



Field Guides Tour Report

Iceland 2016

Jun 21, 2016 to Jun 30, 2016

Eric Hynes

For our tour description, itinerary, past triplists, dates, fees, and more, please [VISIT OUR TOUR PAGE](#).



Harlequin Duck came in a close second in the voting for favorite species of the tour. We savored some fantastic looks at stunning drakes. (Photo by guide Eric Hynes)

Iceland is truly one of those places of exceptional beauty that must be experienced to be believed. All of us at Field Guides are grateful you chose to explore that magical island with us. We saw waterfalls, fjords, volcanoes, cliffs, mountains, rivers, sheep, and more sheep. Oh yeah, and the birding was pretty phenomenal too!

We were thrown a curveball the first morning, when fog shut down our seawatching, so we shifted inland and quickly found ourselves surrounded by thousands of Arctic Terns. One of the avian treasures of Iceland is all the shorebirds in breeding plumage. We ogled European Golden-Plovers, Common Ringed Plovers, Eurasian Oystercatchers, Common Redshanks and Common Snipe before turning toward Reykjavik. Some took the afternoon to check out a museum or put their feet up, but some of us joined the thousands in city center to watch the Icelandic football team upset Austria in the Eurocup.

The next morning we explored the cemetery, seeing Eurasian Blackbird and Redwings really well, then transferred to the airport, where we caught a flight up to Akureyri. Addi, our bus driver helped us load into his luxurious bus and we were off. The next couple of days in the northeastern part of Iceland was highlighted by Dettifoss, Godafoss, Lake Myvatn, thousands of ducks, more shorebirds like Black-tailed Godwit, a Gyrfalcon nest, and a stroll outside of Dalvik.

The third phase of the adventure was spent exploring the West Fjords. We caught up to some handsome Harlequin Ducks, a massive immature White-tailed Eagle, and a remarkably cooperative Rock Ptarmigan. The cliffs of Latrabjarg were dizzying and provided all the looks we could hope for at both murres, Razorbills, Atlantic Puffins, Northern Fulmars, and Black-legged Kittiwakes.

After a smooth ferry ride across Breidafjordur, we explored Snaefellsnes and fell in love with Budir. Our last evening spent cruising around the islands of the bay and gobbling up fresh shellfish was magical.

Reluctantly, we worked our way back to Keflavik for departures -- but not before picking up Common Shelducks, and a very successful seawatch that produced a feeding frenzy. Kittiwakes and gannets hovered over a large pod of White-beaked Dolphins, while the occasional Minke or Orca surfaced. What a wonderful experience for a send off.

Thanks for being such a delightful group of people. When are we going to get together again for more birding? Jamaica anyone?

Be well and good birding,

Eric

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)

PINK-FOOTED GOOSE (*Anser brachyrhynchus*) – About half way into our tour we had already seen lots of Graylag Geese and had started to tune geese out. Thanks to Mary, we started scrutinizing geese again and had wonderful looks at this beautiful species showing their goslings how to hide. [N]

GRAYLAG GOOSE (EUROPEAN) (*Anser anser anser*) – Early and often; this species is a common breeder across Iceland [N]

WHOOPEER SWAN (*Cygnus cygnus*) – These regal beasts were particularly numerous around Lake Myvatn and again in the West Fjords [N]

COMMON SHELDUCK (*Tadorna tadorna*) – Clearly, this localized breeder was having a good year as we saw multiple pairs with large broods swimming in the river. [N]

GADWALL (*Anas strepera*) – A few at Lake Myvatn

EURASIAN WIGEON (*Anas penelope*) – Flocks of colorful drakes by the hundreds, totally in the thousands on Lake Myvatn [N]

MALLARD (*Anas platyrhynchos*) – Yes, they are in Iceland too

GREEN-WINGED TEAL (EURASIAN) (*Anas crecca crecca*) – Uncommon but a few good looks en route to Lake Myvatn and at the lake itself

TUFTED DUCK (*Aythya fuligula*) – The most numerous duck at Lake Myvatn; we observed rafts in the thousands

GREATER SCAUP (*Aythya marila*) – Also abundant at Lake Myvatn

COMMON EIDER (NORTHERN) (*Somateria mollissima borealis*) – Kate - did you see a duckling? [N]

HARLEQUIN DUCK (*Histrionicus histrionicus histrionicus*) – Wow, what a good-looking duck; we saw colorful drakes in a few locations along the coast

COMMON SCOTER (*Melanitta nigra*) – A few on Lake Myvatn; the species that used to be lumped with Black Scoter

LONG-TAILED DUCK (*Clangula hyemalis*) – My favorite was the drake in the tiny pond as we exited the bird museum

BARROW'S GOLDENEYE (*Bucephala islandica*) – Uncommon at Lake Myvatn but we enjoyed some excellent looks on our walk at Hofdi

RED-BREASTED MERGANSER (*Mergus serrator*) – Almost an everyday bird but never numerous

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

ROCK PTARMIGAN (*Lagopus muta islandorum*) – Phew! As a guide, I was relieved to see that first one. Little did I know that we would see six more males along the way.

Gaviidae (Loons)

RED-THROATED LOON (*Gavia stellata*) – What an elegant bird; that skirmish with the hen Common Eider at Rif was exciting [N]

COMMON LOON (*Gavia immer*) – We saw the "Great Northern Diver" almost every day

Podicipedidae (Grebes)

HORNED GREBE (*Podiceps auritus auritus*) – We savored several exceptionally close individuals on Lake Myvatn

Procellariidae (Shearwaters and Petrels)

NORTHERN FULMAR (*Fulmarus glacialis*) – Anyone care to put a number to this species? It would certainly have at least six zeros. They looked like midges swirling against some of the cliffs. [N]

MANX SHEARWATER (*Puffinus puffinus*) – We saw these small dark and light seabirds in small numbers during both visits to Gardur

Sulidae (Boobies and Gannets)

NORTHERN GANNET (*Morus bassanus*) – We observed solid numbers while seawatching at Gardur and a few more were spotted off Svortuloft

Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)

GREAT CORMORANT (NORTH ATLANTIC) (*Phalacrocorax carbo carbo*) – We only spotted this species a couple times on Breidafjörður

EUROPEAN SHAG (*Phalacrocorax aristotelis*) – Our evening cruise out of Stykkisholmur literally put their nests almost within reach [N]

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

WHITE-TAILED EAGLE (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) – Thank goodness we all got on that massive immature bird in the West Fjords because it turned out to be the only one we saw the whole tour

Haematopodidae (Oystercatchers)

EURASIAN OYSTERCATCHER (*Haematopus ostralegus ostralegus*) – It took some getting used to seeing oystercatchers on lawns [N]

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

EUROPEAN GOLDEN-PLOVER (*Pluvialis apricaria altifrons*) – The most memorable bird had to be the one at the start of our walk at Dalvík.

COMMON RINGED PLOVER (*Charadrius hiaticula hiaticula*) – Widespread but not numerous

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

COMMON REDSHANK (*Tringa totanus robusta*) – Boy, if you wandered into their territory they sure made a ruckus [N]

WHIMBREL (EUROPEAN) (*Numenius phaeopus phaeopus*) – We heard their wonderful calls and observed the pale rumps of this nominate subspecies

BLACK-TAILED GODWIT (ISLANDICA) (*Limosa limosa islandica*) – Hands down, one of the best looking shorebirds on the planet

DUNLIN (SCHINZII) (*Calidris alpina schinzii*) – We observed individuals well but the massive flocks already starting to gather on the mudflats outside of Hvammstangi were very impressive.

PURPLE SANDPIPER (*Calidris maritima*) – We encountered this hardy species in several places but our best looks were probably from Flockalundur.

COMMON SNIBE (*Gallinago gallinago gallinago*) – The concentration and constant aerial displaying of this species at Hofdi, and again at Budir, was stunning. [N]

RED-NECKED PHALAROPE (*Phalaropus lobatus*) – They were as beautiful as they were abundant

Stercorariidae (Skuas and Jaegers)

GREAT SKUA (*Stercorarius skua*) – Only seeing this species once was likely a result of the fog and the lack of wind during our two visits to Gardur.

PARASITIC JAEGER (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) – Dark, light, and intermediate morphs; perched, flying, incubating, and marauding; we saw it all with this kleptoparasite [N]

Alcidae (Auks, Murres, and Puffins)

COMMON MURRE (*Uria aalge*) – By the tens of thousands at Latrabjarg [N]

THICK-BILLED MURRE (*Uria lomvia*) – Not nearly as common as the previous species but we saw it well at Latrabjarg too [N]

RAZORBILL (*Alca torda*) – We couldn't ask for better looks [N]

BLACK GUILLEMOT (GRYLLE GROUP) (*Cephus grylle islandicus*) – These guys were most conspicuous in Breidafjörður and they often had Gunnel (the long, eel-like fish) in their bills. [N]

ATLANTIC PUFFIN (*Fratercula arctica naumanni*) – The favorite species of the tour; no big surprise there when you have them at your feet. Sadly, their population on Iceland has dropped by ~50 percent in the last 15 years. Climate change is having dramatic impacts on sealife. [N]

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKE (TRIDACTYLA) (*Rissa tridactyla tridactyla*) – The chicks in the nests were particularly cute and it was fun to hear how they got there name. [N]

BLACK-HEADED GULL (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*) – A very common everyday bird [N]

MEW GULL (EUROPEAN) (*Larus canus canus*) – Our best looks were in Akureyri

HERRING GULL (EUROPEAN) (*Larus argentatus argenteus*) – Plenty of looks but not nearly as common as the other large gulls

LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL (GRAELLSII) (*Larus fuscus graellsii*) – Widespread but their numbers were greatest in the southwest

GLAUCOUS GULL (*Larus hyperboreus leuceteres*) – We studied this species and some hybrids around Olafsvik

GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL (*Larus marinus*) – Plenty of the world's largest gull

ARCTIC TERN (*Sterna paradisaea*) – Just ask Charlie if we got close to this long distance migrant. [N]

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*) – In Reykjavik

Strigidae (Owls)

SHORT-EARED OWL (NORTHERN) (*Asio flammeus flammeus*) – We saw our first en route to Lake Myvatn then we had our best look the morning we departed from Lake Myvatn near the Laxa River

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

MERLIN (EURASIAN) (*Falco columbarius subaeson*) – We were pursuing a tip from a local who spoke of a "falcon" when we came upon this fierce little bird of prey outside of Dalvík.

GYRFALCON (*Falco rusticolus*) – It was great to watch the three kids exercising their wings in the nest through the scope

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

COMMON RAVEN (*Corvus corax varius*) – The subspecies in Iceland is particularly large

Troglodytidae (Wrens)

EURASIAN WREN (ICELAND) (*Troglodytes troglodytes islandicus*) – We all enjoyed lots of song at Hofdi and then I almost stepped on that one in the birches near the ferry. Hopefully most of you got on it.

Muscicapidae (Old World Flycatchers)

NORTHERN WHEATEAR (GREENLAND) (*Oenanthe oenanthe leucorhoa*) – Charismatic little guys

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

EURASIAN BLACKBIRD (*Turdus merula merula*) – Our first was singing away from the mast of a sailboat parked in a driveway of all places. Our best looks were in the cemetery.

REDWING (ICELANDIC) (*Turdus iliacus coburni*) – The density of nesting birds in the cemetery and many other locations was amazing. [N]

Sturnidae (Starlings)

EUROPEAN STARLING (*Sturnus vulgaris*) – Even in Iceland at the far corner of Europe, they still didn't seem like a naturally occurring species [N]

Motacillidae (Wagtails and Pipits)

WHITE WAGTAIL (WHITE-FACED) (*Motacilla alba alba*) – Lots of great looks at "wiggletails"

MEADOW PIPIT (*Anthus pratensis whistleri*) – Common and widespread

Calcariidae (Longspurs and Snow Buntings)

SNOW BUNTING (*Plectrophenax nivalis insulae*) – We saw our first in Sandgerdi but our best look was in the car park at Lake Myvatn hopping under and around cars

Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)

COMMON REDPOLL (ROSTRATA) (*Acanthis flammea islandica*) – Lots of birds in juvenal plumage in Reykjavik indicated a good breeding season [N]

MAMMALS

WHITE-BEAKED DOLPHIN (*Lagenorhynchus albirostris*) – It was thrilling to see three or four surfacing at a time off Gardur in that feeding frenzy

ORCA (*Orcinus orca*) – I don't think I got anyone else on the one I spotted during the ferry crossing but most of you picked out a few off Gardur
COMMON MINKE WHALE (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*) – Remember me repeating "It's up again where the mountain meets the sea!"
HUMPBACK WHALE (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) – One or two were way out among the feeding frenzy off Gardur
HARBOR SEAL (*Phoca vitulina*) – Not many
GRAY SEAL (*Halichoerus grypus*) – Our first looks were in the foam below the cliffs at Latrabjarg; "horsehead"

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Totals for the tour: 65 bird taxa and 6 mammal taxa