



Field Guides Tour Report

Iceland 2019

Jun 14, 2019 to Jun 23, 2019

Godfried Schreur

For our tour description, itinerary, past triplists, dates, fees, and more, please VISIT OUR TOUR PAGE.



Birding in Iceland is great! (photo by guide Godfried Schreur)

We love Iceland!

Eric Hynes did a fantastic job setting up the itinerary for the Field Guides Birding tour through Iceland. Our route included the main highlights for birding on this fascinating island. The Myvatn lake, with thousands of ducks like Barrow's Goldeneye, Long-tailed Duck and Eurasian Wigeon, also harbors the best population of Gyrfalcons. The Breidafjordur is the place to be for spotting White-tailed Eagles, Glaucous Gulls and European Shags. Nowhere else you can see Atlantic Puffins so close-by as in Latrabjarg, the majestic cliff with 3 million breeding seabirds at the most western point of Europe. This is a bonus that not many tour companies offer. The itinerary featured also the most attractive landscapes of Iceland, with wonderful fjords, lava fields, estuaries, volcanoes, icecaps, glacial valleys and rivers and 2 of the best waterfalls, the Godafoss and the Dettifoss, the latter being the most powerful fall of Europe. It is true that there was quite a lot of driving involved in this tour, but driving through Iceland's volcanic and glacial scenery was always fascinating, although we would have liked to stop after every bend for a picture of another beautiful setting. Landscape-wise the Snaefellsnes Peninsula was something outstanding, with the Kirkjufell (Church Mountain) and the the almost magical Snaefellsjokul volcano in the background.

Tour manager Christine Boilard and our ground agent did an excellent job by lining up all the logistics in the right direction. It all worked out perfect. It was great to have you on the tour, Christine! And I did my best as your guide, aiming to stop at the best sites, spotting the birds, pointing them out to you, focusing the telescope on the most interesting ones, giving the opportunity to enjoy the birds and the scenery and get the timing right for a pleasant and comfortable Iceland experience.

Add to this the good hotels, the superb food in fancy restaurants, the comfortable bus and excellent driver, the domestic flight from Reykjavik to Akureyri, and we managed to provide all the ingredients for a superb tour, and so it was. The only factor we cannot influence is the weather, but this year we were very fortunate, with almost no rain and clear skies on most of the days.

The Atlantic Puffin was elected the bird of the trip. Not surprising, having in mind that we could almost touch these cute penguin-like birds with their colorful bills. The Gyrfalcon and the Eurasian Oystercatcher ended as second and third best in the vote. But the White-tailed Eagle and the stunning

drake King Eider were also amongst the highlights of our tour.

We saw (almost) all the important species very well, 75 taxa in total. Have a look at the illustrated list!

In all, we saw a lot of good birds, we had wonderful photographic opportunities, we enjoyed the scenery and the Icelandic cuisine. And, not unimportantly, we enjoyed each other's company very much, because we all together made this Iceland trip into a fantastic experience. We all contributed to this tour in our own way, some by sharing interesting information, some with a good sense of humor, some with excellent spotting skills, some by the eBirding and some with entertaining conversations during dinner. I thoroughly enjoyed our Iceland adventure and I therefore want to thank you all.

Looking forward to welcoming you on another awesome Field Guides tour!

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*) – Increasing population. We encountered a large concentration in Blonduos. [N]

PINK-FOOTED GOOSE (*Anser brachyrhynchus*) – At least 50 individuals seen on Day 5, counting adults and goslings. [N]

WHOOPEE SWAN (*Cygnus cygnus*) – Every day bird. Common around the Myvatn lake. We saw several families with cygnets. [N]

COMMON SHELDUCK (*Tadorna tadorna*) – 1 pair with 2 baby shelducks present in the Westfjords. Close to Borgarness, we counted at least 50 birds. [N]

NORTHERN SHOVELER (*Spatula clypeata*) – 1 Northern Shoveler was seen at the Myvatn lake.

GADWALL (*Mareca strepera*) – Common at the Myvatn lake.

EURASIAN WIGEON (*Mareca penelope*) – Most numerous duck at Myvatn. The drakes spend the day together in large flocks while the females take care of the young. We saw several females with ducklings. [N]

AMERICAN WIGEON (*Mareca americana*) – We found 1 drake American Wigeon together with some Eurasian Wigeons. Not so special for the guests, but very nice for the guide! :-)

MALLARD (*Anas platyrhynchos*) – Common but never numerous, this Mallårde.

NORTHERN PINTAIL (*Anas acuta*) – Only one sighting of this relatively rare bird on Iceland.

GREEN-WINGED TEAL (EURASIAN) (*Anas crecca crecca*) – We saw ones and twos of the Eurasian Green-winged Teal, clearly lacking the white vertical line at the side of the chest.

TUFTED DUCK (*Aythya fuligula*) – The second most common duck on Iceland. We saw many females with ducklings. We could clearly see the tuft when looking at the drakes with the scope. [N]

GREATER SCAUP (*Aythya marila*) – The Greater Scaup is often mixed in the groups of Tufted Ducks. We enjoyed the best views of Tufted Duck at the Tjörne lake in Reykjavik.

KING EIDER (*Somateria spectabilis*) – After scanning hundreds of Common Eiders, we finally found one beautiful drake King Eider.

COMMON EIDER (NORTHERN) (*Somateria mollissima borealis*) – Common Eiders are spread along the whole coastline of Iceland. The males were gathering in large flocks. We saw one charming family of Common Eiders with mum, dad and the ducklings walking on a tidal mud bank close to Akureyri. [N]

HARLEQUIN DUCK (*Histrionicus histrionicus*) – We saw this gorgeous duck on 6 days of the tour. On Day 7 we saw up to 25 birds. We had splendid views of this beauty at the Foss close to Flokalundur.

COMMON SCOTER (*Melanitta nigra*) – We had views of males and females at the Myvatn area.

LONG-TAILED DUCK (*Clangula hyemalis*) – The Long-tailed Duck is not uncommon at lake Myvatn, but he is rather shy. With the telescope we achieved good views.

BARROW'S GOLDENEYE (*Bucephala islandica*) – At least 60 drakes of Barrow's Goldeneye were seen at close range resting on the Laxa river.

COMMON MERGANSER (EURASIAN) (*Mergus merganser merganser*) – We saw only one female and one male on different occasions. It is considered a rare species in Iceland.

RED-BREASTED MERGANSER (*Mergus serrator*) – Every day bird. The Red-breasted Merganser is present at the shoreline of most of the fjords, often in pairs and sometimes in small groups of up to 7 individuals.

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

ROCK PTARMIGAN (*Lagopus muta islandorum*) – In 2018, we struggled to see the Rock Ptarmigan, but 2019 was a good year to see them. We recorded this species on 7 days of the tour. We even saw it very close to the international airport!

Podicipedidae (Grebes)

HORNED GREBE (*Podiceps auritus auritus*) – Beautiful views of a couple of Horned Grebes in the Myvatn area. [N]

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*) – We saw Feral Pigeons in Reykjavik.

Haematopodidae (Oystercatchers)

EURASIAN OYSTERCATCHER (WESTERN) (*Haematopus ostralegus ostralegus*) – The Eurasian Oystercatcher ended at the third position in the election of the bird of the trip, maybe because it was the first bird at close range after arriving in Iceland. It is a stunning bird with the black, white and bright red colors. [N]

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings).

EUROPEAN GOLDEN-PLOVER (*Pluvialis apricaria altifrons*) – A beautiful every day bird.

COMMON RINGED PLOVER (*Charadrius hiaticula hiaticula*) – Very much like the Semipalmated Plover. We needed a proper look to notice the differences. [N]

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies).

WHIMBREL (EUROPEAN) (*Numenius phaeopus phaeopus*) – Another good every day bird. We saw the Whimbrel at close range close to the Godafoss.

BLACK-TAILED GODWIT (ISLANDICA) (*Limosa limosa islandica*) – One of the most pretty meadow birds of Iceland, it is always a pleasure achieving good views of the Icelandic subspecies of the Black-tailed Godwit.

RUDDY TURNSTONE (*Arenaria interpres*) – During passage, many Ruddy Turnstones turn up in Iceland on their way to/from Greenland, where they breed. But in breeding season this wader is rare on Iceland. Thanks to the spotting skills of the group members, we managed to find 3 birds on this tour.

RED KNOT (*Calidris canutus islandica*) – Three Red Knots in breeding plumage were present in the estuary next to the Budir hotel. Were they still heading to their breeding grounds on Greenland or already on the way back after a failed breeding season? The last option is more likely.

SANDERLING (*Calidris alba*) – 1 bird in breeding plumage was present at the beach of Breidavik.

DUNLIN (SCHINZII) (*Calidris alpina schinzii*) – It was nice to see them in breeding plumage with their black bellies and ginger-colored upperparts.

PURPLE SANDPIPER (*Calidris maritima*) – Despite their camouflage plumage - they do blend in on the sea weeds - we managed to see them on several occasions. On day 6, we were looking at a group of Purple Sandpipers, when suddenly a Gyrfalcon showed up and caught one of them.

COMMON SNIPE (*Gallinago gallinago*) – It was lovely to hear the Common Snipe every day doing their display flight, while making this odd sound with his outer tail feathers. [N]

RED-NECKED PHALAROPE (*Phalaropus lobatus*) – Amazing little bird, always busy, no time to bother about us watching them. We had nice views of the Red-necked Phalarope on many occasions but at Breidavik Beach we had the best observation of his spinning feeding behaviour.

COMMON REDSHANK (*Tringa totanus robusta*) – One of the most common and noisy meadow birds of Iceland. Every day bird. [N]

Stercorariidae (Skuas and Jaegers).

GREAT SKUA (*Stercorarius skua*) – We recorded the Great Skua on 3 days. Close to Husavik we saw 3 individuals. This is a good score, having in mind that we did not visit their breeding grounds.

PARASITIC JAEGER (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) – On Iceland, the dark morph is more common than than the pale morph. Fortunately we achieved good views of both morphs.

Alcidae (Auks, Murres, and Puffins).

COMMON MURRE (*Uria aalge*) – The Common Murre is the most numerous alcid on the Latrabjarg cliffs. We saw thousands of them, too many to count or even estimate. One of every 20 birds, more or less, is bridled. [N]

THICK-BILLED MURRE (*Uria lomvia*) – We were lucky to see scientists catching and banding the Thick-billed Murres at Latrabjarg. This way we were able to see them at very short distance. The white line along the side of the bill was very distinctive. [N]

RAZORBILL (*Alca torda*) – The colony of Latrabjarg holds the biggest concentration of Razorbills of the world. One of the thousands of Razorbills was very obliging and allowed us a photo shoot session. [N]

BLACK GUILLEMOT (GRYLLE GROUP) (*Cepphus grylle islandicus*) – Charming, little alcid. Its high pitched alarm call caught our attention. During the Viking Sushi Cruise, we discovered a nesting hole of this species. [N]

ATLANTIC PUFFIN (*Fratercula arctica naumanni*) – The bird of the trip! We all enormously enjoyed the close looks of the Atlantic Puffin at Latrabjarg. He is so cute! [N]

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers).

BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKE (TRIDACTYLA) (*Rissa tridactyla tridactyla*) – This noisy little gull is actually very attractive! [N]

BLACK-HEADED GULL (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*) – Every day bird. In the Botanical Garden of Akureyri, one Black-headed Gull landed on the table of a terrace, right next to where we were having lunch. [N]

MEW GULL (EUROPEAN) (*Larus canus canus*) – We saw the Mew Gull mainly around Akureyri, the stronghold of this species on Iceland.

HERRING GULL (EUROPEAN) (*Larus argentatus argenteus*) – We saw the Herring Gull almost on every day but never in great numbers. We also observed the the Hybrid between Herring Gull and Glaucous Gull, called "Viking Gull".

ICELAND GULL (GLAUCOIDES) (*Larus glaucoides glaucoides*) – What's in the name? The Iceland Gull does not breed on Iceland. In breeding season it is considered as rare. We managed to see at least 5 birds in Blonduos and 1 at Olafsvik.

LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL (GRAELLSII) (*Larus fuscus graellsii*) – Every day bird. It was nice to see them together with Great Black-backed Gull. The size difference was striking.

GLAUCOUS GULL (*Larus hyperboreus leuceteres*) – Although we saw Glaucous Gull every day of the trip, they were significantly more numerous on Snaefellsness Peninsula and the Westfjords.

GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL (*Larus marinus*) – Present at the coast all around Iceland, this huge gull is always causing panic in bird colonies. A pair of Great Black-backed Gulls allowed a photo shoot during the Viking Sushi tour. [N]

ARCTIC TERN (*Sterna paradisaea*) – This elegant tern is often breeding in the neighborhood of houses and villages. Probably the Arctic Terns finds it safer there, as predators like Arctic Fox are afraid of people. [N]

Gaviidae (Loons).

RED-THROATED LOON (*Gavia stellata*) – Almost every day bird. On day 8 we saw up to 8 individuals.

COMMON LOON (*Gavia immer*) – We saw and heard the Common Loon on several occasions. It is great to observe this species in breeding plumage! [N]

Procellariidae (Shearwaters and Petrels).

NORTHERN FULMAR (*Fulmarus glacialis*) – The Northern Fulmar must be one of the most numerous breeding birds of Iceland. We saw them on virtually every cliff, even those cliffs further inland. [N]

MANX SHEARWATER (*Puffinus puffinus*) – At the Gardur lighthouse we saw several Manx Shearwaters flying by.

Sulidae (Boobies and Gannets)

NORTHERN GANNET (*Morus bassanus*) – We recorded Northern Gannet at the lighthouse of Gardur and at the western point of Snaefellsnes.

Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)

GREAT CORMORANT (NORTH ATLANTIC) (*Phalacrocorax carbo carbo*) – On several occasions, seen together with European Shag which allowed the comparison in size.

EUROPEAN SHAG (*Phalacrocorax aristotelis*) – The Viking Sushi Cruise ship approached to within a few meters of some nesting European Shags. We were so close that we even could see the emerald green eyes. [N]

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites)

WHITE-TAILED EAGLE (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) – We were lucky to observe two occupied nests. One nest hosted two chicks and the other had only one eagle-chick. In total, we saw 5 different adult birds with huge wingspan and massive yellow bill. [N]

Strigidae (Owls)

SHORT-EARED OWL (NORTHERN) (*Asio flammeus flammeus*) – The Short-eared Owl is more and more difficult to spot nowadays on Iceland. Searching for this owl is rarely rewarding. Usually the owl finds you. And that's what happened on two occasions on the tour. One sighting took place at a pre-breakfast walk next to the hotel. We were able to follow the bird with binoculars for a while.

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

MERLIN (EURASIAN) (*Falco columbarius subaeson*) – We found an occupied nest of the Merlin on top of a rock pillar. The chicks were in the nest, while both adult birds were around. Later in the tour we observed another Merlin in flight. [N]

GYRFALCON (*Falco rusticolus*) – The second best bird of the trip! We discovered a new nest with probably three chicks in the Westfjords. While watching the nest with the binoculars and telescope from a safe distance, at one stage both adults landed on the nest. It was great to observe these almost white Gyrs so well! [N]

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies)

COMMON RAVEN (*Corvus corax varius*) – Every day bird.

Troglodytidae (Wrens)

EURASIAN WREN (ICELAND) (*Troglodytes troglodytes islandicus*) – We had a very good view of the Icelandic subspecies of the Eurasian Wren in a park of curious Lava formations and natural birch woodland.

Regulidae (Kinglets)

GOLDCREST (*Regulus regulus*) – We were lucky, with one good view of this tiny and rare bird in the Botanical Garden of Akureyri.

Muscicapidae (Old World Flycatchers)

NORTHERN WHEATEAR (GREENLAND) (*Oenanthe oenanthe leucorhoa*) – The Northern Wheatear is very distinctive in flight with his white rump and base of the tail.

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

REDWING (ICELANDIC) (*Turdus iliacus coburni*) – Every day you wake up with the chaotic song of the Redwing, and when you go to bed he is still singing away. Does he ever stop?

EURASIAN BLACKBIRD (*Turdus merula merula*) – We saw the Eurasian Blackbird very well in the old cemetery of Reykjavik. It is still rare outside the capital. [N]

Sturnidae (Starlings)

EUROPEAN STARLING (*Sturnus vulgaris*) – The European Starling is present in Reykjavik and most of the towns and bigger villages in Iceland.

Motacillidae (Wagtails and Pipits)

WHITE WAGTAIL (WHITE-FACED) (*Motacilla alba alba*) – Every day bird. We noticed that the juvenile White Wagtails are very plain grey and lack distinct features.

MEADOW PIPIT (*Anthus pratensis whistleri*) – It was very nice to see and hear so many "Mipits" singing while doing their territorial display flight. [N]

Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)

COMMON REDPOLL (ROSTRATA/ISLANDICA) (*Acanthis flammea islandica*) – We saw the Common Redpolls many times in flight but we had the best views of this little finch in a woodland area next to Stykkisholmur. A male with a bright red forehead showed very well indeed. [N]

Calcariidae (Longspurs and Snow Buntings)

SNOW BUNTING (*Plectrophenax nivalis insulae*) – The Snow Bunting can be found in Iceland on stony mountain slopes, but also close to houses at sea level. We had the best views at a small beach close to Latrabjarg. [N]

MAMMALS

WHITE-BEAKED DOLPHIN (*Lagenorhynchus albirostris*) – Some saw five dolphins very far away during the Baldur ferry crossing. [N]

ORCA (*Orcinus orca*) – At least 5 distant orcas at the sea offshore Olafsvik and Arnarstappi.

HARBOR PORPOISE (*Phocoena phocoena*) – Very nice and close views of at least 6 Harbor Porpoises in the fjord close to Akureyri. Thanks to Frank, we know now that porpoises do not belong to the dolphins. They are small toothed whales and although very closely related to oceanic dolphins, the porpoises form another family called Phocoenidae.

ARCTIC FOX (*Alopex lagopus*) – Despite searching for the Arctic Fox at pre-breakfast and post-dinner walks, we did not see this small mammal until the very last moment. On the last day, just before departure from Keflavik airport we saw a glimpse of a running Arctic Fox in a lava field. Never stop searching and scanning!

HARBOR SEAL (*Phoca vitulina*) – We saw Harbor Seals at the coastline of the Westfjords.

GRAY SEAL (*Halichoerus grypus*) – There were at least 5 Gray Seals fishing below the cliffs of Latrabjarg.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

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