



Field Guides Tour Report

Iceland I 2018

Jun 27, 2018 to Jul 6, 2018

Godfried Schreur

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One of the highlights of the tour is the visit to Latrabjarg seabird cliff. It holds the biggest seabird colony of Iceland, with over 3 million birds. Amongst them there are 230,000 pairs of Razorbills, which is 40% of the global population. Photo by guide Godfried Schreur.

Birding in Iceland is such a treat! You are traveling through breathtaking landscapes with dramatic, partly cloudy skies and everywhere you stop there are birds, lots of birds. Sometimes it is hard, though, to keep on scanning for birds in this stunning scenery stuffed with volcanoes, falls, glacial troughs, curious lava formations, fissures, cliffs, fjords, lakes and rivers. Nevertheless, despite of all this gorgeous "distraction", we certainly managed to find all the "must see" species of Iceland. And we also enjoyed observing the flowers, Arctic Fox, Seals and even some whales.

We had a lovely group and Field Guides did a great job in organizing the logistics, choosing the right hotels and designing the perfect itinerary. It all worked out very well. We had only comfortable and some very charming hotels. The food was delicious. The bus had plenty of space and big windows. Our bus driver, Addi, was great!

Weather-wise, we had a bit of everything; a bit of rain, wind, cold and clouds, but also some sunshine and bright blue skies, typical Icelandic weather.

We covered a big part of western and northern Iceland giving a good impression of the different habitats of this beautiful country. The domestic flight from Reykjavik to Akureyri avoids double backing which keeps the traveling enjoyable.

There were many highlights, like the rich birdlife on and around the Myvatn lake, the Gyrfalcons and the White-tailed Eagles, the alcids at the Latrabjarg seabird cliff, the close range birding from the Viking Sushi Cruise, the flocks of terns around the Arnarstappi hotel and the good weather birding at the Gardur lighthouse at the very end of the tour. But if I have to choose the best moment, I go for that observation of Rock Ptarmigan on top of a lava rock formation at the Budir church. Gosh, we did struggle to see that grouse! Thank goodness, what a relief for the guide when we finally found it :-)

I am looking forward to seeing you again in the near future, maybe in Spain or Holland?

Godfried Schreur

KEYS FOR THIS LIST

One of the following keys may be shown in brackets for individual species as appropriate: * = heard only, I = introduced, E = endemic, N = nesting, a = austral migrant, b = boreal migrant

BIRDS

Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl)

- GRAYLAG GOOSE (EUROPEAN)** (*Anser anser anser*) – An almost every day bird, with big numbers close to Borgarnes. [N]
- PINK-FOOTED GOOSE** (*Anser brachyrhynchus*) – There was one Pink-footed Goose, surprisingly, at the Tjörnin lake in Reykjavik. And we had good views of numerous birds with lots of goslings on Day 5 close to Blonduos. [N]
- WHOOPEER SWAN** (*Cygnus cygnus*) – Every day bird. We saw one very confident bird at the Tjörnin lake in Reykjavik, and lots of Whoopers during the rest of the tour, scattered in the meadows and heathland. [N]
- COMMON SHELDUCK** (*Tadorna tadorna*) – Good numbers of adults and "babies" in the fjord next to Borgarnes. [N]
- GADWALL** (*Mareca strepera*) – Common bird, especially on and around the Myvatn lake.
- EURASIAN WIGEON** (*Mareca penelope*) – Probably the most numerous duck on the Myvatn lake. [N]
- AMERICAN WIGEON** (*Mareca americana*) – One drake was discovered in the Myvatn lake close to our hotel.
- MALLARD** (*Anas platyrhynchos*) – Every day bird. [N]
- NORTHERN PINTAIL** (*Anas acuta*) – We saw a small number of Northern Pintails in the Laxa river valley on our way to Husavik.
- GREEN-WINGED TEAL (EURASIAN)** (*Anas crecca crecca*) – Small numbers on the Myvatn lake.
- TUFTED DUCK** (*Aythya fuligula*) – One of the more common ducks in Iceland. We saw them almost every day. The females were often surrounded by the new generation of Tufted Ducks. [N]
- GREATER SCAUP** (*Aythya marila*) – We had good views of the Greater Scaup at the Tjörnin and Myvatn lakes. They were often close to Tufted Ducks, which enabled us to note the differences between the two species.
- KING EIDER** (*Somateria spectabilis*) – One beautiful drake at the Westfjords and 2 females at the beach close to Olafsvik.
- COMMON EIDER (NORTHERN)** (*Somateria mollissima borealis*) – Common Eiders are very abundant along Iceland's coastline. But they are rather shy, which makes close views difficult. Every day bird. [N]
- HARLEQUIN DUCK** (*Histrionicus histrionicus histrionicus*) – We our first view of the Harlequin Duck at the Godafoss, but the birds were partly hidden and inactive. Luckily we had better views of this good looking duck close to Olafsvik. [N]
- LONG-TAILED DUCK** (*Clangula hyemalis*) – We saw males and females on the Myvatn lake.
- COMMON GOLDENEYE** (*Bucephala clangula*) – We discovered one bird on the last day close to Borgarnes, while we were looking at a pair of White-tailed Eagles.
- BARROW'S GOLDENEYE** (*Bucephala islandica*) – An incredible number of 450 Barrow's Goldeneyes, mainly drakes, were resting at a small pond next to the Myvatn. The females were more dispersed in the area, most of them swimming with the "babies". We had specially good views of them at the Laxa river. [N]
- RED-BREASTED MERGANSER** (*Mergus serrator*) – We saw this species every day during our tour. Pairs and small groups of them all along the coastline.

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

- ROCK PTARMIGAN** (*Lagopus muta islandorum*) – It must have been a bad year for the Rock Ptarmigan. We struggled to see one. Finally, on the Snaefellsness, we saw 2 males perched on lava rock formations. Thank goodness, what a relief!

Gaviidae (Loons)

- RED-THROATED LOON** (*Gavia stellata*) – Very nice to see them in breeding plumage! Its a common species, with breeding pairs at almost all the lakes, ponds and rivers.
- COMMON LOON** (*Gavia immer*) – We heard the Common Loon "howling" at the Myvatn lake, close to our hotel. It was never common, with pairs only in the bigger lakes.

Podicipedidae (Grebes)

- HORNED GREBE** (*Podiceps auritus auritus*) – Very close-by views at the Myvatn area of this pretty grebe!

Procellariidae (Shearwaters and Petrels)

- NORTHERN FULMAR** (*Fulmarus glacialis*) – This must be one of the most numerous birds of Iceland! We saw them everywhere, breeding on almost all mountains within reasonable distance from the coastline. We had superb views of them at the Puffin colony close to Husavik. [N]
- MANX SHEARWATER** (*Puffinus puffinus*) – We had only distant views on the first day, so we decided to go back to the Gardur lighthouse on the last day. Just before finalizing the tour we had much better sightings of this small shearwater.

Hydrobatidae (Storm-Petrels)

- EUROPEAN STORM-PETREL (BRITISH)** (*Hydrobates pelagicus pelagicus*) – We enjoyed very good views of several birds from the Gardur lighthouse on the very last moment of the trip. We were able to see all the distinctive features of this species.

Sulidae (Boobies and Gannets)

- NORTHERN GANNET** (*Morus bassanus*) – We observed flying and fishing birds at several places along the western and northern coast of Iceland. It was spectacular to see them diving from substantial height into the sea.

Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)

- GREAT CORMORANT (NORTH ATLANTIC)** (*Phalacrocorax carbo carbo*) – Rather common bird along the coast of Iceland.
- EUROPEAN SHAG** (*Phalacrocorax aristotelis*) – We enjoyed the wonderful views at close range of several shag families on their nests during the Viking Sushi cruise. [N]

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites).

WHITE-TAILED EAGLE (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) – We managed to find White-tailed Eagles at 3 different places. We observed 1 bird in the Westfjords. During the Viking Sushi cruise in the Breidafjordur, we had the best view of this huge and spectacular bird. And on the last day we had a distant view of a couple. That means that we saw all together 4 different birds.

Haematopodidae (Oystercatchers).

EURASIAN OYSTERCATCHER (WESTERN) (*Haematopus ostralegus ostralegus*) – This wader species is very common along the coastline. We saw many pairs with juvenile birds. [N]

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings).

EUROPEAN GOLDEN-PLOVER (*Pluvialis apricaria altifrons*) – Very common meadow and grassland bird in all the areas visited. At the hotel in Arnarstappi we watched them close by out of the window from our rooms. [N]

NORTHERN LAPWING (*Vanellus vanellus*) – A vagrant in Iceland. Thanks to the info on eBird and our spotting skills we found this beautiful wader north of Husavik.

COMMON RINGED PLOVER (*Charadrius hiaticula hiaticula*) – An almost every day bird. On the first visit to Gardur lighthouse, we found a color-ringed bird. The ringer informed us that it was banded in July 2016 at Bylot Island in the Canadian Arctic. [N]

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies).

WHIMBREL (EUROPEAN) (*Numenius phaeopus phaeopus*) – Another very common wader in heath and grasslands. At Arnarstappi the birds were used to people and therefore very approachable.

BLACK-TAILED GODWIT (ISLANDICA) (*Limosa limosa islandica*) – We saw this beautiful wader every day of the trip, but usually in lower numbers than the other meadow birds. [N]

RUDDY TURNSTONE (*Arenaria interpres*) – We saw a dozen of Ruddy Turnstones feeding in a group of shorebirds at the tidal area next to Gardur lighthouse.

SANDERLING (*Calidris alba*) – One bird in breeding plumage feeding in a flock of shorebirds at Gardur coastline. He probably just returned from the breeding grounds in the Arctic after a failed attempt.

DUNLIN (SCHINZII) (*Calidris alpina schinzii*) – Nice to see this species in breeding plumage, with that very distinct black patch on the belly.

PURPLE SANDPIPER (*Calidris maritima*) – We started the tour with 10 Purple Sandpipers at Gardur. Shortly after that we found an adult with 2 chicks close to Sandgerdi. During the rest of the tour we saw this wader on four more days. Pity he is not purple! [N]

COMMON SNIPE (*Gallinago gallinago gallinago*) – It was really lovely to see so many Common Snipes performing their display flight, making a drumming sound while diving. That's the sound of Iceland for me. We saw them everywhere but we had the best views around our hotel in Arnarstappi. [N]

RED-NECKED PHALAROPE (*Phalaropus lobatus*) – Fabulous and fascinating, little waders that occur in good numbers in Iceland. We saw colorful females and dull-colored males, sometimes at very close range. Their breeding season is so short that they don't have time to be shy. [N]

COMMON REDSHANK (*Tringa totanus robusta*) – Very abundant and widespread. We had many good views of them starting on the first day next to the airport. [N]

Stercorariidae (Skuas and Jaegers).

GREAT SKUA (*Stercorarius skua*) – We saw the Great Skua only on one occasion close to Husavik. The bird showed very well though.

PARASITIC JAEGER (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) – We were lucky to see this very attractive kleptoparasite on every day of our tour. On several occasions we enjoyed watching them chasing terns or gulls in order to steal the food. [N]

Alcidae (Auks, Murres, and Puffins).

COMMON MURRE (*Uria aalge*) – Huge numbers of them on the Latrabjarg cliff. We watched some "bridled" Common Murres. [N]

THICK-BILLED MURRE (*Uria lomvia*) – Good numbers of Thick-billed Murre at Latrabjarg cliff. We saw them together with Common Murre and Razorbill and were able to study all the features that distinguish these Alcids. [N]

RAZORBILL (*Alca torda*) – Latrabjarg holds the world's biggest colony and guarantees excellent views of this species. [N]

BLACK GUILLEMOT (GRYLLE GROUP) (*Cepphus grylle islandicus*) – We have had splendid views of the Black Guillemot at the coastline close to Holmavik. They even breed here in nest boxes! Some birds carried Butterfish in their beak to feed the young. [N]

ATLANTIC PUFFIN (*Fratercula arctica naumanni*) – The star bird of the Latrabjarg cliff. When we arrived there were not many birds present, but eventually we all had plenty of opportunities to take good pictures of this cute bird at close range. [N]

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers).

BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKE (TRIDACTYLA) (*Rissa tridactyla tridactyla*) – We enjoyed watching these pretty gulls at the Latrabjarg and at Arnarstappi, but during the Viking Sushi cruise we came even closer to them and they didn't seem to be bothered at all! We saw one color-ringed bird at Latrabjarg that was banded at the same place in summer 2011. [N]

BLACK-HEADED GULL (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*) – Has become very abundant and widespread in few years time. Every-day bird. [N]

MEW GULL (EUROPEAN) (*Larus canus canus*) – Not widespread but locally abundant. We had the best views of Mew Gull at Akureyri and at a river close to Blonduos.

HERRING GULL (EUROPEAN) (*Larus argentatus argentatus*) – We saw many Herring Gulls during our trip, often together with other gulls, which made it possible to compare them.

ICELAND GULL (GLAUCOIDES) (*Larus glaucoides glaucoides*) – In the breeding season, the Iceland Gull is a surprisingly rare bird in Iceland, as it doesn't breed on the island. We were lucky to find it on two occasions. We saw 4 birds on a riverbank in Blonduos and 1 bird amongst hundreds of Glaucous Gulls.

LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL (GRAELLSII) (*Larus fuscus graellsii*) – We recorded this very common gull every day in large numbers.

GLAUCOUS GULL (*Larus hyperboreus leuceteres*) – Very clean looking gull. We encountered it regularly in the Westfjords and on Snaefellsness. Close to Olafsvik, we counted hundreds of Glaucous Gulls feeding on the waste water of a fish factory. [N]

GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL (*Larus marinus*) – This huge gull is also very common in Iceland. At the gull concentration of Olafsvik we could see all the different plumages.

BLACK TERN (*Chlidonias niger*) – We found this vagrant thanks to an eBird alert and our spotting skills. We did not have to search long to find it, as it was flying up and down a lake close to Husavik.

ARCTIC TERN (*Sterna paradisaea*) – We found several massive colonies in the west of Iceland. We were attacked by them when walking from the apartments to the restaurant in the Arnarstappi hotel. [N]

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*) – Lots of Feral Pigeons in Reykjavik city.

Strigidae (Owls)

SHORT-EARED OWL (NORTHERN) (*Asio flammeus flammeus*) – We saw one very confident bird on our way to the Dettifoss. He stayed perched on a pole next to the track where we were driving. He allowed us to step out and have a good look. Ten minutes later we spotted another Short-eared Owl flying.

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

MERLIN (EURASIAN) (*Falco columbarius subaeson*) – The Merlin is a fast flyer, sometimes too fast. Its flyby is often a question of seconds. Nevertheless it's always spectacular to see this small falcon. We recorded the species on two different occasions; we had short but convincing views.

GYRFALCON (*Falco rusticolus*) – One of the star birds of Iceland is heavily protected because of the threat of egg stealing. So, it's strictly forbidden to approach nests. Nevertheless, we had reasonably good views. We saw two birds close to Husavik and one of these big falcons flying at the eastern side of the Myvatn lake.

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

COMMON RAVEN (*Corvus corax varius*) – Every day bird. We saw them almost everywhere, usually in pairs but sometimes in bigger concentrations.

Troglodytidae (Wrens)

EURASIAN WREN (ICELAND) (*Troglodytes troglodytes islandicus*) – Most of us saw the Icelandic Wren in a park close to the airport of Akureyri. Unfortunately, it was raining at that moment and the views were not splendid. After that, we only heard this little songbird, on three occasions.

Regulidae (Kinglets)

GOLDCREST (*Regulus regulus*) – We had brilliant views of the smallest bird of Europe in the city cemetery of Reykjavik.

Muscicapidae (Old World Flycatchers)

NORTHERN WHEATEAR (GREENLAND) (*Oenanthe oenanthe leucorhoa*) – The Westfjords provided us with some good views of this passerine.

The best observation was close to Latrabjarg. A family of Northern Wheatears was busy feeding. The male often hovered above some flowers trying to catch insects. [N]

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

EURASIAN BLACKBIRD (*Turdus merula merula*) – The walk in the center of Reykjavik offered us many opportunities to observe this bird. In Reykjavik town it's rather common, but outside that urban area it's not at all. We saw it also in Blonduos.

REDWING (ICELANDIC) (*Turdus iliacus coburni*) – One of the most common birds of Iceland. We heard and saw this songbird almost everywhere. One young bird in Dimmuborgir liked our company very much. It looked like he was searching for shelter underneath us. [N]

Sturnidae (Starlings)

EUROPEAN STARLING (*Sturnus vulgaris*) – Common in the western part of Iceland, especially in Snaefellsness and Reykjanes peninsula.

Motacillidae (Wagtails and Pipits)

WHITE WAGTAIL (WHITE-FACED) (*Motacilla alba alba*) – Every day bird, always nice to see. [N]

MEADOW PIPIT (*Anthus pratensis whistleri*) – The "mipit" was almost everywhere. In Flokalundur a bird was not shy at all and allowed me to take some nice pictures. [N]

Calcariidae (Longspurs and Snow Buntings)

SNOW BUNTING (*Plectrophenax nivalis insulae*) – Showed very well around our hotel at the Myvatn lake. Males were singing and young birds were begging for food. Very enjoyable to see them so close by! [N]

Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)

COMMON REDPOLL (ROSTRATA) (*Acanthis flammea islandica*) – We saw Common Redpolls on various occasions. During the rainy walk in the park in Akureyri we had our first good views. Around the Myvatn hotel they were also present and not too shy.

MAMMALS

OLD WORLD RABBIT (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) – One rabbit was seen at the Akureyri Park. Maybe it was an escaped or released pet...

ORCA (*Orcinus orca*) – We saw a young calf stranded on the shore of Þorskafljörður-fjord, close to Bjarkalundur. We assumed it was dead. Later I found on the internet that it was still alive and that it was rescued by locals.

COMMON MINKE WHALE (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*) – While we were looking at stormpetrels and shearwaters at Gardur lighthouse, a very sharp group member discovered a Minke Whale out at sea. This was one of the last sightings on our trip.

ARCTIC FOX (*Alopex lagopus*) – While we were having breakfast at the Arnarstappi Hotel we watched the Arctic Fox hunting in the Arctic Tern colony. The terns were panicking and attacking the fox, who was not impressed what so ever. We were able to observe the fox during several minutes.

HARBOR SEAL (*Phoca vitulina*) – We had two encounters with the Harbor Seal. In the Westfjords we achieved the best views of this gentle looking seal.

GRAY SEAL (*Halichoerus grypus*) – We recorded the Gray Seal at 4 different days. The last sighting took place close to the airport just before finishing the tour.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Totals for the tour: 75 bird taxa and 6 mammal taxa