arctic Terns were close inshore; three Gannets flew past further out. Slavonian Grebes, Red-throated Divers and Long-tailed Ducks again showed well on the lagoons, with dozens of Red-necked Phalaropes. We all agreed that this little-visited site is a real gem.

The next leg of our journey took us further up the east coast, before the ring road turned inland towards Egilsstadir. Next we took the highland shortcut, which is impassable in winter. The gravel road climbed steeply up into the mountains, continued through a series of climbs and a high pass before descending through a fertile valley with extensive conifer plantations. As we crossed the highest ground, we stopped to admire a roaring waterfall and then to photograph a smart Pink-footed Goose as it stood sentinel on its territory. Arriving in Egilsstadir, we stopped to buy lunch supplies and to fortify ourselves with coffee before continuing towards Lake Myvatn.

It was bright and dry when we stopped for our picnic lunch, close to a spectacular waterfall. The road then climbed onto a wide plateau before crossing the rugged volcanic landscape close to Myvatn. Soon we dropped down to the lake shore and followed this south to our hotel.

After checking in and settling into our rooms, we set off for a walk around the lovely wooded peninsula of Hofdi. Redwings and Redpolls sang from the birch trees as we followed a gentle path out to the lake's edge. Here we found a wide range of wildfowl, including Common Scoter, Long-tailed Duck and Barrow's Goldeneye. A Slavonian Grebe swam through the shallow water right under our feet and a pair of Red-necked Phalaropes squabbled just metres from where we stood. It was a magical introduction to Myvatn!

Day 7

Tuesday 30th May

Some of us met early for a pre-breakfast walk along the shoreline footpath. It was a cold morning but we enjoyed a bracing stroll amongst the breeding birds that throng the lake shores. Red-necked Phalaropes quarreled amongst themselves, Slavonian Grebes sat tight on their nest, whilst a variety of ducks were also on nests or feeding on the open water. Snipe and Redshank were calling everywhere, occasionally interspersed with the

plaintive calls of Golden Plover. As we returned towards the hotel, we heard the haunting calls of a pair of Great Northern Divers as they flew in to land on the lake.

Our first stop after breakfast was at the bridge over the River Laxá, where we spent some time watching (and photographing) Harlequin Ducks, which gather to feed in the fast-flowing water. We estimated that around 30 individuals were present, rival drakes sometimes chasing each other across the white water. This must be the best place in Europe to watch this iconic species. Nearby, we drove up a gravel track in search of Gyrfalcons but none were to be found. However, we did find a flock of about 50 Golden Plovers feeding together, all in smart breeding plumage.

We drove on to Husavik, ate our sandwiches in the harbour and then boarded the North Sailing ship for our whale watching trip. It was a cold and breezy afternoon and soon after we left the harbour, the rain set in. Conditions were difficult in a rough sea but having crossed to the far side of the bay, we found two Humpback Whales, one of which surfaced close to the boat and showed its fluke as it dived down. The boat was rolling in the growing swell, so the skipper decided it was time to return to the safety of the harbour. After about half an hour, we were getting close to Husavik when we paused to join another boat that was watching another Humpback Whale. We had a brief glimpse and stopped to see if it would resurface. Suddenly, the Humpback breached clear of the water, turned in mid-air and crashed into the sea on its back. We then had a lovely view of its tail fluke as it made a deep dive - what an experience!

Day 8

Wednesday 31st May

It was a cold, wet and windy morning as we set off to visit the famous waterfall of Dettifoss. First, we walked out to the smaller waterfall of Selfoss and then on to the might cascade of Dettifoss itself - the most voluminous waterfall in Europe. It was a grey day but the scenery was stunning.

Our next stop was the large volcanic caldera of Krafla Viti, where we walked up to the rim to admire the large pool of blue-green water that lies in the crater floor. We did not linger, as there was a biting wind blowing across the exposed uplands. Close by are the steaming fumaroles and mud pools at Namafjall Hverir. Much of this site is covered in a crust of sulphur and other deposits, in a variety of colours. The most active fumaroles pour a continuous stream of dense steam into the air, giving off a strong sulphurous odour. Some of the small mud pools were fizzing with black water whilst others were more viscous, with large bubbles of oozing mud plopping to the surface - it all adds up to an unusual experience!

We stopped at the shops in Reykjahlid to make use of the picnic tables. It remained cold, with spots of rain, so we ate our sandwiches quickly! We drove around the north end of the lake and then down the western shoreline to reach Fugalsafn, which sits on a flat peninsula that attracts most of Myvatn's breeding birds. Here we enjoyed a welcome hot drink, scanned the lake and visited the small but very interesting collection of bird exhibits.

In the later afternoon, a few of us went to visit the Myvatn Nature Baths, a simpler and more relaxed version of the famous Blue Lagoon. The rest of us finished our day with a return to the bridge over the River Laxa, where the keen photographers walked upstream to seek out Harlequin Ducks swimming in the tumultuous rapids. After a lot of cold, wet weather, the sun finally broke through and we enjoyed glorious sunlight for the rest of the day.

Day 9

Thursday 1st June

Our last day began with a drive to Akuyreri; en route, we stopped to admire the superb Godafoss waterfall. Approaching the town, we crossed a causeway over the wide fjord, where we saw several pairs of Eider with chicks. We enjoyed a pleasant coffee in the quiet and relaxed airport before boarding the plane for our short flight to Reykjavik. Although time was limited, we did manage a short visit to the wonderful church of Hallgrimskirkja, which dominates the Reykjavik skyline. Our driver then took us on a quick ride around the old part of the city and its harbour, before we drove back out to the international airport at Keflavik.

It had been a memorable tour, combining spectacular scenery and unforgettable wildlife. The weather was often cloudy and sometimes wet but this did not dampen our enthusiasm for this extraordinary country. Most importantly, we had greatly enjoyed each other's company and the good humour of the whole group added significantly to everyone's enjoyment.

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Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	May/June								
			24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1
1	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>		3	4	3	12	3	1		
2	Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>						2	3	2	
3	Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>					2	5	6	5	
4	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
5	Northern Gannet	<i>Sula bassana</i>		20		5		3			
6	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			1		1	1			
7	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>						15		6	
9	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>		30	12	30	30				
11	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>					4	3			
12	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>					2	8	12	12	2
13	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
14	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>						4	2	3	
15	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>					1	1		1	
16	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		1	2	1	3	3	2	2	
17	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
18	Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>			12	10	7		6	2	
19	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
20	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>		3		1	5		30	20	
21	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyernalis</i>		2			8	6	9	3	
22	Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>						2	2		
23	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>						✓	✓	✓	✓
24	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		4			8	2	8	7	
25	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>							1		
26	Rock Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus muta</i>	2		1	1	6	1			
27	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
28	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>			1		6	1			
29	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		6	6	1	6	8	50	20	
30	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		12			10	2			
31	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		2							
32	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		2	6	2	60	6	4		
33	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
34	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		2			10	6	6	4	
35	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
36	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
37	Red-necked Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
38	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
39	Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>		10	3	12	10	5	1	1	
40	Sabine's Gull	<i>Xema sabini</i>				1	1				
41	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	
42	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>					4				
43	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
44	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓
45	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>		1			3				
46	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>			1		1				
47	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	2	2		4	1	2			

	Common name	Scientific name	May/June									
			24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	
48	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓					
49	Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
50	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>		2	30	3	20		10			
51	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>		4					8			
52	Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>					1		6			
53	Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>		✓	✓		✓		✓			
54	Feral Pigeon / Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>			✓		✓	✓				
55	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
56	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
57	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>				H						
58	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	4		1		1	1	2			
59	Redwing	<i>Turdus illacus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
60	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓						✓	
61	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
62	Common Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>				1		H				
63	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>				10	1	H	1	1		

Mammals

1	Atlantic Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>			2	1	20				
2	Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>			2	1	1				
3	Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>							3		
4	Reindeer	<i>Rangifer tarandus</i>				8	27				