

## ICELAND 2003

*July 5, 2003 to July 14, 2003*

Guided by  
**Ned Brinkley**

We have never had a tour to Iceland that ran so smoothly or on which birds came so easily as this one. Though our reach exceeded our grasp in the case of a few stake-out vagrants (Steller's Eider and White-winged Scoter will have to wait for another time), we had marvelous luck with tricky species such as Gyrfalcon (at astonishingly close range), White-tailed Eagle, and Harlequin Duck, and even found a bonus adult male King Eider in the remote West Fjords. Weather, too, was cooperative, if blustery on a few days, and our pelagic trip located all regular cetaceans we could hope for, though Blue Whales had been unusually scarce in this La Niña spring and early summer. Studies of waterfowl, alcids, and shorebirds were superb, and we were treated to a good wildflower show, including the first Arctic Riverbeauty for the tour, found by George (thanks!) at the Waterfall of the Gods. Thanks to all for coming out to Iceland this year -- it would be hard to imagine a better tour here!

*List total: 71 bird taxa and 8 mammal taxa*

*If marked to left of list, \* = heard only, I = introduced, E = endemic*  
*ice03esb*

### **Gaviidae**

#### RED-THROATED LOON (*Gavia stellata*)

*Although we saw the species in many places, most extraordinary were the studies we had of Red-throateds on nursery ponds, with young, in the valley northeast of Egilsstadir on our second day and the beautiful courtship of two adults at Lake Myvatn on the next day.*

#### COMMON LOON (*Gavia immer*)

*The easternmost nesters in the species' range are in eastern Iceland, and we had luck in locating them on about half the tour days, most memorably with young at Lake Myvatn. Also found at Sandgerdi, presumably nonbreeders.*

### **Podicipedidae**

#### HORNED GREBE (*Podiceps auritus*)

*All of the Horned Grebes we saw were in the northeast; adults with young at Lake Myvatn came in very close - lovely views of lovely birds.*

### **Procellariidae**

#### NORTHERN FULMAR (*Fulmarus glacialis*)

*An abundant species anywhere near the coast, we saw fulmars especially well on nests in the Breidafjörður and at Látrabjarg.*

#### MANX SHEARWATER (*Puffinus puffinus*)

*About 40 passed offshore, some rather close, between Gardur and the nearby lighthouse.*

### **Hydrobatidae**

#### EUROPEAN STORM-PETREL (*Hydrobates pelagicus*)

*Pretty good looks at 2-3 birds on our pelagic trip, and we found as many as six dozen offshore between Gardur and the local lighthouse, a great place to watch seabirds!*

### **Sulidae**

#### NORTHERN GANNET (*Morus bassanus*)

*A few from our pelagic trip and fjord crossing and from Látrabjarg, but most gannets were seen around Gardur, where they fed by the hundreds in association with kittiwakes, Minke Whales, Great Skuas, and many alcids.*

### **Phalacrocoracidae**

#### GREAT CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax carbo*)

*One near Sandgerdi on our first full day, with more in the West Fjords later in the trip.*

#### EUROPEAN SHAG (*Phalacrocorax aristotelis*)

*Especially fine looks from the boat "Saerun" in the Breidafjörður, with a few at Látrabjarg and elsewhere.*

### **Anatidae**

#### WHOOOPER SWAN (*Cygnus cygnus*)

*Very common and seen most days, this species is as handsome and striking a swan as any. Set against blue skies and blue fjord waters, flocks of post-nesting swans with their young were a sight to behold.*

#### PINK-FOOTED GOOSE (*Anser brachyrhynchus*)

*We were very fortunate to find eleven pairs of Pink-footed Geese, plus about 60 mostly-grown goslings, on our drives over the heath from Egilsstadir on to Lake Myvatn. This species breeds in the remote, inaccessible interior, and these birds were the first of their kind to have moved shoreward. Earlier tours have difficulty finding this species.*

#### GREYLAG GOOSE (*Anser anser*)

*Abundant and confiding, we saw them to great advantage even in the capital, where they are very accustomed to people.*

#### COMMON SHELDUCK (*Tadorna tadorna*)

*We at last found a set of family groups near Borgarnes on our last day.*

#### EURASIAN WIGEON (*Anas penelope*)

*Plentiful only in the Myvatn area, where many nice males were seen. Hens with young were also in evidence here.*

#### GADWALL (*Anas strepera*)

*Seen in Reykjavík and at Lake Myvatn in small numbers; not a common nester in Iceland.*

EURASIAN TEAL (*Anas crecca*)

*The only flock we found was on a small farm at the roadside in the fjord north of Flókalundur. Uncommon in Iceland, this is the nominate "crecca" form, split by most authorities from North America's Green-winged Teal.*

MALLARD (*Anas platyrhynchos*)

*Seen on five days, to best advantage in the capital.*

TUFTED DUCK (*Aythya fuligula*)

*Very nice looks at males, females, and young in the capital and at Lake Myvatn; also seen on the drives at various spots, such as Akureyri ponds and estuaries.*

GREATER SCAUP (*Aythya marila*)

*Many hens with young in the capital, with a few at Myvatn.*

COMMON EIDER (*Somateria mollissima*)

*Great views of eiders in the northwestern fjords at every turn, but what a treat to see nesting birds at such close range in the capital!*

KING EIDER (*Somateria spectabilis*)

*Although we could not locate the male Steller's Eider this year (try as we may!), or the White-winged Scoter reported, we were delighted to see the adult male King Eider, in high breeding dress, bobbing in the feeding group of Common Eiders in the Reykjarfjörður north of Flókalundur, a first for this tour. The species is annual in Iceland but very tough to find in summer.*

HARLEQUIN DUCK (*Histrionicus histrionicus*)

*Great views of adult males on the rocks at Látrabjarg, but equally marvelous was the sight of a hen with eight ducklings clambering up the mini-waterfall near Narfastadir. Two hens were also at a traditional site at the crossing of the Laxá River near Skútustadir.*

LONG-TAILED DUCK (OLDSQUAW) (*Clangula hyemalis*)

*Seen on four days, our best were two surprising males near Myvatn, with hens also in the area. A scarce nester in Iceland.*

BLACK SCOTER (*Melanitta nigra*)

*A fine adult male -- a first for this tour (which usually runs a little later in the month) -- was near the Steller's Eider spot, fine consolation for our miss. We also saw a female at Myvatn the next day.*

COMMON GOLDENEYE (*Bucephala clangula*)

*One female at the little refuge called Höfði on Lake Myvatn, surrounded by dozens of the next species.*

BARROW'S GOLDENEYE (*Bucephala islandica*)

*Abundant at Lake Myvatn, both males and females, especially at the Bakkatjörn.*

RED-BREASTED MERGANSER (*Mergus serrator*)

*Small numbers on five days.*

COMMON MERGANSER (*Mergus merganser*)

*Just one on the whole trip, a hen on our big driving day from Myvatn to Laugarbakki.*

***Accipitridae***

WHITE-TAILED EAGLE (*Haliaeetus albicilla*)

*Most incredible was finding a nest on our own in the West Fjords -- a nest that had not been noted by eagle researchers that year! There are rather few of these eagles left in Iceland, and it is a privilege to see them here. We also saw a nesting pair in the Breidafjörður, thanks to our captain.*

***Falconidae***

MERLIN (*Falco columbarius*)

*We saw just two Merlins, both zipping by the vehicle as they usually do, but another pair was seen by some in pursuit of a Gyrfalcon!*

GYRFALCON (*Falco rusticolus*)

*Best-ever studies of Gyrs, perched most obligingly next to the road after our picnic, in the Myvatn area. This pair allowed the closest approach I've ever seen in the species. Great photographs!! The species is still at a very low ebb in their cycle (as are the ptarmigans, their chief prey), and we were lucky to see them.*

***Tetraonidae***

ROCK PTARMIGAN (*Lagopus mutus*)

*A female with eight chicks came out nicely near Litla-Árskogsandur, our only ones of the trip.*

### **Haematopodidae**

#### EURASIAN OYSTERCATCHER (*Haematopus ostralegus*)

*Seen perfectly on many occasions, with many just hanging out on lawns or at the airports, apparently unbothered by people's comings and goings.*

### **Charadriidae**

#### EURASIAN GOLDEN-PLOVER (*Pluvialis apricaria*)

*This was the signature sound and sight of the tour. We saw hundreds, even thousands of these birds, even in the cities, and their mournful calls and songs were unforgettable. Good opportunities to study features of these birds that differ from those of the other golden-plovers, Pacific and American.*

#### COMMON RINGED PLOVER (*Charadrius hiaticula*)

*Seen almost daily in small numbers; also possible to see subtle features distinguishing them from the related Semipalmated Plover.*

### **Scolopacidae**

#### COMMON SNIPE (*Gallinago gallinago*)

*Now a distinct species from our North American snipe (now "Wilson's Snipe"), the Common Snipe of Eurasia was most cooperative at Myvatn, but we saw scores of them displaying and perched in other locations, virtually anywhere the ground was moist.*

#### BLACK-TAILED GODWIT (*Limosa limosa islandica*)

*Seen to best advantage north of Egilsstaðir and north of Akureyri, this stately wader was in high breeding plumage, far brighter and more extensively rusty than its mainland counterpart.*

#### WHIMBREL (*Numenius phaeopus islandicus*)

*Many Whimbrel, all with the white rumps of nominate (formerly "islandicus") birds, graced the hillsides and farmsteads along our route. Our first were right in the capital near our b&b.*

#### COMMON REDSHANK (*Tringa totanus*)

*Though noisy, this striking *Tringa* (especially striking in flight) was a very common constituent of the mudflat-shorebirds in the north and west.*

#### RUDDY TURNSTONE (*Arenaria interpres*)

*Only about six seen on three days; most are still to the north on breeding grounds at this time of year.*

#### RED KNOT (*Calidris canutus islandica*)

*We were delighted to find the first knots returning from Greenland at Rif, a small sanctuary on the Snaefellsnes peninsula - their colors were still high.*

#### SANDERLING (*Calidris alba*)

*One in breeding plumage on our first day (near Gardur), plus a real bonus, a flock of dozens around Rif on our next-to-last day. Usually missed on this tour.*

#### DUNLIN (*Calidris alpina schinzii*)

*Many at Rif, with 7 total at other sites.*

#### PURPLE SANDPIPER (*Calidris maritima*)

*Most of the birds we saw were at or near Látrabjarg, where ten or more were present at several spots.*

#### RED-NECKED PHALAROPE (*Phalaropus lobatus*)

*A few birds here and there paled next to the estimated 950 birds at Rif, where we scanned and scanned for Red Phalarope without luck. A great thing to see so many, so close to the road!*

### **Stercorariidae**

#### GREAT SKUA (*Stercorarius skua*)

*Very common in the flocks around Gardur, where we saw dozens, and we saw a single at Látrabjarg and three on our pelagic trip.*

#### PARASITIC JAEGER (*Stercorarius parasiticus*)

*Seen on five days, but best were small numbers northeast of Egilsstaðir, where they perched and bathed along roadsides.*

### **Laridae**

#### MEW GULL (*Larus canus*)

*Good views in the fjord at Akureyri; this is the nominate form of our Mew Gull, often called "Common Gull".*

GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL (*Larus marinus*)

*We saw "svartbakur" (black-backs) on only five days; this species is less common than in North America, as the eider farmers often shoot them to preserve their eiderlings, on which this species preys readily.*

GLAUCOUS GULL (*Larus hyperboreus*)

*Common in the Northwest Fjords, where we saw hundreds, including on their nest cliffs at Kirkjufell.*

HERRING GULL (*Larus argentatus*)

*A handful on our first day (plus a few hybrids with the previous species) and on our next-to-last day. Not a very common gull in Iceland at this time of year.*

LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL (*Larus fuscus*)

*Abundant, especially around the capital and the international airport.*

BLACK-HEADED GULL (*Larus ridibundus*)

*Also very common coastally and in towns.*

BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKE (*Rissa tridactyla*)

*Kittiwakes on their nests, engaged in courtship and territorial displays, are remarkable gulls. We could not have seen them to better advantage than at Látrabjarg, where thousands could be seen at any moment.*

**Sternidae**

ARCTIC TERN (*Sterna paradisaea*)

*Even more numerous than the kittiwakes were Arctic Terns, especially near Rif, where skies were filled with the species.*

**Alcidae**

COMMON MURRE (*Uria aalge*)

*The best views of this and most alcid species were at Látrabjarg; we also saw the bridled "morph" of this species there on the cliffs, at pretty close range.*

THICK-BILLED MURRE (*Uria lomvia*)

*We found one Thick-billed Murre on our pelagic trip but many more (including chicks) at Látrabjarg.*

RAZORBILL (*Alca torda*)

*The world's largest colony of Razorbill is found at Látrabjarg, and we saw thousands here, many in flight, others perched, and a few with chicks at pretty close range.*

BLACK GUILLEMOT (*Cepphus grylle islandica*)

*Seen on three days in the western parts of the island.*

ATLANTIC PUFFIN (*Fratercula arctica*)

*Marvelous encounters at very close range (1-2 meters!) at Látrabjarg and on our boat trip on the "Saerun".*

**Columbidae**

ROCK DOVE (*Columba livia*)

*Mostly in the towns, especially Reykjavík.*

**Motacillidae**

WHITE WAGTAIL (*Motacilla alba alba*)

*Very common throughout.*

MEADOW PIPIT (*Anthus pratensis*)

*Abundant everywhere we went, even right up to seashores.*

**Troglodytidae**

WINTER WREN (*Troglodytes troglodytes islandicus*)

*Heard around Flókalundur and seen well at Höfði.*

**Turdidae**

EURASIAN BLACKBIRD (*Turdus merula*)

*A few brief glimpses of birds in flight at the local cemetery in the capital was all we could manage this year, probably owing to chilly afternoon weather that day.*

REDWING (*Turdus iliacus*)

*Very numerous species seen daily in all habitats other than sea cliffs.*

**Muscicapidae**

NORTHERN WHEATEAR (*Oenanthe oenanthe leucorhoa*)

*A few in town at Patreksfjörður; several family groups on the drive out to Látrabjarg.*

### **Corvidae**

COMMON RAVEN (*Corvus corax*)

*A few family groups at various places on the drive.*

### **Sturnidae**

EUROPEAN STARLING (*Sturnus vulgaris*)

*Mostly in towns; we saw a few leucistic ones near Rif.*

### **Fringillidae**

COMMON REDPOLL (*Carduelis flammea islandica*)

*Great looks around Myvatn at this local race.*

### **Emberizidae**

SNOW BUNTING (*Plectrophenax nivalis insulae*)

*Seen on three days but nowhere better than at Skútustadir, where males sang from rooftops at our hotel. A pair with young was nicely seen on the heath west of Egilsstadir as well.*

### **MAMMALS**

I BROWN HARE (*Lepus capensis*)

*I think this is the species of hare that has become introduced in the capital area, where we saw a few.*

WHITE-BEAKED DOLPHIN (*Lagenorhynchus albirostris*)

*Great looks at breaching, playful White-beaked from our pelagic trip.*

ORCA (*Orcinus orca*)

*We couldn't have asked for a better show of Orcas, which were around us almost constantly for two hours on our boat trip, including some fairly tiny calves.*

MINKE WHALE (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*)

*Several seen pretty well on the pelagic trip.*

HUMPBACK WHALE (*Megaptera novaeangliae*)

*Great looks at three or four Humpbacks on our pelagic trip.*

ARCTIC FOX (*Alopex lagopus*)

*Thanks to our excellent driver, Torfi, we got to see a nice dark-morph Arctic Fox east of Rif!*

HARBOR SEAL (*Phoca vitulina*)

*Common in the West Fjords, with a few at Látrabjarg in company with the next species.*

GRAY SEAL (*Halichoerus grypus*)

*Common only at Látrabjarg, where we could compare with the commoner Harbor Seal.*