

Undiscovered Iceland

Naturetrek Tour Report

23 - 31 May 2019



Behind Seljalandsfoss



Red-necked Phalarope



Reindeer



Jokulsarlon

Report & images by compiled by Andrew Bray



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Summary

This tour is timed to coincide with the return of birds to their Icelandic habitat. We enjoyed seeing many birds, including iconic species such as Barrow's Goldeneye and the Gyr Falcon. Our route took us from the airport around the peninsula and along the south coast to Skaftafell. Here we walked over Ingólfshöfði and visited the iceberg lagoon of Jökulsárlón. We stayed a night at Djúpvogur before travelling to Mývatn. Our final trip was the whale watching tour out of Húsavík which was truly a great ending to a fantastic journey.

Day 1

Thursday 23rd May

We arrived at Keflavik Airport which was less busy than expected, although it still took time to get our hired minibus. Once under way we explored the Reykjanes Peninsula with our first stop at the bridge across the fissure. Here you can stand on the bridge with one foot over the American Plate and another foot over the Eurasian Plate. It was then on to the area past the lighthouse at Reykjanestá where there is a statue to the Great Auk, the last one of which was shot by a Danish Naturalist in 1844. We looked out to sea and could see Eldey where roughly half of the Icelandic population of Gannets live, numbering around 116,000. There were Eider, Common Scoter, Kittiwakes and Fulmars plus a few Gannets and rather a lot of Arctic Terns with their long tail streamers. From there it was a short distance to Gunnevehr where the hot water erupts from the ground. There were boards telling the tale of Gunne, a witch who is now a ghost. There are also a few remains of the house where a Dane had put down roots to grow plants. He went back to a job in Denmark just before WW2 broke out. It was then onto the hotel and a superb meal.

Day 2

Friday 24th May

Today was a long day. We started at Grindavík which is one of Iceland's most important fishing ports; here several Glaucous Gulls were seen as well as Turnstone and Whimbrel. At the end of the inner harbour there were lots of Fulmar. It was then on the road to Hiðervatn where we saw Red-throated Diver at a distance plus much closer a Red-breasted Merganser, Tufted Duck and Ringed Plover. Our next stop was Ölfusá where four Whooper Swans left the shoreline as we topped the cliff. At Selfoss we stopped near an ATM and headed for a drink at Kaffi Krús which was very popular with locals. Our final stop before lunch was the dramatic falls at Seljalandsfoss where we got a bit wet from the spray when walking behind the falls. There was a Snow Bunting singing nearby as Fulmars wheeled above us. Our lunch stop was at the old cow shed of Gamla fjósid.

It was then onto Skogafoss where we reluctantly decided not to tackle the 572 steps to the top of this magnificent waterfall. We drove to Reynisdangar where the black sand leads to the basalt columns, and Puffins and Guillemot were seen as were Eider and Kittiwake. We were soon in Vík for a refreshing drink. We then drove through miles of volcano fields created by the Laki eruptions in 1783. The molten lava covered 600 sq kms and caused problems around the world. After the lava fields, where we stopped at Skáftareldaraun, we drove across the world's largest alluvial floodplain of Skeiðarársandur. This is a result of the melt water from Europe's largest glacier of Vatnajökull which takes up 8% of the country's landmass.

Day 3

Saturday 25th May

A few of us had an early morning walk today, heading up towards the glacier from the hotel. There were lots of Snipe and Redwing plus two Red-throated Divers and a Ptarmigan that perched on top of a mound. We drove south and east looking for Phalaropes in the morning but none were found. We stopped at Hof to look at the church with its grass roof - the last one built in that style. We then headed in the rain to the Puffin tour to Ingólfshöfði. The half hour in the back of the trailer was cold and the rain fell, but it brightened up as we walked up the sandy slope to the top. Here we saw even more Great Skuas than we had seen already. We were briefed on the problem of Mink taking the eggs. There were Puffin, Guillemot, Fulmar and Kittiwake on the cliffs and at sea, while on the sea's edge there were some Eider. At the very end we found a Razorbill, but then it was time to go.

We stopped opposite the hotel for lunch and warmed up. Our next stop was just down the road at Skaftafell where we walked up to Swartifoss with its black hexagonal columns either side. We then headed for the view point but slightly disappointingly Iceland's tallest mountain was hidden by the cloud. We descended by another route and had some drinks at the caravan rather than the cafeteria which was closed. It was then back to the hotel at 5pm.

Day 4

Sunday 26th May

We had another early morning walk up to Svinafellsjökull seeing more Snipe and Redwing. It is hard to appreciate that this massive glacial spur could disappear within a generation. A Ptarmigan called and Redshank flew. After another large Icelandic breakfast we stopped by a bridge as there were numerous birds on a lake the other side of the berm. These included Barnacle Geese, a Red-throated Diver, a Dunlin and some Golden Plover. It was then onto Jökulsárlón where we stopped short of the bridge and walked through the moraine field to see the myriad of birds. We then drove across the bridge and parked the minibus. Our first birds were a pair of Snow Bunting.

Having checked in for a trip in an amphibious vehicle, we viewed birds and Common Seals from the bank while waiting to set off. There were lots of Eider and Arctic Terns and also Common Gull on the icebergs. Out on the water the guide told us that the glacier was 190m deep (the lowest point in Iceland) and the tallest mountain, Hvannadalshnúkur at 2,110m was nearby! Our boat trip in a DUKW was fantastic and the icebergs were memorable. After our trip we went to Diamond Beach where we saw six Harlequin Duck and four Sanderling.

We stopped for lunch at Freynes again before heading back to Skaftafell National Park and had walk in fine drizzle to Skaftafellsjökull. It was amazing to see how much the glacier had retreated. It was then a short drive to Svinafellsjökull along 2km of bumpy track. Here we could see the glacier from the side, and we passed the memorial to two German climbers who disappeared on the glacier in 2007. It was then an even shorter journey back to the hotel where we met up again for the list and a superb meal.

Day 5

Monday 27th May

We left the hotel at Skafatell and headed east. We stopped again just short of the bridge at Jökulsárlón so we could take some more photos. It was then stop and start to Höfn as we looked for and found Red-necked

Phalarope and Slavonian Grebe. At Höfn we filled up and had a coffee and a quick trip to the supermarket. It was then onto Strokksness near the NATO radar station where we saw more Harlequin Duck and seals that were resting on the rocks. We had lunch from the back of the minibus and we finished just as it started to rain.

It was more stop and start to Djúpvogur seeing Scaup and Black-tailed Godwit, and there was also a stop to look at Reindeer which were introduced here in the 18th century. On arrival at the Hotel Framtið we checked in and then later drove to the airfield and walked up a mound to survey the lakes that were clustered around the air strip. We added another Shelduck to our list plus Long-tailed Duck, Red-throated Divers and Shoveler. It was getting very cold now, so we cut short our visit and headed back to the hotel. After the checklist, most of us had fresh, delicious salmon for dinner, after which we went for a walk around the harbour before heading to our warm rooms.

Day 6

Tuesday 28th May

This morning we went back to the bird reserve and had a short walk at one end of the runway. There were plenty of Red-throated Divers and Long-tailed Ducks. We followed Route 1 but took a short diversion to Fáskrúðsfjörður for a coffee. It was then a long drive through a tunnel and past Egilsstaðir to a lunch stop near Hvanna, where there were plenty of Pink-footed Geese in the nearby fields. We then drove to the Bishop's Cairns where the two Bishops of Iceland divided up the country. The cairns in the bleak lunar landscape were the border upon which they decided. Further on down the road there are cairns about 100m apart that were built along with the road as a tribute to those people who used them to guide them while walking to Þingvellir. The people of the east coast used to walk to the Parliament and used cairns to guide them to Lake Mývatn before turning south. We eventually saw the lake of Mývatn where the Mý means flies!

We arrived at the Hotel Sel Mývatn in Skútustaðir where we dropped off our luggage before heading to the corner of the lake where Route 1 crosses the Laxa River, seeing many Barrow's Goldeneye plus Harlequin Duck and Long-tailed Duck. There were plenty of other birds to see as well including Wigeon and Tufted Duck. The wind was very strong and the temperature was falling so it was back to the hotel and a lovely meal

Day 7

Wednesday 29th May

Today we awoke to heavy snow. We didn't leave the hotel until 10am, and at one stage we were completely white as it fell so heavily. We started with an early morning walk around the pseudo craters where we saw a Gyr Falcon, Slavonian Grebe and a Great Northern Diver. We drove to the *Fugalsafn* (bird museum, which opens at midday) or where we sheltered behind a building and saw Shoveler, Pintail, lots of Tufted Duck, Wigeon and Gadwall, plus a Great Crested Grebe and five Common Scoter. It was then on to Húsavík on the road which is now newly metalled. In Húsavík we ate at a café before finding out the whale watching was cancelled today due to the weather. We then drove to Dettifoss with a long walk from the car park to the falls which are spectacular, as is the gorge that they have eroded. It is the largest European waterfall by volume and is a tremendous sight.

We then headed back to Krafla, passing the geo-thermal power plant, and walked to the site of the Krafla Fires (1974 – 1985). We walked on rock younger than ourselves! We then descended back along the road to Hverir where the water and mud boils. It was only a short hop across the ridge to the Mývatn Baths where some of the

group took the plunge. Our final stop was at Reykjahlið where the geo plates are pulling apart, and it was then back to the hotel for a shower and dinner.

Day 8

Thursday 30th May

A productive early morning walk today produced Red-necked Phalarope only a metre from us, as well as Slavonian Grebe and Great Northern Diver. After breakfast we drove to Höfði where we walked through a spectacular wood and saw Mealy Redpoll as well as Redwing and Snipe. Our next stop was the pinnacles of Dimmuborgir where the Yule Elves are said to live. This fascinating area was formed when under water. Our final stop around Lake Mývatn was the Cowshed Cafe at Vogafjós where we had a coffee whilst next door through the glass windows were the cows.

We had lunch once again in Húsavík, and afterwards we drove to the end of the harbour where there were several Glaucous Gulls, but no Iceland Gulls. We then parked the minibus near the whale watching tour departure point and walked past the fish market buildings to look at birds on the beach. It was then on the old whaler “Gardar” for a 3 hour tour around the entrance to the fjord. In all we saw four Humpback Whales and a Minke Whale. There were plenty of sea birds near the cliffs of Nattfaravíkur. It was then time to return to dry land and take off the suit they gave us to keep warm and we drove back to the hotel.

Day 9

Tuesday 31st May

It was a very early morning start today and we stopped at Goðafoss where in 1,000AD the local chieftain threw his idol gods into the waterfall as Christianity had been declared the official religion at Þingvellir that year. We boarded the aircraft for our trip to Reykjavík where we were met by Gudmúder Tyrfingsson. Our journey home had begun.

We had a fabulous time with quite a few bird species. We saw a lot of Iceland’s spectacular and unique scenery, including waterfalls, icebergs, thermal springs and mountains. The volcanic activity was awe inspiring and we stood between the two plates that cause so much of this activity. In addition of course there was the wildlife, and we saw 69 species of birds plus six species of mammals. The tour certainly showed Iceland off at its best.

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Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	May								
			23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31
1	Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>				70	60				
2	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		30	2	4	40	40	40	✓	✓
3	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>						✓			
4	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		✓	25	2	✓	✓	✓	✓	6
5	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>					2	1			
6	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>					3	1	1		
7	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>						3	✓	10	
8	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>					6	8	✓	✓	✓
9	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		60	10	3	35	30	30	39	10
10	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>							2		
11	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>			2		20		3	5	
12	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		60			15	30	✓	✓	✓
13	Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>					3	1	2	4	
14	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	40	✓	10	✓	✓	✓		✓	20
15	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>				6	4	8			1
16	Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>	70							5	
17	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>		2			2	10	6	6	2
18	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>						✓	8	12	10
19	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		1			1	4	9	6	2
20	Rock Ptarmigan - E	<i>Lagopus muta islandorum</i>			3	h		2	3		
21	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>		1	2	3	10	6	1	2	
22	Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>							1	6	
23	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	✓	✓		2	✓	✓		✓	
24	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>							1		
25	Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>							7	4	
26	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>	4	2	14		3	3			
27	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	2	40	10	10	40	30	10	20	
28	Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	4	1	3	4	10	20	50	40	10
29	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		2			8	2	5		
30	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>		40	6	3	20	8	20	15	2
31	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>		4			40	40	30	50	10
32	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		30		2	2	5		1	
33	Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>					✓				
34	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>				4				3	
35	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>			5	1	1	2			
36	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>					2	1			
37	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	3	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
38	Red-necked Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>					30	20	50	50	20
39	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		10	2	4	60	40	30	30	10
40	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	✓	✓	✓					✓	

	Common name	Scientific name	May								
			23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31
41	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓			30	30	30	✓	
42	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>				40	60			✓	
43	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	1	10	1		3	2	4	3	
44	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>		15						4	
45	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	30	✓			40	10	20	✓	
46	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓			60	20	30	60	
47	Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
48	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>			50	19	10			1	
49	Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>	1	6	3	10	20	6	8	2	
50	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>		2	✓					✓	
51	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>			1					4	
52	Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>	3				1			20	
53	Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>		20	✓					✓	
54	Rock Dove - I	<i>Columba livia var. domestica</i>		3			1	2			
55	Common Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>						2			
56	Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>								1	
57	Gyrfalcon	<i>Falco rusticolus</i>							1		
58	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>			1						
59	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	2	5	2	3	10	10	20	✓	
60	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>			h	h					
61	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>			1	1					
62	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓							6
63	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	3	3							
64	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus coburni</i>		4	✓	✓	✓	10	20	✓	✓
65	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		3		3	4	2		2	
66	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	3	5	6	5	6	14	20	15	2
67	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	3	✓	15	6	6	8	20	10	4
68	Common Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>								10	
69	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>		h	2	10				1	

Mammals

1	Arctic Fox	<i>Alopex lagopus</i>				1					
2	Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>				✓	✓				
3	Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>								1	
4	Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>								4	
5	Mink	<i>Neovison vison</i>		1							
6	Reindeer	<i>Rangifer tarandus</i>					✓	✓			



Barrow's Goldeneye