

Birding Ecotours



ICELAND: VIKING BIRDING SET DEPARTURE TRIP REPORT

10 - 18 JUNE 2018

By Andy Walker



Harlequin Duck is spectacular and always a tour highlight.

Overview

This 9-day scheduled Iceland tour commenced in Reykjavík on the 10th of June 2018 and concluded back there on the 18th of June 2018. This tour moved through some of the most spectacular scenery in western and northern Iceland, taking in the Snæfellsnes Peninsula, the magnificent sea cliffs at Látrabjarg, the picturesque Flatey Island, the gorgeous Lake Mývatn, the stunning Skjálíandi Bay, as well as numerous other roadside stops (including the roaring Goðafoss Waterfall).

The tour connected with many exciting birds and yielded a long list of northwestern European specialties. Wildfowl featured heavily, with many breeding birds as well as a long list of vagrants (see below) such as **Harlequin Duck, King Eider, Common Eider, Long-tailed Duck, Barrow's Goldeneye, Common Scoter, Eurasian Wigeon, Eurasian Teal, Tufted Duck, Greater Scaup, Common Shelduck, Whooper Swan, Brant Goose, and Pink-footed Goose**. Breeding **Red-throated** and **Common Loons** were seen regularly, and a pair of the latter with two chicks was a tour highlight, as were the numerous breeding **Horned Grebes**.

Shorebirds were abundant with a great deal of breeding activity underway. It is a great sight to see these birds in their breeding plumage rather than their more familiar drab plumage, some of the most spectacular being **Black-tailed Godwit, Red-necked Phalarope, European Golden Plover, Dunlin, Purple Sandpiper, Red Knot, Ruddy Turnstone, Common Redshank**, and best of all the rare breeder, **Red Phalarope**.



Amazing views of Red-necked Phalarope are guaranteed in Iceland during June.

Seabirds were another big focus on the tour, and we enjoyed some very close looks at the comical **Atlantic Puffin** along with the dapper **Black Guillemot**, **Razorbill**, and **Common** and **Thick-billed Murres**. We had plenty of **Parasitic Jaegers** and good views of **Northern Gannet**, **Great Skua**, **European Shag**, nine species of gulls with **Iceland Gull** and **Glaucous Gull** seen well, and thousands of **Northern Fulmars**.

Finding both **White-tailed Eagle** and **Gyrfalcon** on nests, as well as several hunting **Merlins** and **Short-eared Owls** were all highlights and rated among some of the best tour moments. Assorted other special birds included **Rock Ptarmigan**, **Northern Raven**, **Eurasian Wren**, **Common Blackbird**, **Redwing**, **Goldcrest**, **Northern Wheatear**, **Common Redpoll**, **White Wagtail**, and the gorgeous **Snow Bunting**.



Redwings are common breeding visitors to Iceland during the summer months. Busily breeding up while the weather is suitable before they migrate south during the winter.

Some of the vagrants found during the tour included **Lesser Scaup**, **Ring-necked Duck**, **American Wigeon**, **Canada Goose**, **Little Gull**, and **Grey Heron**, providing a little further excitement to the proceedings!

A total of 81 bird species were seen (plus one species heard only, **Red Crossbill**), along with an impressive list of other animals, including **Humpback Whale** and **Arctic Fox**. Species lists are at the end of this report.

As well as all the fantastic birds and impressive landscapes we also sampled, day after day, truly amazing Icelandic food and drink, some of the best meals on any of our tours.

Detailed Report

Day 1, 10th June 2018. Arrival into Keflavík/Reykjavík and travel to Olafsvík

After I met Claudia at the airport in Keflavík early in the morning, we had a brief stop at some coastal ponds nearby, finding **Common Loon, Glaucous and Iceland Gulls, Whooper Swan, Common Eider, Common Ringed Plover, Common Redshank, Eurasian Oystercatcher, Purple Sandpiper, and European Golden Plover**. After an early breakfast we then traveled north to Reykjavík, where we picked up the other tour participants Tristan, Lyn, Gretchen, and Kristine in the city. In no time at all the journey had commenced towards Olafsvík on the Snæfellsnes Peninsula, our base for a couple of nights.

Several birding stops were made along the way. The first, near Borgarnes, yielded numerous **Common Shelducks, Dunlin, Grey Heron** (a scarce summer visitor in Iceland), **Northern Fulmar**, and the stunning **Black-tailed Godwit**. After a nice lunch at a bakery we continued our journey northwest, stopping for **Red-throated Loon, Horned Grebe, Parasitic Jaeger, Arctic Tern, Greater Scaup, Whooper Swan, Little Gull** (a national rarity!), **Northern Raven**, and **Red-necked Phalarope**.

We arrived at Olafsvík in time for a very nice dinner in a local restaurant, our first of many excellent meals on the tour.

Day 2, 11th June 2018. Snæfellsnes Peninsula

The beauty of birding in Iceland at this time of year is more-or-less-constant daylight, meaning very early starts are not always necessary! We had a relaxed breakfast and then headed out for a day birding around the Snæfellsnes Peninsula. Our first stop was at a few small pools that were covered in **Common Eiders** and **Arctic Terns**. Spending several minutes here we started picking off numerous birds; some of the most spectacular were the displaying **Red-throated Loons** that were flying around our heads before they dropped onto the water and continued displaying. A pair of **Red-breasted Mergansers** and several **Tufted Ducks** also looked rather nice. Several herds of **Whooper Swans** and a couple of **Greylag Geese** were in the fields nearby, with **Common Snipe** constantly displaying overhead. Other shorebirds here included tame **Red-necked Phalaropes, Black-tailed Godwit, and Eurasian Oystercatcher**.

As we continued to a coastal headland we were very quickly enjoying nice views of a couple of **Rock Ptarmigans**, both sheltering from the rain shower. Beautiful birds! We also had brief glimpses of **Northern Wheatears**, with more prolonged views at the same spot later in the morning. There was also a stunning male **Snow Bunting** showing very well here. On the coast itself we spent some time getting to grips with a range of Alcids such as **Atlantic Puffin, Common Murre, Thick-billed Murre, Razorbill, and Black Guillemot**. The cliffs were covered with **Northern Fulmars** and **Black-legged Kittiwakes**, and both were constantly streaming past, with the occasional **Northern Gannet** and **European Shag** doing likewise. Single **Red-throated** and **Common Loons** also flew past.

We enjoyed a wonderful lunch in a tiny beachside café and were suitably distracted by some gorgeous breeding-plumaged **Red Knots**, with similarly smart **Ruddy Turnstone, Dunlin, Common Ringed Plover, Common Redshank, and Eurasian Oystercatcher** also in attendance.

We also spent time watching some baby **Common Eiders** and a large flock of non-breeding birds bathing.



Black-tailed Godwits in breeding plumage are a sight to behold.

The afternoon was spent enjoying further looks at the above species at several different sites, though one of the best birds of the day was found under the sea cliffs when we found two small flocks of the exquisite **Harlequin Duck**. Good, close views were had of one of the best-looking ducks on the planet, and we soaked the views in. As the day's birding came to a close, we headed back to town for another great meal.

Day 3, 12th June 2018. Olafsvík to Stykkishólmur, ferry to Flatey Island, finally to Breiðavík and Látrabjarg bird cliffs

We had a fairly early start in order to make our ferry connection in Stykkishólmur to the picturesque Flatey Island. After enjoying breakfast at a bakery, we boarded the ferry and headed north, seeing rafts of **Atlantic Puffin** along the way. Once on Flatey Island we found it to be a very peaceful place, apart from the constantly alarm-calling **Arctic Terns** and **Common Redshanks** and drumming of **Common Snipes**. **Snow Buntings** were very evident, and we enjoyed very good views of many during the day. Dodging the odd rain shower (and fitting in another delicious lunch), we looked through the hundreds of **Red-necked Phalaropes** until eventually we found our main target on the island – the **Red Phalarope**, a bird so beautiful it really needs to be seen to be believed. There were plenty of Alcids to enjoy around the island, and we got some great views of **Atlantic Puffin** and **Black Guillemot**. This island is considered one of the most beautiful in all of Iceland, and it is easy to see why after spending a day here.



Snow Buntings were looking glorious in their breeding plumage.



Atlantic Puffin, taken close to midnight in thick cloud and rain.

In the late afternoon we caught the ferry out of Flatey Island and then continued our journey west to Breiðavík, and after another very good meal spent the evening birding at the Látrabjarg cliffs, where, despite the occasional rain shower, we got very good looks at **Atlantic Puffin** sitting just

a few feet in front of us. The sea cliffs here really are incredible and stacked full of **Thick-billed** and **Common Murres**, **Black-legged Kittiwakes**, and **Northern Fulmars**. An **Arctic Fox** was a nice surprise too, as it searched for an easy meal among the seabird colony. A great experience to be birding in daylight at midnight!

Day 4, 13th June 2018. Breiðavík to Blönduós

Due to the late finish the previous day this morning we had a later, more relaxed start. We spent the majority of the day driving east to our final destination of Blönduós. We made a few stops along the way and built up a decent list of birds. The first stop produced a flock of three vagrant **Canada Geese**, presumably from Greenland or the north-eastern United States given the prevailing weather conditions. Here we also saw two pairs of displaying **Red-throated Loons**, **Eurasian Wigeon**, **Red-breasted Merganser**, and **Eurasian Teal**.

Another stop resulted in a pair of displaying and then foraging **Common Loons** and a flock of breeding-plumage **Purple Sandpipers**, looking very dapper. Here hundreds of **Common Eiders** were present in a range of plumages too. Another stop will not be forgotten anytime soon, because we enjoyed excellent views of a pair of apparently breeding **Gyrfalcons**, followed by a pair of nesting **White-tailed Eagles** – one of the pair getting some attention from an aggressive **Great Black-backed Gull**. A **Common Redpoll** flew over, and a **Eurasian Wren** sang, but it was hard to take our eyes off the raptor fest that was unfolding in front of our eyes!



Watching a pair of Gyrfalcons near their nest will not be forgotten for a long time!

We continued our journey, getting some excellent looks at about twenty **Harlequin Ducks**, **Rock Ptarmigan**, many **Common Eiders**, and several rampaging **Parasitic Jaegers**.



This White-tailed Eagle was sitting near its nest, getting occasional flack from a Great Black-backed Gull!

Day 5, 14th June 2018. Blonðuós to Lake Mývatn

We woke to a rather wet and wild morning on the north coast and had a quick check of the nearby river mouth, where we found plenty of **Common Eiders**, a few **Red-breasted Mergansers**, and half a dozen **Long-tailed Ducks**, many coming into their dark breeding plumage and looking rather special. A couple of **Red-throated Loons** were observed carrying food back to nest sites, and we had our best looks of the entire tour at a pair of delightful **Common Loons** that were duetting with their extremely haunting calls. **Glaucous** and **Iceland Gulls** were numerous here, and a few **Lesser Black-backed Gulls** were also present.

By mid-morning we were on the road towards Lake Mývatn. A couple of stops along the way gave us some very good views of **Horned Grebe**, **Mew Gull**, breeding **Pink-footed Goose**, and **Harlequin Duck**. Most of the journey was wet, but we still enjoyed magnificent views of the stunning scenery that was a constant along the journey.

As late afternoon arrived the temperature really dropped, and the rain increased, but unperturbed we persisted, and a very productive stop at the lake gave us our first **Barrow's Goldeneye**, **Common Scoter**, **Gadwall**, and **Northern Pintail** of the trip. We also got improved views of **Eurasian Wigeon**, **Eurasian Teal**, **Red-breasted Merganser**, **Tufted Duck**, **Mallard**, **Greater Scaup**, and **Horned Grebe**. While looking for wildfowl here we also had our best looks at a perched, pale-phased **Parasitic Jaeger**, but best of all was the highly sought-after, and anticipated, **Short-eared Owl**. One flew right toward us, being heavily mobbed by numerous **Redwings** and assorted shorebirds before giving a great series of views.



*Iceland is the only place in Europe where **Barrow's Goldeneye** can be found.*



***Short-eared Owl** gave some great views as it hunted around the lake!*

A very nice dinner at our excellent hotel, our base for the next two nights, was enjoyed, and we even spotted **Merlin** and **Gyr Falcon** from the dinner table!



Horned (Slavonian) Grebe is another example of a totally stunning bird that we see so well on this Iceland birding holiday.

Day 6, 15th June 2018. Lake Mývatn and boat trip from Húsavík

We awoke to a very cold morning, even with a few snow showers thrown in, and this would be the order of the day. We spent the morning conducting a circuit of this large, bird-filled lake and enjoyed views of numerous wildfowl species. **Long-tailed Ducks** were looking spectacular in their breeding attire and showed at very close range. **Barrow's Goldeneyes** were displaying, and **Eurasian Wigeons** were noted with young. One of the better sightings was that of a vagrant drake **American Wigeon** found with some **Eurasian Wigeons**, allowing a great comparison of the two to be made. **Whooper Swans** were found throughout, and we got some very close views of **Red-necked Phalarope**.

During the afternoon we drove to the pretty coastal town of Húsavík, stopping along the way for a roadside **Short-eared Owl**, followed by **Rock Ptarmigan**, **Common Loon** (with babies), and **Horned Grebe** (also with babies) at a small pond. We then took a whale-watching trip into the Skjálfandi Bay, where we enjoyed very good looks at **White-beaked Dolphin**, **Humpback Whale** (picture at end of report), **Atlantic Puffin**, **Black Guillemot**, **European Herring Gull**, and **Great Skua**. It was a little cold and rough at times due to the three-meter swell but still an enjoyable afternoon, which we finished with a pair of **Harlequin Ducks** in a small river near our hotel.

Day 7, 16th June 2018. Lake Mývatn to Blonðuós

This was a more relaxed day as we started our journey halfway back toward Reykjavík. After breakfast we focused on a small area of the lake with lots of birds and found numerous **Greater Scaups**, **Gadwall**, **Tufted Duck**, and **Eurasian Wigeon**. On scanning through these ducks we found a very good candidate for an adult drake **Lesser Scaup**, though it remained distant. **Long-**

tailed Ducks were looking spectacular, as were **Barrow's Goldeneyes**. We again saw several **Horned Grebes** at their nests and lots of **Red-necked Phalaropes**. Another nice surprise was the **Short-eared Owl** that raced through with its attendant plethora of mobbing birds, likely the same bird seen a couple of days earlier.



*The immaculate **Common Loon** gave excellent views.*

After checking out of our hotel we started our journey back to Blonðuós. Along the way we found a few **Common Mergansers** and more **Whooper Swans** and had some brief views of **Parasitic Jaeger**.

The afternoon around Blonðuós gave us the chance to relax and take in some of the local sights. Those of us checking the river mouth enjoyed **Black-legged Kittiwake**, **Red-throated Loon**, **Arctic Tern**, **Parasitic Jaeger**, and lots of **Common Eiders**.

Day 8, 17th June 2018. Blonðuós to Keflavík via Reykjavík

We had a relaxed start and headed to the coast and the river mouth to scan the **Common Eider** flock. It was with great joy that we immediately found a stunning male **King Eider**! There were also a male **Harlequin Duck** and several **Long-tailed Ducks** present. After a bit of maneuvering, we managed to get ourselves a lot closer to the sea duck flock and spent some time enjoying watching the birds surf. What a set of incredible birds! Plenty of other birds were also here trying to distract us, like **Parasitic Jaeger**, **Northern Fulmar**, and **Iceland** and **Glaucous Gulls**.

Soon it was time to start our drive south. We made a strategic stop along the way at some small woodland, where we found **Eurasian Wren**, **Common Redpoll** (of the Icelandic subspecies,

including a gorgeous pink male), and our first **Goldcrest**. It is amazing to think of this tiny bird surviving in such a harsh environment.



*A supremely beautiful duck, this drake **King Eider** was a fantastic way to end the tour.*

After a delightful lunch on the coast, we continued to the edge of Reykjavík, where a bit of birding near the State Government Office (complete with lots of dignitaries celebrating Icelandic National Day) provided a couple of nice, unexpected vagrant bonus birds, in the form of two drake **Ring-necked Ducks** and a **Brant Goose**. But it started to get cold and wet again, so we decided to head to our final hotel of the tour in Keflavík, seeing several **Common Loons** in the nearby bay on the way, and then had our final dinner-and-checklist session.

Day 9, 18th June 2018. International Departure

The tour participants departed, but not before voting for their ‘Bird of the Trip’. There were numerous birds to choose from, but the following species were considered the best (in no particular order): **Harlequin Duck**, **White-tailed Eagle**, **Short-eared Owl**, **Common Loon**, **Black-tailed Godwit**, and **King Eider**. Late departures were rewarded with a small group of **Manx Shearwaters** near our accommodation.

A huge thank you to Claudia, Gretchen, Kristine, Lyn, and Tristan for making the trip so enjoyable. It was a pleasure birding with you around Iceland and I look forward to birding with you again somewhere else soon, and I look forward to my next visit to this wonderful, beautiful country!



The intrepid group with Andy at the end of the tour, reflecting on many great birds and fun times!

Bird List - Following IOC (8.1)

Birds 'heard only' are marked with (H) after the common name, all other species were seen. The following notation after the common names is used to show conservation status following BirdLife International: VU = Vulnerable, NT = Near Threatened.

Common name	Scientific name	Trip
	ANSERIFORMES	
Ducks, Geese and Swans	Anatidae	
Brant Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>	1
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	1
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	1
Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>	1
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	1
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	1
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	1
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	1

Common name	Scientific name	Trip
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	1
American Wigeon	<i>Mareca americana</i>	1
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	1
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	1
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	1
Ring-necked Duck	<i>Aythya collaris</i>	1
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	1
Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>	1
Lesser Scaup	<i>Aythya affinis</i>	1
King Eider	<i>Somateria spectabilis</i>	1
Common Eider - NT	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	1
Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>	1
Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>	1
Long-tailed Duck - VU	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>	1
Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>	1
Common Merganser	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	1
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	1
	GALLIFORMES	
Pheasants and allies	Phasianidae	
Rock Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus muta</i>	1
	GAVIIFORMES	
Loons	Gaviidae	
Red-throated Loon	<i>Gavia stellata</i>	1
Common Loon	<i>Gavia immer</i>	1
	PROCELLARIIFORMES	
Petrels, Shearwaters	Procellariidae	
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	1
Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>	1
	PODICIPEDIFORMES	
Grebes	Podicipedidae	
Horned Grebe - VU	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>	1
	PELECANIFORMES	
Hérons, Bitterns	Ardeidae	
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	1
	SULIFORMES	
Gannets, Boobies	Sulidae	
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>	1
Cormorants, Shags (Phalacrocoracidae)		

Common name	Scientific name	Trip
European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	1
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	1
	ACCIPITRIFORMES	
Kites, Hawks and Eagles	Accipitridae	
White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>	1
	CHARADRIIFORMES	
Oystercatchers	Haematopodidae	
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	1
Plovers (Charadriidae)	Charadriidae	
European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	1
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	1
Sandpipers, Snipes	Scolopacidae	
Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	1
Black-tailed Godwit - NT	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	1
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	1
Red Knot - NT	<i>Calidris canutus</i>	1
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	1
Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>	1
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	1
Red-necked Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>	1
Red Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus fulicarius</i>	1
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	1
Gulls, Terns and Skimmers	Laridae	
Black-legged Kittiwake - VU	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	1
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	1
Little Gull	<i>Hydrocoloeus minutus</i>	1
Mew Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	1
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	1
Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>	1
Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>	1
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	1
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	1
Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	1
Skuas	Stercorariidae	
Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>	1
Parasitic Jaeger	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>	1
Auks	Alcidae	
Thick-billed Murre	<i>Uria lomvia</i>	1
Common Murre	<i>Uria aalge</i>	1

Common name	Scientific name	Trip
Razorbill - NT	<i>Alca torda</i>	1
Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>	1
Atlantic Puffin - VU	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>	1
	COLUMBIFORMES	
Pigeons, Doves	Columbidae	
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	1
	STRIGIFORMES	
Owls	Strigidae	
Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>	1
	FALCONIFORMES	
Caracaras, Falcons	Falconidae	
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>	1
Gyrfalcon	<i>Falco rusticolus</i>	1
	PASSERIFORMES	
Crows, Jays	Corvidae	
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	1
Goldcrests, Kinglets	Regulidae	
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	1
Wrens	Troglodytidae	
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	1
Starlings, Rhabdornis	Sturnidae	
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	1
Thrushes	Turdidae	
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	1
Redwing - NT	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	1
Chats, Old World Flycatchers	Muscicapidae	
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	1
Wagtails, Pipits	Motacillidae	
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	1
Meadow Pipit - NT	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	1
Finches, Euphonias	Fringillidae	
Common Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>	1
Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>	H
Longspurs, Snow Buntings	Calcariidae	
Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>	1
Total Seen		81
Total Heard Only		1
TOTAL RECORDED		82

Mammal List

Common Name	Scientific Name	Trip
	CARNIVORA	
	Canidae	
Arctic Fox	<i>Vulpes lagopus</i>	1
	Phocidae	
Harbor Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>	1
	CETARTIODACTYLA	
	Balaenopteridae	
Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>	1
	Delphinidae	
White-beaked Dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus albirostris</i>	1
TOTAL		4



Humpback Whale disappearing into the horizon after swimming around near our boat.