



Iceland Birding and Nature June 18 – 27, 2021

Guides Trausti Gunnarsson and Dan Donaldson with 9 participants: Rebecca and David, Fran, Jo, Heather, Rob, Maureen, Kim, and Bev.

Compiled by Dan Donaldson

Summary:

Iceland is a land of constant transition, with landforms actively created by volcanic activity and continental uplift while constantly eroded away by grinding glaciers the pounding of the Atlantic Ocean on its edges. Here, too, birds are also in constant transition with habitats continuously being created and altered by geologic, atmospheric, seasonal and human forces.

This birding trip was planned for June (breeding time) to maximize our opportunities to see summer migrants as well as resident birds and the occasional vagrant lost on ocean winds and currents. Our species list was limited to 73 species, but most species (especially breeding shorebirds and gulls) occurred in large numbers daily and were seen by the hundreds throughout the trip. Shorebirds were everywhere! The shorebirds we observed were away from water in grassy fields and pastures either nesting or foraging for insects. With nearly 24 hours of sunlight, birds were active around the clock. This trip focused on nesting seabirds, waterfowl and shorebirds and all species seen were in great numbers, but we also had plenty of opportunities for passerines and birds of prey. Seabird colonies were active with murrelets, guillemots, razorbills and puffins and the freshwater lakes and glacial rivers gave us wonderful waterfowl viewing opportunities. Iceland's changing land uses, mainly the decline of sheep grazing practices and the reestablishment of forest lands is changing the species makeup of the island as more European passerines such as kinglets, crossbills, and wrens are colonizing these new habitats. Birds of prey were active as well and we observed White-tailed Eagles, Short-eared owls, Gyrfalcons, and Merlins--all active on the wing and ferrying prey back to their nesting sites. This was an amazing cultural journey as well as our local guide, Trausti, kept the group engaged with sharing stories on Icelandic customs and entertained us with Icelandic sagas about the people, locations and land features we visited.

Here's a fun first! We compiled a "Geothermal Hot Tub Bird List!" This list was tallied as the group relaxed in geothermal hot tubs at various locations we visited. It's a short, but sweet list and included Black-tailed Godwit, Snow Bunting, Common Snipe, Whimbrel, Eurasian Oystercatcher and Parasitic Jaeger. Perhaps a geothermal springs/hot tub bird list challenge is in order?

BIRDS (73 species recorded):

DUCKS, GEESE AND SWANS: Anatidae (18)

Graylag Goose *Anser anser* – prolific in Iceland. Seen everyday near water and grazing in pastures.

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Pink-footed Goose *Anser brachyrhynchus* – seen in good numbers (100+) on our way to and from Akureyri on the Heradsvotn River.

Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus* – large and beautiful, Whoopers were seen daily on small ponds and in sheep pastures near water.

Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna* – flyby only on the Borgarfjournur Bay, a stop on our way north to the Snaefellsnes peninsula.

Northern Shoveler *Spatula clypeata* – an uncommon duck species in Iceland, we viewed this one on the pond in front of the Kast Guest House on the southern shore Snaefellsnes peninsula.

Gadwall *Mareca strepera* – Seen at Lake Myvatn across from the Gyrfalcon nest.

Eurasian Widgeon *Mareca penelope* – observed several days on various freshwater lakes including Lake Myra.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* – our old friend was seen daily at nearly every freshwater location but also nearshore in bays.

Green-winged Teal *Anas crecca* – seen daily but best and up close at remote Flatey Island far out in the Breidafjournur Bay, north of the Snaefellsnes peninsula.

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula* – a beautiful cousin to the Lesser Scaup, Tuffies were seen daily and in great numbers good numbers.

King Eider *Somateria spectabilis* – one individual picked from a flock of over 200 Common Eiders at a roadside stop at the Kolgrafafjardarbru Bridge (Yay Bev!)

Common Eider *Somateria mollissima* – these stunning ducks were our most common waterfowl and were seen anytime we were near salt water. We observed large feeding flocks with newly hatched chicks feeding in saltwater shallows.

Harlequin Duck *Histrionicus histrionicus* – great Latin name! fast running water specialists, these beautiful ducks were seen daily working the rapids of the many glacial-melt rivers thought the island.

Long-tailed Duck *Clangula hyemalis* - Seen on the Hvitavatn river near the Langjokull Glacier on our highland crossing.

White-winged Scoter *Melanitta deglandi* – an uncommon visitor to Iceland, one individual that was known to be lingering in the area was located just outside our hotel in Keflavik.

Common Scoter *Melanitta nigra* – a.k.a Black Scoter – a few individuals found on the northern shore of Lake Myvatn on our way to the crater park.

Barrow's Goldeneye *Bucephala islandica* – found in good numbers on Lake Myvatn, along with clouds of Blackflies.

Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator* – Seen daily, usually associating with other waterfowl at freshwater locations. Especially good looks and photos at Lake Myvatn.

PARTRIDGES, PHEASANTS, AND ALLIES (1)

Rock Ptarmigan *Lagopus muta* – seen most days and found by searching the highest points in the vast lava fields that cover the island. Using the same rock outcrop lookouts for centuries, their droppings adding fertilizer to the baren rocks, allows the formation of hummocks or pillars of grasses to form, 2-3 feet tall, that can easily be seen against the skyline. Birds were in their summer mottled plumage but the males were easily identifiable with their brilliant red combs above their eyes. Our best looks were in the Beserkjahraun lava fields on the Snaefellsnes Peninsula.

Grebes (1)

Horned Grebe *Podiceps auritus* – Horned Grebes were plentiful daily in beautiful breeding plumage on any available freshwater pond or lake. We were able to watch them building their floating nests which are anchored to reeds and other aquatic emergent vegetation.

PIGEONS AND DOVES: Columbidae (1)

Rock Pigeon (1) *Columba livia*— It took a little effort but we found several pairs in the Botanical Gardens in Reykjavik

Oystercatchers(1)

Eurasian Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus* these loud and flashy shorebirds were very common on this trip and seen nearly daily, often in mowed grass and pastures.

PLOVERS AND LAPWINGS (2)

Eurasian Golden Plover *Pluvialis aprcaria* - stunning in their golden breeding plumage, these Golden Plovers were also seen daily in most any available flat grassy grounds, including lawns.

Common Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula* – another very common sighting on most salt and freshwater mudflats as they occupy similar habitats as killdeer.

SANDPIPERS AND ALLIES: Scolopacidae (9)

Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* – Seen daily. Iceland's tundra and ancient moss-covered lava fields are perfect breeding habitat for Whimbrels and we saw incredible numbers of pairs and individuals throughout the island.

Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa* – Godwits are always a group favorite. These large and colorful shorebirds were usually seen as pairs, daily in roadside pastures and fields.

Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*—best observed at the Garoskagi Lighthouse foraging along the water's edge with many Common Eider families.

Sanderling *Calidris alba* – also seen in same location as the Ruddy Turnstones at Garoskagi Lighthouse beach.

Dunlin *Calidris alpina* – observed in good numbers throughout the trip in suitable wetland habitats but most notably at the Hveravellir geothermal hotspots.

Purple Sandpiper *Calidris maritima* – first seen in Vesturland, on the beach just down from where we observed the Iceland gull at the docks in the harbor.

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* – Common Snipe were a constant present during this trip. Seen and heard everyday -all day and night. Their breeding display flights were heard around the clock.

Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus* – very common bird on this trip and like our other breeding shorebirds, R-n Phalaropes were seen daily and were active feeders in most any pond or shoreline.

Common Redshank *Tringa totanus* – very common, very vocal and easily photographed, these birds were seen in nearly every habitat and were ever-present every day.

SKUAS AND JAEGER (2)

Great Skua *Stercorarius skua*- seen the morning of our trip to the Westman Islands, incredibly good looks and photographs of these formidable predator as they patrolled the shore of the Markarfljot River, often just 10 feet away from the group.

Parasitic Jaeger *Stercorarius parasiticus* – seen in both dark and light morphs daily. Jaegers were regularly seen patrolling fields and wetlands, regularly chasing shorebirds and terns in efforts to steal food or perhaps chicks.

AUKS, MURRES, AND PUFFINS (4)

Common Murre *Uria aalge* — seen on our ferry trips and shoreline cliffs, Common Murres were best seen along the cliffs near the Svortulof lighthouse along with Thick-billed Murres, Razorbills, and Black Guillemots.

Razorbill *Alca torda* — seen nesting at Svortulof Lighthouse but also usually seen on ferry trips in open water or along the rocky shorelines of islands we passed by.

Black Guillemot *Cephus grylle* — seen in good numbers under the same conditions as Murres and Razorbills above.

Atlantic Puffin *Fratercula artica* — observed on open water on all of our ferry trips. Most notably and closely on the Westman Islands, which contains the largest puffin colony in the world. Birds have nested right up to the blind and we easily watched parents bringing glass eels by the beakful to their burrows.

GULLS AND TERNS: Laridae (8)

Black-legged Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla*—seen daily at any ocean location, including nesting colonies of thousands.

Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*—observed everyday large numbers in nearly all but the driest of habitats.

Mew Gull *Larus canus*—observed in range of habits including puddles in sheep pastures.

Herring Gull *Larus argentatus*—observed often but in much less numbers than other large gulls. We used them for comparison of other large gulls that were in much greater numbers.

Iceland Gull *Larus glaucoides*—Observed at the commercial Port of Olafsvik socializing with other gulls on the docks. Port Olafsvik is also where we observed Purple Sandpiper.

Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*—by far our most numerous gull, Lessers were observed daily in large numbers. Many were nesting in most any low grass habitats including lawns, pastures, roadsides.

Glaucous Gull *Larus hyperboreus*— our most numerous large gull, Glaucous Gulls were observed in great numbers daily, usually near coastlines but some have been more acclimated to human activity and were seen in cities, towns, and villages.

Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea* — the number of Arctic Terns in Iceland is staggering and were a constant presence every day. Their calls were heard most anytime we were outdoors. Many in the group were mobbed at quite close range when unknowingly approaching nesting sites, which could be in most any tuft of grass.

LOONS: Gaviidae (2)

Red-throated Loon *Gavia stellata* —seen every day of the trip in breeding pairs (usually with chicks) in practically every small pond and lagoon.

Common Loon *Gavia immer* —also seen everyday but usually on much larger bodies of water or in ocean bays. Seen at Lake Myrna and other large inland lakes, but several individuals were observed while watching Sperm Whales from the cliffs at Garoskagi Lighthouse.

PETRELS AND SHEARWATERS: Procellariidae (2)

Northern Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis* —prolific breeders in Iceland, N Fulmars were observed daily in many locations near salt water, but also breeding on very high on volcanic cliffs far inland from the ocean.

Manx Shearwater *Puffinus puffinus (really?)*— observed in flocks of hundreds, our only shearwater was observed in the Stakksfjorour Bay where we observed White-winged Scoter our first day in Keflavik. Manxies, were also observed flying near the ferry on our crossing to the Westman Islands.

GANNETS AND BOOBIES: Sulidae (1)

Northern Gannet *Morus bassanus* — best seen at the Garoskagi Lighthouse the first day of our tour, but also observed them as flybys on our ferry crossings to norther and southern islands.

CORMORANTS: Phalacrocoracidae (2)

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* –

European Shag *Phalacrocorax aristotelis* – observed in limited numbers of individuals daily in oceanic habitats on the Snaefellsnes Peninsula, but also had individuals at Lake Myra and other inland sites.

HAWKS, KITES AND EAGLES: Accipitridae (1)

White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* — this very large sea eagle was observed on a nest on a small rocky island at Borgarfjorour Bay on our way to the Snaefellsnes Peninsula. Also observed for several minutes on the on the wing soaring near the Berserker lava flow.

OWLS: Strigidae (1)

Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus* —observed hunting grasslands from the van on several occasions.

FALCONS AND CARACARAS: Falconidae (2)

Merlin *Falco columbiarius*—seeming larger and lighter than our North American merlins, birds were observed at Gullfoss Falls as an individual was observed delivering food to a mate. A nesting location was soon found in the downstream canyon. We returned a couple days later and observed a chick at the next location.

Gyrfalcon *Falco rusticolus* – Nesting pair with chicks observed at Lake Myra. We made several stops at this location to view this family as Gyrfalcon was on most everyone’s wish/quest list.

Crows and Jays: Corvidae (1)

Common Raven *Corvus corax* —observed in large numbers daily as this species population is on the rise in Iceland as in other areas in its expanding range, to the point of causing problems for breeding populations of many other species. Ravens were seen in most landscapes, including egg raiding in seabird colonies.

KINGLETS: Regulidae (1)

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*— a slightly larger version of North America’s Golden-crowned Kinglet these active forest foragers are one of the passerines establishing populations within Iceland’s expanding forest plantations.

WRENS: Troglodytidae (1)

Eurasion Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes* — once known as Winter Wren and now simply called wren in Europe, a very cooperative Eurasion Wren was found in the brushy hedgerows near the research forest outside of Akureyri.

STARLINGS AND MYNAS: Sturnidae (1)

European Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*—Yep, starlings. Seen daily in typical habitats and locations

THRUSHES: Turdidae (2)

Redwing *Turdus iliacus* – this large American Robin-like bird was seen daily throughout the island in great numbers.

Eurasian Blackbird *Turdus merula* – These very large and black thrushes were best seen and heard as breeding pairs in the botanical gardens in Reykjavik.

OLD WORLD FLYCATCHES AND CHATS: Muscicapidae (1)

Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe* – lava field specialists on this trip, Northern Wheatears were common sites popping up from the moss-covered lava fields throughout the island. Seen Daily.

PIPITS AND WAGTAILS: Motacillidae (2)

White Wagtail *Motacilla alba* – these flashy birds were found in open grassy habitats across the island appearing most anywhere but very often associated with low brushy vegetation such the prolific Lupin that was introduced in Iceland as a soil erosion control practice.

Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis* – common in open and grassy habitats throughout the island, pipits were seen daily in good numbers. Their white outer tail feathers making them easily singled out from wagtails and wheatears that share the same habitats.

FINCHES AND EUPHONIAS: Fringillidae (1)

Common Redpoll *Acanthis flammea* – more often heard than seen and photographed, Redpolls were heard in lowland forest areas. A large feeding flock was observed and photographed at the Botanical Gardens in Reykjavik.

LONGSPURS AND SNOW BUNTINGS: Calcaridae (1)

Snow Bunting *Plectrophenax nivalis* – a treat to see these birds in breeding plumage and calling from conspicuous locations in the landscape, our first and best looks at Snow Buntings were on Flatly Island where we were greeted by a calling male right at the marina dock.

SWALLOWS AND MARTINS: Hirundinidae (1)

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* – an uncommon find in Iceland, barn swallows do make the occasional journey from Europe. The European variant of the barn swallow has a brilliant white belly, making ID of this swallow a challenge at first. This bird was found just down the road from the Lamb Inn working a small roadside pasture. Our individual made the county rare bird report.

NEW WORLD WARBLERS: Parulidae (1)

Black-and-white Warbler *Mniotilta varia* – an incredible surprise, and only for 4 record for Iceland, we were alerted to a Black and White Warbler in a woodlot just down the street from our guest house on the Snaefellsnes Peninsula. We found this lonely bird immediately and took fantastic photographs of this long-distance traveler.

MAMMALS (5 species recorded):

White-beaked Dolphin *Lagenorhynchus albirostris* – seen briefly riding the wake of our ferry to Flatly Island.

Harbor Porpoise *Phocoena phocoena* – a few individuals observed from the ferry deck on the way to Hrisly Island.

Harbor Seal *Phoca vitulina* - seen briefly on our ferry ride to the Westman Islands.

Gray Seal *Halichoerus grypus* – 2 individuals observed patrolling the shoreline at the Garoskagi Lighthouse on day one of our tour.

Sperm Whale *Physeter macrocephalus* – A pod of 5 Sperm Whales were observed from the cliffs at Svortulof Lighthouse.