

Iceland 2007

July 20, 2007 to July 29, 2007

Guided by
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Iceland never disappoints. This year, we were closer than ever to Gyrfalcon and White-tailed Eagle, and while the Snowy Owl may have been nothing more than a dot of white in a punishing alpine landscape, it too made an impression. We watched alcids court and bob on cliffs and heavy seas; were chased around by young Arctic Foxes at Helgafell, where wishes come true; saw twenty species of waterfowl, most with young, around the Myvatn and Seltjarnarnes and even lucked into four King Eiders in the remote West Fjords; and sampled fresh seafood of many sorts over our extended week on this Virginia-sized island. Perhaps the memories of the island itself, young, rocky, and raw, are what come most to mind - waterfalls small and large, cliffs that seem to have been carved just for nesting birds, blue fjords dotted with swan, and those rainbows at tour's end. There may have been a few misses (European Storm-Petrel, Short-eared Owl), but the essence of Iceland and its native birds came through beautifully, and with the balmiest, bluest weather we've ever had on a tour here! Thank you for all your many contributions to the tour, and for the photographs sent after the tour - it was a great pleasure spending the week and seeing so much of Iceland together.

List total: 73 bird taxa and 5 mammal taxa

*If marked to left of list, * = heard only, I = introduced, E = endemic,
N = nesting, a = austral migrant, b = boreal migrant*

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Gaviidae

RED-THROATED LOON (*Gavia stellata*)

Several beautiful encounters with this handsome species, including one with young in Myvatn.

COMMON LOON (*Gavia immer*)

A few at scattered sites, including a pair with young at Myvatn. These are the easternmost nesters in the species' range worldwide.

Podicipedidae

HORNED GREBE (*Podiceps auritus*)

Up to 50, many with young, at Myvatn, and a few on freshwater lakes elsewhere.

Procellariidae

NORTHERN FULMAR (*Fulmarus glacialis*)

Numerous in coastal areas and even in a few cliffside areas away from the immediate coast.

MANX SHEARWATER (*Puffinus puffinus*)

Our tally of 63 Manx on our first morning birding on the Reykjanes with Yann was certainly the highest ever for this long-running tour! Great views of birds at relatively close range, though we could find not a single European Storm-Petrel.

Sulidae

NORTHERN GANNET (*Morus bassanus*)

Small numbers offshore in three places, including near the breeding island of Eldey.

Phalacrocoracidae

GREAT CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax carbo*)

Up to 10 per day in the West Fjords, with a few around the Reykjanes.

EUROPEAN SHAG (*Phalacrocorax aristotelis*)

Small numbers in the West Fjords, as at Latrabjarg, but great looks at nesting birds from our boat, the Saerun.

Anatidae

WHOOPEE SWAN (*Cygnus cygnus*)

Abundant throughout, but never too many!

PINK-FOOTED GOOSE (*Anser brachyrhynchus*)

We battled with high winds in a remote river valley near Varmahlid to count 24 of these geese, which are mostly still at remote inland locations, away from roads, raising young.

GREYLAG GOOSE (*Anser anser*)

Very common in towns and river valleys around the entire coast; less common around Myvatn.

COMMON SHELDUCK (*Tadorna tadorna*)

We saw Iceland's only breeders (several hundred!) near Borgarnes on our way to the airport.

EURASIAN WIGEON (*Anas penelope*)

Very common, especially at Myvatn, where eclipse males, females, and ducklings were noted by the hundreds.

GADWALL (*Anas strepera*)

At Myvatn, we found about 40 including young this year, a nice tally for an uncommon species here.

EURASIAN TEAL (*Anas crecca*)

Two at Reynihlid were the only ones of the tour!

MALLARD (*Anas platyrhynchos*)

A few hundred seen, but many of these were in the capital! Generally not an abundant nester in Iceland.

NORTHERN PINTAIL (*Anas acuta*)

A few quick looks at females at Myvatn and on the Snaefellsnes.

NORTHERN SHOVELER (*Anas clypeata*)

A lot of searching on the Snaefellsnes at last turned up one of the prize rarities among nesters in Iceland: a shoveler!

TUFTED DUCK (*Aythya fuligula*)

Abundant in the capital, where we saw our first with young, and at Myvatn, with small numbers elsewhere.

GREATER SCAUP (*Aythya marila*)

A hen with young up close in Reykjavik made a great opportunity to study field marks on this species; Lesser Scaup is a rare vagrant to Iceland.

COMMON EIDER (*Somateria mollissima*)

Hundreds and hundreds lined the coastal areas, particularly in the West Fjords, where we zoomed past large groups of molting males.

KING EIDER (*Somateria spectabilis*)

A few spare hours spent tootling around the Reykjarfjordur in the West Fjords netted not one but four beautiful male King Eiders, a rarity in Iceland (and recorded just once before on the tour)!

HARLEQUIN DUCK (*Histrionicus histrionicus*)

Ten birds, including young, were around Myvatn, and males, mostly in molt, were at the seacoast, most numerous at Latrabjarg but also at Olafsvik.

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

Two on our first day's birding at the Seltjarnarnes were unexpected; the rest (40, some with young) were at Myvatn, where expected.

BLACK SCOTER (*Melanitta nigra*)

Up to 21, including young, at Myvatn was a good count.

BARROW'S GOLDENEYE (*Bucephala islandica*)

Over 500 Barrow's certainly made the best number here in many years; at least 30 sets of young were seen! The species appears to be holding steady here, after a drop in the 1980s.

RED-BREASTED MERGANSER (*Mergus serrator*)

Thirty-four, including young, over five different days.

COMMON MERGANSER (*Mergus merganser*)

One hen with young along a rushing montane river east of Akureyri was the only sighting of this shy species.

Accipitridae

WHITE-TAILED EAGLE (*Haliaeetus albicilla*)

Five of these majestic birds crossed our paths: unforgettable was that first pair near our lodge at Flokalundur that eyed us carefully before slowly taking flight, almost a living part of that magnificent landscape. We got even closer to several birds from our boat, including a young bird near the nest. And who could forget watching the bird hunting not far from Brjanslaekur, which seized a fulmar from the nest?

Falconidae

MERLIN (*Falco columbarius*)

*Six Merlins was a healthy tally for a week's trip. The first bird, at Myvatn, was unexpectedly cooperative, particularly for a feisty, fidgety adult male. Birds on Iceland are of the endemic subspecies *_subaesalon_*.*

GYRFALCON (*Falco rusticolus*)

The National Bird of Iceland, and one in significant decline here, Gyrfalcon gets no more stately and awesome than the bird we saw: first perched for a good while, so near us, then in that inimitably powerful flight, with Whimbrel in hot pursuit, the adult female was simply breathtaking. That's the closest we've been to the species in 13 tours here!

Tetraonidae

ROCK PTARMIGAN (*Lagopus mutus*)

Fourteen around Litla-Arskogssandur (with one seen well by all near the ferry slip! thank heaven) was a good total for this declining species.

Haematopodidae

EURASIAN OYSTERCATCHER (*Haematopus ostralegus*)

Very common along coastlines and even in wet soccer fields!

Charadriidae

EURASIAN GOLDEN-PLOVER (*Pluvialis apricaria*)

Probably Iceland's most abundant shorebird, goldens were seen almost everywhere we went, and their mournful call rang out through river valleys and along coasts, even at night.

COMMON RINGED PLOVER (*Charadrius hiaticula*)

Small numbers seen on six days.

Scolopacidae

COMMON SNIPE (*Gallinago gallinago gallinago*)

Though we flushed as many as 9 snipe during the tour, surprisingly none posed for a good view - in some years, they perch on the dumpsters at Myvatn and call!

BLACK-TAILED GODWIT (*Limosa limosa islandica*)

Over 50 around Myvatn, and dozens scattered around other sites, made for the best year ever for this lovely species. Behind the Sel Hotel, dozens were nesting in wet pastures, ideal habitat.

WHIMBREL (*Numenius phaeopus islandicus*)

Distributed all around the island, we saw most in upland areas, often perched on fence posts.

COMMON REDSHANK (*Tringa totanus*)

Another fence-post percher, redshank is likewise abundant and will even sit on utility wires! Very dapper shorebird, especially when seen in flight.

RUDDY TURNSTONE (*Arenaria interpres*)

Fairly common coastally.

RED KNOT (*Calidris canutus islandica*)

Twenty-one in the capital at Seltjarnarnes were unexpected, and 45 in the West Fjords made a very nice tally.

DUNLIN (*Calidris alpina schinzii*)

Hundreds around the coast.

PURPLE SANDPIPER (*Calidris maritima*)

Six in the capital were new for this tour locally, and we saw many more in expected places on the Reykjanes and in the West Fjords.

RED-NECKED PHALAROPE (*Phalaropus lobatus*)

As many as 1500 at Rif made a marvelous sight, even with the high winds of the day! Perhaps 250 more among four other locations.

Stercorariidae

GREAT SKUA (*Stercorarius skua*)

One floating well offshore at Gardur couldn't be found in the scopes by all, and the few others we encountered at Latrabjarg, though seen well, were rather distant! A few from the ferry as well.

PARASITIC JAEGER (*Stercorarius parasiticus*)

A magnificent show at Gardur, as soon as we stepped out of the vehicle, was a dark morph chasing Arctic Terns at close range! We saw dozens more through the tour, a real pleasure!

Laridae

MEW GULL (*Larus canus*)

Just a few around Akureyri and Seltjarnarnes.

GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL (*Larus marinus*)

Great Black-backed Gulls, and indeed all the gull species below (with one ironic exception), were abundant and seen almost daily near the coast.

GLAUCOUS GULL (*Larus hyperboreus*)

GLAUCOUS X HERRING GULL (HYBRID) (*L. hyperboreus* x *argentatus*)

ICELAND GULL (*Larus glaucoides*)

Despite its name, Iceland Gull is rare in summer in Iceland, as it breeds only in Greenland; we were very lucky to find a single bird in the harbor at Sandgerdi!

EUROPEAN HERRING GULL (*Larus argentatus*)

LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL (*Larus fuscus*)

BLACK-HEADED GULL (*Larus ridibundus*)

BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKE (*Rissa tridactyla*)

Sternidae

ARCTIC TERN (*Sterna paradisaea*)

Did anyone keep a count? We must have seen tens of thousands, notably huge numbers near Rif, where clouds were nesting and even more feeding well offshore.

Alcidae

COMMON MURRE (*Uria aalge*)

Brilliant views of breeding birds on the cliffs at Latrabjarg.

THICK-BILLED MURRE (*Uria lomvia*)

Likewise, we had grand views of breeders (cheek by jowl with the preceding species) at Latrabjarg.

RAZORBILL (*Alca torda*)

Thousands at Latrabjarg, the Atlantic's largest colony of the species - a dazzling, elegant sight!

BLACK GUILLEMOT (*Cephus grylle islandica*)

One at Latrabjarg was followed by hundreds from the ferry and on our boat around the Breidafjordur!

ATLANTIC PUFFIN (*Fratercula arctica*)

What an amazing little bird, and how wonderful to spend such quality time with them at Latrabjarg, where we could almost touch them! A splendid bird, seen in the many hundreds here and in the Breidafjordur.

Columbidae

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*)

Seen only around Reykjavik.

Strigidae

SNOWY OWL (*Bubo scandiacus*)

A fuzzy white dot in the great distance was, in fact, an adult male Snowy Owl on the [name of heath withheld by request of Icelandic conservationists!]. The location was amazingly remote and held breeding Purple Sandpipers -- and little else! This was only the second record of this species on the tour, and the first was equally (absurdly) distant!

Motacillidae

WHITE WAGTAIL (*Motacilla alba alba*)

Abundant, and amusing, throughout, with all plumages seen.

MEADOW PIPIT (*Anthus pratensis*)

Very common in many habitats, especially near water or wet fields.

Troglodytidae

WINTER WREN (*Troglodytes troglodytes islandicus*)

A few heard around Myvatn, and several seen in the Vaglaskogur, not far from Akureyri. We also caught up with four that posed nicely in small trees at Fokalundur, a few yards upslope from our hotel, where the birds would sometimes come in the early morning to pick insects off the porches.

Turdidae

EURASIAN BLACKBIRD (*Turdus merula*)

A few in the large cemetery we visited in the capital were among the country's only breeders.

REDWING (*Turdus iliacus*)

Seen in great abundance where there were trees, even small ones!

Muscicapidae

NORTHERN WHEATEAR (*Oenanthe oenanthe leucorhoa*)

Small numbers on four days.

Corvidae

COMMON RAVEN (*Corvus corax*)

Recorded every day but one, this the world's largest passerine was nowhere numerous.

Sturnidae

EUROPEAN STARLING (*Sturnus vulgaris*)

A very few around Akureyri and Reykjavik.

Fringillidae

COMMON REDPOLL (*Carduelis flammea islandica*)

Great studies of two dozen right in the parking lot of the cemetery in Reykjavik, and plenty elsewhere. This was a record breeding year in Iceland for the species!

Emberizidae

SNOW BUNTING (*Plectrophenax nivalis insulae*)

Good views of several singles, including one that perched on a car at our hotel in Myvatn.

MAMMALS

I OLD WORLD RABBIT (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*)

Two in Reykjavik.

WHITE-BEAKED DOLPHIN (*Lagenorhynchus albirostris*)

Two from the ferry.

ARCTIC FOX (*Alopex lagopus*)

A highlight of the tour, two kits came out and chased each other in circles around the group at Helgafell - one playing with a dead Redwing! Marvelous photographic opportunity, to say the least!

HARBOR SEAL (*Phoca vitulina*)

Small numbers in the West Fjords.

GRAY SEAL (*Halichoerus grypus*)

We saw this species well only around Latrabjarg, where its long 'Roman nose' profile stood out nicely among the preceding species.