



Field Guides Tour Report

ICELAND 2017

Jun 20, 2017 to Jun 29, 2017
Eric Hynes and Godfried Schreur

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



European Golden-Plovers were a conspicuous highlight throughout Iceland's open landscape. (Photo by guide Eric Hynes)

Iceland has become a major tourist destination and for good reason. This spectacular country offers unspoiled beauty, endless geologic features, a rich history, an abundance of renewable energy, a good perimeter highway, friendly people, and delicious seafood. The fact that millions of interesting shorebirds, seabirds, and songbirds migrate there to breed is a bonus. We absorbed as much as we could of this magical island in our short stint. Our many miles were covered safely and comfortably thanks to our outstanding driver, Addi, and the luxurious bus we chartered. Co-leading this adventure with Godfried was truly a pleasure and greatly enhanced the experience for all.

Our first morning together we focused on the Reykjanes Peninsula. Seawatching from the lighthouse at Gardur was very productive as we picked up species like Manx Shearwater and European Storm-Petrel, which we did not encounter again. The various habitats of Sandgerdi gave us our first taste of many of the gorgeous shorebirds that come to Iceland each summer to breed. Species such as European Golden-Plover, Whimbrel, Black-tailed Godwit, and Common Snipe were scattered among an enormous Arctic Tern colony.

Day two in Iceland we spent discovering the city cemetery in Reykjavik and the forest specialties it held. Goldcrest is an uncommon breeder in Iceland and a treat to see so well. We also picked up Common Redpoll, Eurasian Blackbird, and Redwing. We arrived in Akureyri midday after a brief flight across the country and met our amazing driver, Addi. We enjoyed lunch and two brief hikes in the Dalvik valley before motoring over to Godafoss. The "Waterfall of the Gods" was sublime, and our first views of Harlequin Ducks were excellent. We eventually settled into our guesthouse in the Lake Myvatn area.

One of our primary targets around Lake Myvatn was Gyrfalcon, and we took care of that straight away with a distant scope view of an adult perched. The largest concentration of drake Barrow's Goldeneyes, and separately Eurasian Wigeons, that any of us could remember were noteworthy. Godfried's experience put us in just the right spot to have multiple Great Skuas steadily glide overhead. Next up was one of the greatest spectacles in Europe: Dettifoss.

Over the next couple days we wound our way across Iceland, eventually reaching its westernmost point. Along the way we discovered many Purple Sandpipers, Harlequin Ducks, Parasitic Jaegers, multiple displaying Rock Ptarmigans, Pink-footed Geese, a nesting pair of White-tailed Eagles, and endless geologic features. Words and photos don't do justice to the intimate experiences we savored among the hundreds of thousands of alcids at Latrabjarg. Picking up Eurasian Curlew and Common Wood-Pigeon was the cherry on top.

The final chapter of our Icelandic adventure we spent on Breidafjordur and the Snaefellsnes Peninsula. Highlights toward the end of the tour included: Iceland Gull, precision bombing from Arctic Terns, point-blank Red-throated Loons, and the freshest seafood possible on a delightful evening cruise.

On behalf of all of us at Field Guides, thank you for selecting our Icelandic avian adventure. I genuinely enjoyed spending time with all of you and would love to see you out in the field again someday.

"Skal" from high in the San Juans,

--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*) – After scoping distant birds, we enjoyed close looks at this elegant, diminutive goose.

GRAYLAG GOOSE (EUROPEAN) (*Anser anser anser*) – This species appears to have a growing population in Iceland. We encountered many in most areas of our route.

WHOOPEER SWAN (*Cygnus cygnus*) – The West Fjords is a real stronghold for this regal species.

COMMON SHELDUCK (*Tadorna tadorna*) – This duck with the unusual structure and bold pattern was one of our targets our last day.

GADWALL (*Anas strepera*) – Numerous at the north end of Lake Myvatn

EURASIAN WIGEON (*Anas penelope*) – Handsome drakes by the thousands

MALLARD (*Anas platyrhynchos*) – Common

NORTHERN SHOVELER (*Anas clypeata*) – This is a rare breeder in Iceland

NORTHERN PINTAIL (*Anas acuta*) – Another rare breeder we were lucky to catch up to

GREEN-WINGED TEAL (EURASIAN) (*Anas crecca crecca*) – Encountered in multiple locations but never in big numbers

TUFTED DUCK (*Aythya fuligula*) – They gather by the thousands to breed at Lake Myvatn but our best views were on the Tjorn in downtown Reykjavik

GREATER SCAUP (*Aythya marila*) – We studied this species almost underfoot at the Tjorn in Reykjavik.

KING EIDER (*Somateria spectabilis*) – We were pleased to discover two hens in the north, but a more colorful subadult drake in the West Fjords outshined the hens.

COMMON EIDER (NORTHERN) (*Somateria mollissima borealis*) – A widespread breeder along Iceland's coast

HARLEQUIN DUCK (*Histrionicus histrionicus histrionicus*) – One collection of stunning drakes in the West Fjords stands out in my mind.

COMMON SCOTER (*Melanitta nigra*) – We had to stay sharp to spot this close relative of Black Scoter

LONG-TAILED DUCK (*Clangula hyemalis*) – This species is a treat to hear as well as see

BARROW'S GOLDENEYE (*Bucephala islandica*) – What a concentration of drakes!

COMMON MERGANSER (EURASIAN) (*Mergus merganser merganser*) – We only saw one hen but she was good enough to fly along the river twice to make sure we all got a good view.

RED-BREASTED MERGANSER (*Mergus serrator*) – Nearly an every day bird

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

ROCK PTARMIGAN (*Lagopus muta islandorum*) – Wow, what a year for Rock Ptarmigan! We enjoyed cooperative males most days, including display flights.

Gaviidae (Loons)

RED-THROATED LOON (*Gavia stellata*) – Our best looks were on the Snaefellsnes Peninsula, with family groups in roadside ponds

COMMON LOON (*Gavia immer*) – More days than not

Podicipedidae (Grebes)

HORNED GREBE (*Podiceps auritus auritus*) – Seen well at Lake Myvatn

Procellariidae (Shearwaters and Petrels)

NORTHERN FULMAR (*Fulmarus glacialis*) – By the millions

MANX SHEARWATER (*Puffinus puffinus*) – We spotted this pelagic species from the lighthouse at Gardur our first morning.

Hydrobatidae (Storm-Petrels)

EUROPEAN STORM-PETREL (BRITISH) (*Hydrobates pelagicus pelagicus*) – This species reaches the northern edge of its breeding range on islands off the southern coast of Iceland. A few dark sprites bounded across the surface off the lighthouse at Gardur.

Sulidae (Boobies and Gannets)

NORTHERN GANNET (*Morus bassanus*) – We observed these dramatic seabirds in good numbers from the lighthouse at Gardur.

Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)

GREAT CORMORANT (NORTH ATLANTIC) (*Phalacrocorax carbo carbo*) – We studied the differences between this species and the European Shag while waiting for the ferry.

EUROPEAN SHAG (*Phalacrocorax aristotelis*) – Our evening cruise got us up close and personal to occupied nests.

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

WHITE-TAILED EAGLE (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) – Voted the bird of the tour, this enormous raptor is endangered in Iceland but we savored spectacular looks at a pair overhead.

Recurvirostridae (Stilts and Avocets)

BLACK-WINGED STILT (*Himantopus himantopus*) – The bird we successfully chased en route to the airport was first found on April 20 and represents Iceland's first record for the species.

Haematopodidae (Oystercatchers)

EURASIAN OYSTERCATCHER (WESTERN) (*Haematopus ostralegus ostralegus*) – This is a common breeder in Iceland

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

EUROPEAN GOLDEN-PLOVER (*Pluvialis apricaria altifrons*) – An every day bird

COMMON RINGED PLOVER (*Charadrius hiaticula hiaticula*) – This Semipalmated Plover look-alike was encountered in small numbers most days.

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

WHIMBREL (EUROPEAN) (*Numenius phaeopus phaeopus*) – Perhaps the most memorable one was at Godafoss

EURASIAN CURLEW (*Numenius arquata*) – This oversized Whimbrel look-alike is a scarce breeder in Iceland and is more likely to be encountered in the winter there. We were lucky to come across one en route to Latrabjarg.

BLACK-TAILED GODWIT (ISLANDICA) (*Limosa limosa islandica*) – One of the most colorful and vocal shorebirds we encountered.

RUDDY TURNSTONE (*Arenaria interpres*) – This species doesn't breed on Iceland but Barry first found a southbound migrant for us at Hotel Budir.

DUNLIN (SCHINZII) (*Calidris alpina schinzii*) – We observed this bronze-backed subspecies more days than not.

PURPLE SANDPIPER (*Calidris maritima*) – We tallied a remarkable 91 individuals when we first hit the south shore of the West Fjords. We found small flocks along the north shore of the Snaefellsnes Peninsula as well.

PECTORAL SANDPIPER (*Calidris melanotos*) – The "Patagonia Picnic Table Effect" generated this vagrant for our list. Great spotting Joan.

COMMON SNIPE (*Gallinago gallinago gallinago*) – The haunting winnowing of displaying males overhead is the soundtrack of Iceland in summer.

RED-NECKED PHALAROPE (*Phalaropus lobatus*) – The pair at the edge of the parking lot at Rif couldn't have been more cooperative.

COMMON REDSHANK (*Tringa totanus robusta*) – These should be renamed Post Orangeshank

Stercorariidae (Skuas and Jaegers)

GREAT SKUA (*Stercorarius skua*) – Godfried guided us to the perfect overlook for excellent looks at this big bully.

PARASITIC JAEGER (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) – Iceland is an excellent place to study this kleptoparasite. We saw lots of dark morphs with intermediate and light morphs mixed in.

Alcidae (Auks, Murres, and Puffins)

COMMON MURRE (*Uria aalge*) – The breeding concentration of this Alcid at Latrabjarg is staggering.

THICK-BILLED MURRE (*Uria lomvia*) – Far less numerous than the previous species, we still saw this species well at Latrabjarg.

RAZORBILL (*Alca torda*) – Did you catch one with its bill open and notice their brilliant golden mouth lining?

BLACK GUILLEMOT (GRYLLE GROUP) (*Cepphus grylle islandicus*) – The new twist on our West Fjords route provided the best looks you could ever hope to have of these small Alcids.

ATLANTIC PUFFIN (*Fratercula arctica naumanni*) – This species was a runner-up in the favorite species polling. Lying on your belly, only arm's length away from sea parrots, is an unforgettable experience.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKE (TRIDACTYLA) (*Rissa tridactyla tridactyla*) – Seeing adorable chicks during our evening cruise was a treat.

BLACK-HEADED GULL (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*) – An every day bird

MEW GULL (EUROPEAN) (*Larus canus canus*) – We primarily observed this species in the Akureyri area.

HERRING GULL (EUROPEAN) (*Larus argentatus argenteus*) – We primarily saw this species in the southwest part of Iceland.

ICELAND GULL (GLAUCOIDES) (*Larus glaucoides glaucoides*) – Despite its name, this species is easily missed in Iceland in the summer as it breeds farther north (Greenland). Godfried did a remarkable job of quickly spotting a ragged immature bird among the many large gulls gathered at Olafsvik.

LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL (GRAELLSII) (*Larus fuscus graellsii*) – We saw this species by the thousands. Two areas of concentration were Stykkisholmur Harbor and the Reykjanes Peninsula.

GLAUCOUS GULL (*Larus hyperboreus leuceteres*) – Primarily encountered in the north and west

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

ARCTIC TERN (*Sterna paradisaea*) – When you get close to this species and get an appreciation for how delicate they are, it is mind-boggling to think that they fly tens of thousands of miles annually. A few of you received an Icelandic blessing from a particularly protective parent.

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*) – In Reykjavik

COMMON WOOD-PIGEON (*Columba palumbus*) – This unexpected vagrant provided quite a thrill, especially once we realized it was flying for its life with several Parasitic Jaegers in hot pursuit.

Strigidae (Owls)

SHORT-EARED OWL (NORTHERN) (*Asio flammeus flammeus*) – This one makes the list barely. Normally we encounter it in the Lake Myvatn area but were unlucky this year. A single bird teased us one evening at Hotel Budir.

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

MERLIN (EURASIAN) (*Falco columbarius subaeson*) – This was another one that barely made the list. We had a single bird buzz the bus as we started out onto the West Fjords.

GYRFALCON (*Falco rusticolus*) – This is the world's largest falcon and Iceland's national bird. We had two good scope views of perched adult birds in the Lake Myvatn area.

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

COMMON RAVEN (*Corvus corax varius*) – We came across several large concentrations along the shore shortly after leaving Hvammstangi.

Troglodytidae (Wrens)

EURASIAN WREN (ICELAND) (*Troglodytes troglodytes islandicus*) – This species fared well in the mild winter of 2016-2017 as we had no trouble seeing it in several locations.

Regulidae (Kinglets)

GOLDCREST (*Regulus regulus*) – We came upon this rare breeder in Iceland at the city cemetery in Reykjavik.

Muscicapidae (Old World Flycatchers)

NORTHERN WHEATEAR (GREENLAND) (*Oenanthe oenanthe leucorhoa*) – Widespread but never numerous

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

EURASIAN BLACKBIRD (*Turdus merula merula*) – We had barely stepped out of our hotel in Reykjavik before spotting our first singing male teed up.

REDWING (ICELANDIC) (*Turdus iliacus coburni*) – Lots and lots and lots

Sturnidae (Starlings)

EUROPEAN STARLING (*Sturnus vulgaris*) – Another species that seems to have a growing population in Iceland.

Motacillidae (Wagtails and Pipits)

WHITE WAGTAIL (WHITE-FACED) (*Motacilla alba alba*) – An every day bird

MEADOW PIPIT (*Anthus pratensis whistleri*) – Another common breeder

Calcariidae (Longspurs and Snow Buntings)

SNOW BUNTING (*Plectrophenax nivalis insulae*) – Nearly an every day bird but never numerous

Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)

COMMON REDPOLL (ROSTRATA) (*Acanthis flammea islandica*) – It took a little work but we finally found the angle for looks at perched birds in Reykjavik and later had flyovers in multiple locations

MAMMALS

ARCTIC FOX (*Alopex lagopus*) – This is the only native terrestrial mammal in Iceland. A few of us watched one patrolling the tidal flats at Hotel Budir.

AMERICAN MINK (*Mustela vison*) – One scurried across the rocks below us at Gardur. This non-native pest is a management priority in Iceland. [I]

HARBOR SEAL (*Phoca vitulina*) – A few towards the end of the tour

GRAY SEAL (*Halichoerus grypus*) – The "horse head" seal; we spotted this species on three different days

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Guide Godfried Schreur and participant Teri Tillman kept one eye on the ground while we explored Iceland. Godfried compiled the following list of flowers that they were able to key out. The numbers refer to the book "Flowering Plants and Ferns of Iceland" by Hörður Kristinnsson.

4. Nootka Lupin
14. Field Forget-me-not
16. Oyster Plant
21. Alpine Bartsia
27. Marsh Violet
28. Common Butterwort
34. Wood Crane's-bill
42. Heath Spotted Orchid
49. Wild Thyme
71. Water Avens
72. Hairy Stonecrop
75. Thrift
76. Moss Campion
78. Cuckoo Flower
84. Bog Billberry
94. Sea Mayweed

96. Mountain Avens
99. *Parnassia palustris*
100. Sea Campion
102. Alpine Mouse-ear
107. Bogbean
121. Common Mouse-ear
126. Sea Sandwort
141. Alpine Bistort
145. Stone Bramble
148. Garden Angelica
147. Rowan
158. Sea Rocket
166. Common Scurvygrass
175. Slender Bedstraw
187. White Clover
193. Alpine Cinquefoil
194. *Argentina anserina*
199. Arctic Poppy
219. Yellow-rattle
222. Dandelion
232. Groundsel
234. Alpine's Lady's-mantle
236. Hairy Lady's-mantle
242. Northern Green Orchid
243. Small White Orchid
275. Field Horsetail
285. Common Moonwort
306. Dwarf Willow
307. Arctic Willow
314. Black Cottonwood
315. Greater Plantain
317. Sea Plantain
319. Common Sorrel
321. Mountain Sorrel
323. Frog Orchid
335. Juniper
338. Crowberry
395. Scheutzer's Cottongrass

Totals for the tour: 77 bird taxa and 4 mammal taxa