

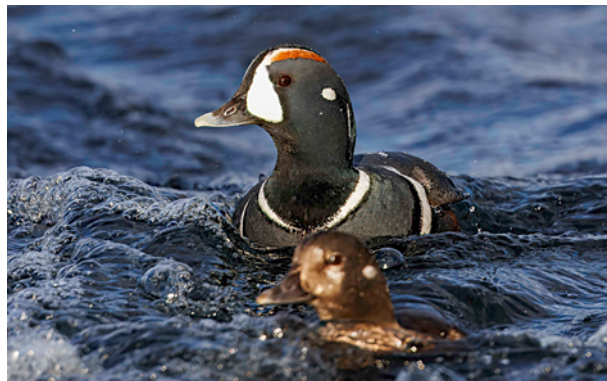
Undiscovered Iceland

Naturetrek Tour Report

21st – 29th May 2026



Puffins



Harlequin Ducks



Red-necked Phalarope



Arctic Fox

Tour report by Marcus John
Photos by Dave Jackson, Marcus John, Jack Harry Wardell and Chris Jones



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Summary

On this tour we witnessed some of the most dramatic scenery that Iceland has to offer, as we journeyed along the southern section of the ring road, around the wild east coast, and finally up to the far north. Leaving the coaches behind, we experienced the real, unspoiled Iceland, which barely seems to have changed since the days of the sagas. Rain showers did not spoil the views during the first couple of days, and once we reached Djúpivogur, we had lots of warm sunshine.

Among so many highlights were three separate sightings of the normally elusive Arctic Fox, each one better than the last. We had wonderful encounters with flocks of waders, including the iconic Red-necked Phalarope, which often swam within touching distance. The wildfowl around Lake , were spectacular, especially the gorgeous Harlequin Ducks. Add in Humpback Whales on our boat trip out of Húsavík, cascading waterfalls and unseasonal snowy landscapes, and we had the complete Iceland experience.

Day 1

Thursday 21st May

Heathrow – Keflavik – Reykjavík (Kriunes)

Our flight was smooth and we landed on time at Keflavik airport. We made a brief stop at the roadside pools in Njardvik and saw a good range of waders and wildfowl, including a flock of Knots in their rufous-orange breeding plumage. Alongside these were other waders including Turnstones, along with a few Pale-bellied Bent Geese.

Our first night was spent at the excellent Hotel Kriunes, only a forty-five-minute drive from the airport. It is situated right on the shores of Lake Elliðavatn, which holds a good range of breeding birds. It was a cool but dry afternoon and so, after checking in, we met up again just outside our hotel rooms, where we stood right on the lakeshore. We were immediately assailed by the strident calls of Arctic Terns, after which the hotel is named. Common Snipe displayed overhead, as both Redwings and Redpolls sang out from the trees. Out on the lake, we found pairs of Whooper Swan, Slavonian Grebe and Great Northern Diver: quite the introduction to Icelandic birding!

We enjoyed a delicious dinner and afterwards, Dave and Marcus gave an introductory talk. Then it was time to get some sleep, in preparation for a long drive the next day.

Day 2

Friday 22nd May

Hveragerði – Skógafoss – Dyrhólaey – Vik – Hotel Skaftafell

Most of us were up before breakfast to look for birds. We were greeted by the evocative sound of Great Northern Divers, their ululating calls and song carrying far across the still water. Three pairs of Slavonian Grebes were swimming very close to shore, their wonderful golden head plumes seeming to glow, even in dull light. Waders included Golden Plover, Redshank and Black-tailed Godwits, while among lots of Tufted Ducks was a pair of Scaups.

After a brief stop at Hveragerði, we visited the fantastic waterfall of Skógafoss. This single cascade is twenty-five metres wide and sixty metres high; the walk to the top offered a superb view. Down on the river below, we found our first pair of Harlequin Ducks swimming close to the tourists, who were too busy photographing the falls to notice them.

The next place on our itinerary was Dyrhólaey; it was very wet and windy, but we still appreciated the incredible seascape, with dramatic sea stacks formed of black volcanic rock. We watched dozens of Fulmars soaring and banking in the stiff breeze.

We ate lunch in the Lava Café in the historic town of Vík, before the final leg of our long drive to Skaftafell. It was not long before Alison's sharp eyes picked out the first Arctic Fox of the tour, though only a few saw it. After this impromptu stop, we continued across extensive moss-covered lava fields; we stopped to walk and take photos of the amazing scenery. Even more impressive was Skeiðarársandur, a vast, flat landscape formed by glacial meltwater. These plains consist of braided rivers and sand/gravel sediments, which have been washed out from beneath the Vatnajökull glacier. There was just time for one last stop to admire a picturesque roadside waterfall, which we dubbed "Jackson's Falls", before we arrived at our hotel.

Day 3

Saturday 23rd May

Skaftafell – Ingólfshöfði & Jökulsárlón – Skaftafellsjökull

Some of us were up early for a walk up behind our hotel and towards the Svínafellsjökull glacier. We were surrounded by displaying Common Snipes: dozens of these waders were constantly swooping all around us, with others making their repetitive calls from prominent perches, including our hotel roof! Redwings sang from lower down, sometimes perching in full view, just metres away. As we walked back down for breakfast, a pair of Red-necked Phalaropes descended from high above the valley to land in a small pool. They swam around feeding for a few minutes, allowing splendid views through the scope. Then they mated for several seconds, after which the female chased the male off!

Most of the group joined Marcus on the trip out to Ingólfshöfði. This isolated peninsula lies far out across the black sands of the glacial outwash that dominates this section of the coast. We joined local guides on a trailer pulled by a large tractor, which takes about half an hour to cross over the eerily beautiful landscape. On the way, we saw Red-throated Divers and a small group of Arctic Skuas, including both dark and pale phase birds.

When we disembarked, we had a steep walk up a sandy slope onto the grassy peninsula itself. Fulmars wheeled around everywhere, with a Great Skua occasionally cruising past looking for prey (Ingólfshöfði has been declared a nature reserve in order to protect this species). One of the first birds we saw when we arrived at the top was a displaying male Snow Bunting. At first, we only saw Puffins in flight, but as we neared the lighthouse, we finally had two birds alight on the very edge of the grassy summit. Then it was time to walk back through the Great Skua colony, where birds sat on eggs just five metres from the path. Ingólfshöfði is an incredibly special place, and we felt privileged to have spent time in such a wild and remote location.

After a welcome lunch in the nearby Vatnajökull Cafe, we headed back to the hotel for a short break, before going for a walk at nearby Skaftafell National Park. We strolled out through light rain showers to enjoy views of the Skaftafellsjökull glacier. Though there were few birds, we all agreed that the extensive birch and willow woodland made for a very enjoyable walk.

Day 4

Sunday 24th May

Jökulsárlón – Svínafellsjökull

We ate an early breakfast to maximise our time at the iceberg lagoon of Jökulsárlón. As we drove along the ring road we saw several interesting birds, but we only stopped when Dave spotted an Arctic Fox! It ran away across the grassy plain, but stopped a couple of times to look back at us, so everyone was able to get a good look at this elusive mammal.



Dunlin



Red Knot



Laxa River



Lake Mývatn

When we arrived at Jökulsárlón, we first stopped at the less-visited western side, where we found a flock of migrant Barnacle Geese on a small pool close to the path; a pair of Red-throated Divers was nesting here as well. A few hundred metres on, we found a pair of Harlequin Ducks on the lagoon itself.

Next, we visited “Diamond Beach,” where lumps of ice are often washed up on the black sand. There were only small pieces, but they looked superb as the waves washed over them. Arctic Terns were calling loudly and flew low overhead; a few of us were lucky enough to watch as a dark-morph Arctic Skua pursued one tern, twisting and turning at eye-level! Dave found a solitary Purple Sandpiper, which we enjoyed photographing at close quarters.

Soon it was time for our ride on the amphibious vehicle: it was a unique way to see the icebergs up close. We motored over the black sand and straight into the icy waters of the lagoon. We sailed up close to two large icebergs, enjoying the strange shapes wrought by water and wind. A pair of Common Eiders swam right under the front edge of the largest berg: a lovely sight. The rain that had been threatening finally arrived, so we were glad to head back onto land. We immediately drove back along the ring road to enjoy a warm lunch at the same roadside café as yesterday: the soup was excellent!

In the late afternoon, we went for a short walk out to the glacier snout of Svínafellsjökull, close to our hotel. We were able to walk up to the very edge of the glacier, which towered above us across a pool of meltwater. The contrast between the jagged white river of ice and the stark black mountains on either side was breath-taking. We had plenty of time to wander around and find new angles for photography, before returning to the welcome warmth of our hotel.

Day 5

Monday 25th May

Skaftafell – Höfn – Hvalnes Lighthouse – Djúpivogur

We departed the hotel at 8.30am, to drive east past Jökulsárlón and on to the coastal town of Höfn. We saw a good variety of birds from the vehicles, but once again it was an Arctic Fox that caused most excitement. This time it was much closer to the road, and seemed unperturbed when we stopped to watch it picking its way across the grassy plain, looking for nesting birds. It was amazing to have seen three foxes in four days!

The rain had eased off when we stopped again a few kilometres before Höfn, to check some large, reedy pools on either side of the ring road. Dozens of Red-necked Phalaropes were swimming and feeding on the shallow water, looking beautiful in the watery sunshine.

After buying food at the supermarket, we stopped on the shore just past the harbour. But it was hardly picnicking weather, as the skies opened and it poured with rain for about half an hour. Once it cleared, we were able to walk out, and enjoyed some excellent birding. Several hundred Common Eiders were swimming offshore, with other ducks including Red-breasted Mergansers and Scaups. There was a good variety of waders, including a flock of Turnstones in bright breeding plumage. Five Red-throated Divers were calling and displaying, while Arctic Skuas chased the Arctic Terns.

The drive to Djúpivogur took us through breathtaking coastal scenery, with towering, snow-topped mountains dropping down to wide, black-sand bays. The dramatic crags above Hvalnes lighthouse were thronged with hundreds of Fulmar nests. We saw several small groups of Reindeer along the road, and found a pair of Harlequin Ducks by one of the many narrow bridges which crossed the fast-flowing glacial rivers.

Having checked into our hotel, we went for a walk around the picturesque harbour and out to a nearby freshwater lake, enjoying the late afternoon sunshine. Migrant waders included a flock of summer-plumaged Knots, and a couple of Purple Sandpipers. On the grassy slopes we saw lots of waders, including displaying Whimbrels and Golden Plovers. The lake held a small colony of Black-headed Gulls, as well as Shovelers and Red-throated Divers.

Day 6

Tuesday 26th May

Djúpivogur – Egilsstaðir – Mývatn

We awoke to a sunny morning, and the weather remained bright and quite warm throughout the day. We had a leisurely stroll around the harbour and along a coastal path, before enjoying a typical Icelandic buffet breakfast in the quaint dining room of our comfortable hotel.

The next stage of our journey took us along the only stretch of gravel road on this tour. We left Route One just north of Djúpivogur to drive up a steep mountain road, which took us into the wild highlands. There were extensive areas of snow and many beautiful waterfalls; we soon found Pink-footed Geese, which breed right across Iceland's mountainous interior, and we also had great views of Ptarmigan.

We took a mid-day break in Egilsstaðir, the main town in this region and an important hub for locals and visitors alike. We had time for coffee and to pick up supplies for lunch. We drove out of town and thanks to Dave's local knowledge, we stopped to eat at a beautiful picnic area in a wooded river canyon.

The next couple of hours took us across more mountain scenery before we crossed an area of bleak lava plains: it was beautiful, if austere. When someone remarked that this was like a moonscape, Marcus explained that it was here that the first Apollo astronauts had practised for their moon landings! We were making very good time, until we were stopped by a long queue at a bridge under repair. We had no choice but to wait for an hour; at least we were able to get out and explore the strange landscape.

We had our first views of Lake Mývatn as we descended into the village of Reykjahlíð, before driving around to the Sel Hotel, our base for the next three nights. After settling into our rooms, we headed off to the nearby Laxa River, which is home to both Harlequin Ducks and Barrow's Goldeneyes. We spent an hour walking along its shores, admiring the tumultuous rapids and the ducks, which seemed to delight in braving the white water!

Day 7

Wednesday 27th May

Mývatn – Goðafoss – Húsavík – Vestmannaeyjar

The Sel Hotel lies immediately opposite the famous Skútustadagrig pseudo-craters, and the pretty lake of Stakhólstjörn. A smooth path led from the road along the lakeshore, offering excellent birding right on the hotel's doorstep. Most of us set off before breakfast and were rewarded with amazingly close views of Slavonian Grebe and Red-necked Phalarope. Snipes, Golden Plovers, Redshanks and Black-tailed Godwits were calling all around us; wildfowl included several Long-tailed Ducks, which looked beautiful in the sunshine. A pair of Great Northern Divers called across the water; their nest was on a small islet in the centre of the lake.

The main event for today was our whalewatching trip from Húsavík, a forty-five-minute drive north of Mývatn. On our way there, we were distracted when we spotted a large raptor above the road: it turned out to be our only White-tailed Eagle of the trip! We arrived in Húsavík in time for an early lunch, before boarding our boat for a three-hour trip with North Sailing. Their boats are converted wooden-hulled trawlers; it feels extra special walking on a wooden deck as you scan the open ocean for wildlife!

Humpback Whales are regular visitors to Skjálfandi Bay, and we saw four individuals. On at least two occasions, they surfaced remarkably close to the boat, and we had great views as they exhaled, and then showed their flukes when they dived back below the surface. Seabirds were also numerous, including lots of Puffins. We were in high spirits, but getting rather cold as we motored back into harbour, so we relished the cakes and hot chocolate served by the crew!

Dave's local knowledge came in handy once again on our drive back to the hotel. We stopped at a wide lake called Westmannsvatn to find 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: the only one of its kind in the whole country!

Day 8

Thursday 28th May

Mývatn – Dettifoss – Hverir – Dimmuborgir (Grjótagjá)

The weather today became much colder: a northerly wind picked up, and by the late afternoon, the sleet was turning to snow.

We went for another pre-breakfast walk along the shores of Stakhólstjörn, and once again we were soon absorbed in the endless interactions of such a variety of fascinating birds: this truly was a paradise for birders! After another excellent buffet breakfast, we set off for our first destination of the day: Dettifoss. This is the second-most powerful waterfall in Europe, and it 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 among 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 created an other-worldly atmosphere.

Next stop was the excellent Café Borgir, where we enjoyed the soup buffet. After eating our fill, we walked into the adjacent site of Dimmuborgir. Translated as “Dark Fortress,” this is an extraordinary lava field. Formed by ancient volcanic eruptions and a lava lake, this surreal landscape is filled with jagged pillars, natural arches, and deep caverns. Rich in folklore, it is said to be home to trolls and other hidden people: it certainly has a mystical atmosphere.

Once back at our hotel, we set off for a late afternoon walk, but the strengthening wind and snow convinced us to beat a hasty retreat!

Day 9

Friday 29th May

Departure

Today was our last day, and it was with some reluctance that we set off along the road to Akureyri and our flight back to Reykjavík. The cold weather had intensified overnight, and the temperature had dipped below freezing as we left the hotel. We enjoyed the unexpected snowy landscapes on the hour-long journey to the airport. Such unseasonal snow is nothing new to the locals, and our flight took off on time and landed slightly ahead of schedule. There was no snow in Reykjavík, and we arrived at Keflavik Airport in plenty of time for the flight to London.

We had all enjoyed our superb journey along the lesser-known roads of Iceland, witnessing extraordinary landscapes and finding a wonderful range of exciting wildlife. The weather had also shown great variety, from warm sunshine to freezing snow showers, but this only added to the whole experience. Three Arctic Foxes was an exceptional total, but this was rivalled by the abundance of birds, many of which were seen at ridiculously close quarters! And our enjoyment was greatly enhanced by the camaraderie of such a lovely group of fellow travellers: this was a trip which will live long in the memory.

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Species lists

Birds (H=heard only)

I=Introduced		May 2026								
Common name	Scientific name	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29
Brent Goose (pale-bellied)	<i>Branta bernicla hrota</i>	✓								
Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓			
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>		✓				✓			
Tundra Bean Goose	<i>Anser serrirostris</i>			1						
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>					✓				
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>					✓	✓			
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>						✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓	✓			✓		✓	✓	
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>						✓			
Common Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>	2	2			2		4	4	
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>		4		2		18	5		
Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>							4	2	
Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>						2	2	8	
Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>						6	6	4	6
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rock Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus muta</i>			1		1	3	6	12	
Feral Rock Dove - I	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓			✓
Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>	6	7					4	2	
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>	✓	✓			✓	✓			
Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>	✓				✓	✓			
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>				✓	✓	✓			
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>			✓	✓	✓				
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓			
Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucooides</i>							2		
Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		

I=Introduced		May 2026									
Common name	Scientific name	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	
Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>		✓	✓	✓						
Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>		✓	✓				✓			
Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>							✓			
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>							✓			
Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>			✓							
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Black-throated Diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>							1			
Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓		
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>							1			
European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>							1			
White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>							1			
Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>							1			
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>					1	1				
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		H	H							
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓							✓	
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓		✓						
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>			✓		✓					
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>	✓	✓	✓							
Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>			2	6		2		H		

Mammals

I=Introduced		May 2026								
Common name	Scientific name	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29
Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>							4		
Reindeer - I	<i>Rangifer tarandus</i>					✓	✓			
Arctic Fox	<i>Vulpes lagopus</i>		1		1	1				
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>				2					
Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>			1		2				

Plants

Common name	Scientific name
Mingan Moonwort	<i>Botrychium minganense</i>
Small Adder's Tongue	<i>Ophioglossum azoricum</i>
Rough Horsetail	<i>Equisetum hyemale</i>
Marsh Marigold	<i>Caltha palustris</i>
Goldilocks Buttercup	<i>Ranunculus auricomus</i>
Tufted Saxifrage	<i>Saxifraga caespitosa</i>
Annual Stonecrop	<i>Sedum annuum</i>
Biting Stonecrop	<i>Sedum acre</i>
Mountain Avens	<i>Dryas octopetala</i>
Alpine Burnet	<i>Sanguisorba alpina</i>
Stone Bramble	<i>Rubus saxatilis</i>
Meadowsweet	<i>Filipendula ulmaria</i>

Common name	Scientific name
Alpine Cinquefoil	<i>Potentilla crantzii</i>
Silverweed	<i>Argentina anserina</i>
Faeroe Lady's Mantle	<i>Alchemilla faeroensis</i>
Marsh Violet	<i>Viola palustris</i>
Woolly Willow	<i>Salix lanata</i>
Goat Willow	<i>Salix caprea</i>
Dwarf Birch	<i>Betula nana</i>
Moss Campion	<i>Silene acaulis</i>
Alpine Mouse Ear	<i>Cerastium alpinum</i>
Sheep's Sorrel	<i>Rumex acetosella</i>
Mountain Sorrel	<i>Oxyria digyna</i>
Thrift	<i>Armeria maritima</i>
Cowberry	<i>Vaccinium vitis-idaea</i>
Oyster Plant	<i>Mertensia maritima</i>
Northern Bedstraw	<i>Galium boreale</i>
Alpine Speedwell	<i>Veronica alpina</i>
Wild Angelica	<i>Angelica sylvestris</i>
Alpine Rock-cress	<i>Arabis alpina</i>
Common Scurvy Grass	<i>Cochlearia officinalis</i>
Dandelion	<i>Taraxacum</i> agg.
Stained-leaved Hawkweed	<i>Hieracium strictophyllum</i>
Coltsfoot	<i>Tussilago farfara</i>