

Iceland: Birding & Nature

With Naturalist Journeys & Caligo Ventures



June 18 – 27, 2021

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Go north for your next adventure! Our Iceland birding tour is also a grand chance to experience geysers, grand waterfalls, wildflowers, glaciers, mountains and seacoasts. Iceland is a natural crossroads for species of Europe and North America, and while typical for an island the species count is not high, the quality of views and mix of species makes for a delightful holiday. We have chosen to focus on three of the top birding areas, with three nights at each spot, creating a really well-paced journey. We drive between them, savoring Iceland's iconic landscapes – a mix of wild terrain and picturesque farms, home to grazing sheep and unique Icelandic horses.

Lying in the productive waters of the North Atlantic Ocean, this stunning island country of Iceland has long beckoned to travelers and birdwatchers alike. This is where ancient Nordic history and sagas that come to life, it's easy to immerse yourself in dramatic green vistas, glaciers, waterfalls, lava fields and dramatic mountain ranges. The birds of Iceland are intriguing, home to northern specialties like Rock Ptarmigan and Snow Bunting and boasting thousands of breeding Atlantic Puffin, Razorbill, Thick-billed Murre, other seabirds and waterfowl. We watch for powerfully-flying Gyrfalcon that hunt over nesting colonies—Iceland's national bird.

Itinerary

Fri., June 18 Arrivals & Snæfellsnes Peninsula

Welcome to Iceland! Please plan to arrive early this morning at Iceland's Keflavik International Airport (KEF), just 30 miles southwest of Reykjavik. Once we have all assembled, we stop in Keflavik for a welcome breakfast where we get to know our guide and fellow travelers. It's going to be a fun 10 days!

Tour Highlights

- Spend two days exploring the Snæfellsnes Peninsula, taking in dramatic scenery and bountiful nesting colonies
- Ferry to Flatey Island where Arctic Tern, Common Eider, Red-necked Phalarope, Common Redshank and other species are highlights alongside the colorful fishing village. We whale watch en route!
- Bird Lake Myvatn, one of the most important breeding locations for waterfowl in all of Europe
- Visit Hrísey Island and walk the trails, on the lookout for Black-tailed Godwit, Snow Bunting, Meadow Pipit, and Rock Ptarmigan
- Soak in a natural hot pool at Hveravellir, a pleasant break on one of our travel days
- Spend a day exploring Þingvellir National Park, where geology, ornithology, botany, and history come together—stand on the spot where two tectonic plates meet
- Ferry to the Westman Islands to see massive Atlantic Puffin colonies; we also watch for Northern Gannet and Manx Shearwater

Tour Summary

10-Day / 9-Night Iceland Birding Tour w/ Trausti Gunnarsson and Dan Donaldson
\$5690, from Keflavik
Airport is Keflavík International (KEF), Keflavik



Then, off we go, passing by Reykjavik, Iceland's capital, en route to the stunning Hvalfjörður Fjord and Borgarnes, an historic settlement. We, of course, bird along the way, making time to stop for birds and scenery. Have your binoculars and cameras ready. We keep our eyes peeled for Redwing and White Wagtail, and along the coast we look for Lesser and Glaucous Black-backed Gulls and shorebirds.

Iceland's volcanic topography is impressive; even as we drive away from the airport, we work our way through immense lava fields, covered in brilliant mosses. We make our way to Snæfellsnes Peninsula on the far western side of the island, where we spend the next three nights.

Accommodations at Kast Guesthouse or similar (B,L,D)

Sat., June 19 Snæfellsnes Peninsula

We spend the day exploring the 60 mile-long Snæfellsnes Peninsula, which is home to dramatic sea cliffs, beautiful fjords, beaches, and striking volcanic peaks. Today we visit massive seabird nesting colonies, where we watch for nesting Common and Thick-billed Murres and Black-legged Kittiwakes. In addition to coastal headlands and cliffs, wetlands and shallow ponds of the peninsula host Red-throated Loons, Whooper Swans, Arctic Terns, Black-headed Gulls, and shorebirds such as Red-necked Phalarope and Common Redshank.

From ocean lookouts, we keep our eyes peeled for cetaceans—including Humpback Whales! As we round the peninsula, if conditions are right, we hope to have grand views of the Snæfellsjökull icecap, a 700,000 year old glacier capped volcano.

If we have time this afternoon, we take a walk through the lava fields. We also witness the stunning sea cliffs and watch for breeding birds like Thick-billed Murre. Did you know? Lava fields here are home to some of the most stunning vegetation on the island. Approximately 130 species of plants nestle in here, including many ferns and some specialty orchids. Macro photographers will delight in the botany show today.

Accommodations at Kast Guesthouse or similar (B,L,D)

Sun., June 20 Ferry to Flatey Island

We will be sailing from the scenic town of Stykkishólmur passing through the volcanic islands of Breiðafjörður Bay with their hexagonal basaltic columns to land on the beautiful tranquil island of Flatey. In fact Flatey is only a very small island, scarcely a mile or so long, with just one road and hardly any cars. Its tiny village is one of the most picturesque in Iceland. Arctic Terns, Black Guillemots and snazzy Snow Buntings in their dazzling black-and-white summer plumage are particularly approachable here. Flatey is also a fabulous place to see Red-necked Phalaropes, which seem to occupy every pond and make the island in June a place definitely not to be missed.



The boat trip is about an hour and a half each way, a good time to watch for Northern Fulmar and Kittiwake as well as other seabirds.

There is a wonderful sense of time forgotten here. Enjoy a coffee at the local coffee house as we wait for the ferry to return us to Stykkisholmur, then we drive back to our lodgings, checking a few birding hotspots on the way.

Accommodations at Kast Guesthouse or similar (B,L,D)

Mon., June 21 Scenic Drive to Akureyri

We depart the peninsula today, traveling east across the northern part of the island to Akureyri on Eyjafjöfður Fjord. The city of Akureyri, amass with colorful buildings and home to a beautiful and colorful town center, is on the inner-most western shore of the fjord and often hosts cruise ships; this is Iceland's second largest city, population 19,000.

Our drive takes most of the day, but we stop often for photos and to bird, of course. Roadside ponds and wetlands and the barren uplands offer us good birding opportunities; watch for Graylag, Pink-footed Goose, and breeding shorebirds that should include Dunlin in bright plumage.

We enjoy dinner in the city tonight.

Accommodations at Lamb Inn Öngulsstadir or similar (B,L,D)

Tues., June 22 Lake Myvatn & Breeding Waterfowl

For birders, spending the day at Lake Myvatn (translates to Midge Lake) is a real highlight. Located in the Northwest quadrant of the island and is famous for its flora, fauna, and heated lagoon. The lake is located at the western edge of a volcanic zone that crosses the island; Lake Myvatn was formed over 2,300 years ago when a



lava flow dammed a river. This shallow lake and the Laxá River are considered two of the most important waterfowl breeding locations in all of Europe.

Barrow's Goldeneye, Greater Scaup and Gadwall mingle here with Tufted Duck, Common Scoter, Long-tailed Duck, and, as well as Horned Grebe, Eurasian Teal, Red-necked Phalarope, Common Loon, and plentiful other waterfowl and wetland species. Summer is breeding season and we are on the lookout for tiny and adorable chicks! We also work the river looking for stunning Harlequin Duck feeding in rapid waters, and we keep our eyes peeled for predators: Merlin, Gyrfalcon, and Short-eared Owl.

Wildflowers are also abundant here, with many wetland species in prime bloom.
Accommodations at Lam Inn Öngulsstadir or similar (B,LD)

Wed., June 23 Island of Hrísey & Akureyri Botanical Gardens

After breakfast we embark on an island adventure today, visiting Hrísey Island in Eyjafjörour Bay. We take a quick, 15-minute ferry from Árskógssandur to Hrísey and then enjoy a morning on the island's walking trails. As we walk, we look for Black-tailed Godwit, Snow Bunting, Rock Ptarmigan, and Meadow Pipit. On our ferry rides to the island and back, we keep our eyes peeled for marine mammals like Harbor Porpoise, Humpback Whale, and even Minke Whale.

Once we return to the mainland, we make time to visit Akureyri and its beautiful botanical gardens where the show of color is abundant! The collection is strong on Arctic plants, sitting just shy of the Arctic Circle. Our summer visit allows us the chance to see beautiful and bright native and non-native flowers and other flora, as well as birds like the Icelandic race of Common Redpoll, Eurasian Blackbird and possible Goldcrest.
Accommodations at Lam Inn Öngulsstadir or similar (B,L,D)

Thurs., June 24 Hveravellir Hot Springs, Gullfoss Waterfall & Skálholt

Our adventure continues as we cross Iceland's rugged interior and make our way south to Skálholt. This is a full travel day, but we do make stops to enjoy the scenery, take photos, bird, and explore the plants and study the geologic formations. We spend much time today looking for the beautiful Gyrfalcon.

We also take a break from our travels to take the opportunity to soak in the natural hot pool at Hveravellir. A real treat! Then, in the late afternoon, we stop to visit the geysers at Geysir and the stunning glacial waterfall at Gullfoss, a large and dramatic two-tiered fall. Watch for Graylag Goose, Whooper Swan, Eurasian Golden Plover, Whimbrel, Common Snipe and possibly Merlin along the way.



We spend the next three nights in Skálholt, located in the southwest quadrant of the island; this small, historic site is known for its simple, clean-lined white church and is the ancient seat of the Icelandic bishops.
Accommodations in Skálholt (B,L,D)

Fri., June 25 Pingvellir National Park

A visit to Iceland would not be complete without spending time at Pingvellir (Thingvellir) National Park. This park is one of the most popular tourist destinations in Iceland, and for good reason—here, geology, botany, ornithology, and history collide. Pingvellir is the site of the ancient Icelandic parliament that was founded in 930 AD. It's also here in the park that the Eurasian and North American tectonic plates come together and consistently produce volcanic and seismic activity. The cracks and faults of the region are visible throughout the park. We spend time interpreting the geology here and how it affects the local flora and fauna.

Pingvellir is also a good birding area, with chances to see Green-winged Teal, both Common and Red-throated Loon, Eurasian Oystercatcher, possible Red Knot and among the numerous Black-headed Gulls, watch for a Parasitic Jaeger.

Accommodations in Skálholt (B,L,D)

Sat., June 26 Westman Islands

Today is a trip highlight for many! We embark on a ferry this morning, this time to the Westman Islands of the southwestern coast of the mainland. We watch for whales and other marine life as we make our way to the islands. This is an excellent crossing to search for Northern Gannet, Great Skua and Manx Shearwater.

Rocky and steep-sided, these volcanic islands are largely uninhabited. In fact, just one of the islands in the Westmans, Heimaey, is inhabited. Heimaey is the largest island in the Westmans and its inhabitants have suffered from recent volcanic activity and eruptions. We see evidence as we enter the harbor. We spend time witnessing the islands' huge Atlantic Puffin colonies and watch for other nesting alcids along the way. Heimaey is one of Iceland's top birding areas and we hope to pick up some new species, possibly Common Ringed Plover, Ruddy Turnstone, good views of Iceland Gull and European Shag and more.

This afternoon we ferry back to the mainland where we learn about and see areas that were affected by the Eyjafjallajökull eruption in 2010.

Accommodations in Skálholt (B,L,D)



Sun., June 27 Return to Reykjavík & Departures

We say goodbye to Iceland and its lovely people and landscapes today, making our way back to Reykjavík and on to the airport. But we do make time to bird along the way. We plan to be in Reykjavík by noonish to give everyone a chance to shop, explore the city and have a final lunch together before making our way to the airport in the afternoon. Some may want to stay on a few days to explore this northern city. (B,L)

About Your Guides Trausti Gunnarsson & Dan Donaldson

Your expert guide, native of Iceland, is **Trausti Gunnarsson**. He comes highly recommended to us by our colleagues at the Massachusetts Audubon Society who rave about his knowledge of all aspects of nature in addition to birding—flora, geology, Icelandic culture and mammals. He is involved in conservation and is the current Secretary for the Iceland Chapter of Birdlife International. Guiding has been his livelihood for several decades and we are thrilled to have him with our group.



Dan Donaldson is an accomplished naturalist-birder based in Northeastern Ohio. Dan has developed his skills while working as a naturalist for a local park district for 15 years as well as with his full-time job as director of the local soil and water conservation district. With varied audiences from novices to experts, Dan incorporates much more than just identification in his tours and programs. His specialization in birding locales ranges from the Great Lakes to coastal destinations from the Maritime Provinces of Canada to the Florida Keys.

Cost of the Journey

Plan Ahead!

Protect yourself with Allianz Travel Insurance. Their website will show a grid of tour cost and your age category for you to make selections. As of January 2017, Naturalist Journeys pays 100% of your flight carbon offset.

Travel Information

Please plan to arrive at Keflavik International Airport on the morning of Friday, June 18. Please plan departures in the afternoon on June 27.

Cost of the Journey

Cost of the Journey is \$5690 DBL / \$6340 SGL, based on double occupancy, per person.

The tour price includes airport transfers, 9 nights' accommodations, all meals from dinner Day One through breakfast Day 10, professional guide services, park and preserve entrance fees, and miscellaneous program expenses.

Cost of the journey does not include airfare from your home to Keflavik, Iceland, or items of a personal nature, such as drinks from the bar, telephone, and local guide gratuities (at your discretion, we will give some guidelines).

Photo Credits

Snaefellsnes, Daniel Bergmann (DB); Black-tailed Godwit, DB; Puffin, DB; Common Eider, DB; Gyrfalcon, DB; Harbour Seal, DB; Snaefellsnes, DB; Puffin, DB; Red-throated Loon, DB; Red-necked Phalarope, DB; Snow Bunting, DB; Myvatn, DB; Purple Sandpiper, DB; Barnacle Geese, DB; Short-eared Owl, DB;

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