

The land of ice and fire, and a few birds and animals to boot.

Iceland August 2019

By Chris and Vicky Harper

Although our family trip to Iceland was not primarily a bird watching trip, we did attempt to see as many of the key species as we could in our busy schedule, as well as some of the mammal species the country is well known for, especially the whales. So what follows is a day by day account of the wildlife sightings of our 10 days, with a bit of extra information thrown in for anyone thinking of visiting this amazing country.

August 2nd Manchester to Reykjavik

With direct flights for around £200 pound return with Iceland Air at a handy time, you can reach the country relatively cheaply, but as is well known, once there the cost of living is high. We opted for an Air B&B in Hafnarfjordur, which is a very pleasant town just on the outskirts of the capital for our first five nights. Our first bird of the trip (always fun looking) was a White Wagtail at the airport, and once we had picked up our hire car, the route East through the volcanic Reykjanes peninsular produced a few other sightings. These included Oystercatchers, Raven, many Lesser Black-backed Gulls, a few Whooper Swans, Greylag Geese and Arctic Terns.

After sorting out the accommodation, an exploration of the local park gave us great views of the Icelandic race of Redwing, but very little else. We all found it eerily strange that very few of the 'common' garden birds of the UK were not to be seen anywhere, as if Silent Spring had become real.

We did enjoy the Artic Terns fishing in the harbour until late in the evening, however, and the sunset at 11 pm to end our first evening.



Above: Redwing

August 3rd Reykjanes Peninsula

On route to the excellent Viking museum in Njarovik back through the volcanic rocks were some super sightings. Golden Plover were common in places, standing on tufts of grass and rocks surveying the area, as were Whimbrel. Meadow Pipits flitted along the road, with more White Wagtails. At sea we saw a few groups of Common Eider, and some family parties of Red-breasted Merganser with young in tow. Redshank were common amongst the rocks.

At the museum itself many Arctic Tern were in the harbour, and we watched as at least one Arctic Skua attempted to chase them down as they returned with food.

Further around the peninsula are the Hafnaberg Cliffs. The trek there is arduous, but we were certainly rewarded for our efforts. The track passed an active Arctic Skua nest as well as a few Wheatears, but the main reward comes at the cliffs. We guessed we would be too late to see the Brunnich's Guillemots, but there was still plenty of action. Scanning around there were still plenty of Puffins, Kittiwake and Fulmar on the cliffs, with many Gannet out at sea. A few Black Guillemot could also be seen lower down the cliffs.



Above: Arctic Skua and nest

Best of all the whole family watched a Minke Whale tracking south, followed by a few Gannets. Definitely got us in the mood for the whale watch the next day. We skipped back to the car through the volcanic sand path.

After a visit to the Bridge Between the Continents where another two Arctic Skua were seen, we then headed to Reykjanesta. As well as a view of Eldey to see the Gannet colony, there is a statue here of a Great Auk, as this is where the last one on planet Earth was killed. There is also a huge Arctic Tern colony nearby and thousands were swirling around as we passed nearby in the car. A Raven circled above, and three Arctic Skua were also in the area.

A quick sea watch saw us spot a Common Dolphin, and if we hadn't have had to make our appointment at The Blue Lagoon, we would have definitely spent more time at this spot.

So, we had to sacrifice an hour's sea watch for two hours in some thermal spas heated by volcanoes. It's a hard life sometimes.



Above: Great Auk statue



Above: Arctic Terns

August 4th Reykjavik

We had left it until as late as possible to book our whale watch, with us deciding on Elding as they had daily updates on what had been seen on their trips. The boat was comfy, crew friendly and had a distinct anti-whaling stance which also appealed. An early start saw us drive past a golf course on the edge of the city that had a sizeable flock of Redwing on it, with I'm sure Fieldfare too, but we couldn't stop to look. On the boat trip out there were large numbers of Puffin, Guillemot, Razorbill, Fulmar, Eider and Arctic Tern, some harassed by Arctic Skua.



Above: Fulmar

Near the tip of the Snaefellsnes Peninsula we were lucky to see a pod of ten White-beaked Dolphin, some coming right up to the bow of the boat. After bathing in their antics for a while, we noticed a distant feeding flock of Gannets and Manx Shearwaters, so headed over towards it. Soon enough the long backs of Minke Whale appeared, some we got excellent views of whilst still keeping a good distance. The guides reckoned there were four in total. An amazing experience, and well worth the £60 fee.



Above: White-beaked Dolphin



Above: Minke Whale

Back in the harbour we spotted a good candidate for a Glaucous Gull x Herring Gull hybrid.

The afternoon was spent enjoying the delights of Reykjavik, and one of them was just how close you could get to the Arctic Terns. In one special encounter near the Sun chaser statue, one regularly flew in to feed it's fledged young right in front of us. This, together with flyover Arctic Skua, Redwing feeding at your feet in cafes near the Parliament, and some Feral Pigeons made for a very enjoyable time in this lovely city.



Above: Arctic Tern and young

August 5th Golden Circle

Waking up to a skulking Blackbird was a surprise in the morning as we readied ourselves for the 'golden circle' tour. We drove ourselves, although there are plenty of companies who do it should anyone prefer that. At Pingvellir as well as spectacular scenery and being able to stand at the world's first Parliament and the Plate Boundary between North America and Eurasia, there were also some cracking birds. On the river was a Red-throated Diver nest, with two young in it. We were treated to some very close views as the birds left the nest for a swim about right under our noses.



Above and below: Red-throated Diver and young



Around the area were also a couple of Great Northern Divers, a few groups of Whooper Swan, and a few Arctic Skua. We coined the phrase 'a groupa Whoopa'. Little things...

The Geysir area proved less productive for birds, but a spectacle in itself, whilst the same could be said for the Gullfoss waterfall, although we did hear Ptarmigan here.

Around the Kerid volcanic crater were many Whimbrel, and a couple of Greenshank, which was a nice surprise. The journey back was long and tiring, but we still enjoyed spotting the odd Raven, Redwing and Meadow Pipit from the car, with as ever a spectacular scenic backdrop.

August 6th Vik

We broke the trip to the stunning black sand beach near Vik by visiting two gorgeous waterfalls en route, and as well as the usual birds seen, we did notice our first of a few Great Skua as we moved South, some flying right next to the car giving very close views. A distant Merlin was also seen having a go at a flock of small birds, presumably Meadow Pipit as that was by far the most numerous passerine.

From the beach itself there is great scenery as well as a great wildlife spectacle. Thousands of Puffins were on the cliff and sea, with many toing and froing from their nest burrows. Joining them were many Fulmar and the occasional Great and Arctic Skua flying over. Out at sea were diving Gannets, a few passing Manx Shearwater, and best of all quite close in three Brunnich's Guillemot riding the surf.



Above: Puffins off the beach

Our first lifer of the trip, and an unexpected one as we thought our best chance had gone previously at Hafnaberg Cliffs.

A quick wander behind Seljalandsfoss waterfall on the way back rounded off a long but very enjoyable day out.

August 7th Hafnarfjordur to Akureyri

The five-hour journey to the North of Iceland was as usual accompanied by some spectacular scenery, at times very bleak, but always interesting. The temperature dropped to six degrees by halfway there, and we didn't see it above that for the next four days. Good job we followed the 'bring lots of layers' advice.

Our first stop was at the Deildartunguhver Hot Springs, the biggest in Europe. A few Shags were by the coast on the way there, and we disturbed a Common Snipe by the visitor centre, where a warm cuppa was manna from heaven.

Travelling across the plateau to Blönduós for our second stop we passed many a 'groupa Whoopa' and flocks of Greylag, but precious little else. There is a bird hide overlooking the Bláa River here which made for an excellent lunch stop. From the hide we saw a flock of Common Scoter, Eider, Ringed Plover, three Red-throated Diver, a couple of splendid looking Iceland Gulls and three tatty looking Harlequin. Tatty but still a lifer for Vicky, and the first I'd seen for nine years. But it was seeing an Iceland Gull in its namesake country that proved a more lasting memory.



Above: Iceland Gull (with Lesser and Great Black-backed Gull)

The route from here to Akureyri is pretty special, and it was nice and clear as we passed glaciated valleys and glacier topped mountains. Bird wise, we had another Merlin chasing the Pipits, two Merlin in an aerial battle, and best by far three Raven chasing a Gyrfalcon on the side of a mountain. The problem in Iceland is because the main roads are raised off the ground it is almost impossible to stop to get better views of these spectacles, so we hoped for more prolonged views elsewhere. Still, it was a lifer for us, and as the number one target for the trip, arrival at our Air B&B in the town was with a spring in the step.

Eating out and exploring Iceland's second city was enjoyable if cold. A walk to the harbour gave good views of a flock of Common Crossbills in a front garden (couldn't turn one into a Two-barred version despite the mini invasion in the country this summer). On the sea were a couple of Slavonian Grebe, a Great Northern Diver looking splendid in Summer plumage, a Great Black-backed Gull as well as more Scoter.

Although cooler we did see a lot more Redwing and Starling here than in the South, maybe linking with the fact there were more trees here too.

Time to kit up and prepare for another winter's day in summer tomorrow.

August 8th Lake Myvatn

Most reviews mention the area around Lake Myvatn as one of the premier birding spots in Iceland, so spending a day here was really looked forward to. On the way to the point where the Laxa River leaves the lake we saw two Great Northern Divers fishing together, looking like a pair of snakes with just their necks above water.

On arrival at the point we were pleased to see a nice display board showing our target species in summer plumage. Looking downstream, we were lucky to see a few families of Barrow's Goldeneye surfing in the fast-flowing river, including young. Not summer plumage, but still looking good. A lifer for both of us, and getting decent views was the icing on the cake. A walk upstream gave some very close views of more Harlequin Duck, a couple of flyover Snipe and Black-tailed Godwits.



Above: Mývatn and Laxa display board



Above: Female Barrow's Goldeneye with young



Above: Harlequin with young

Passerines included a showy Wheatear, a few skulking Meadow Pipits, and a very brief Lapland Bunting, which despite us waiting around for ten minutes in the rain refused to show after feeding under the abundant low scrub.

A view of the lake gave us many ducks, including Shoveler, Teal, Wigeon and Gadwall, but little else as the rain really set in.

A trek to Europe's most powerful waterfall, Dettifoss, didn't quite give us pneumonia, but it was nice to see some close Ptarmigan, even though it was so cold we could hardly lift the binoculars to our eyes. A spectacular waterfall it is though.

Leaving the Myvatn area without seeing a close Gyr Falcon was getting us down a bit, but with the rain clearing, a brief splash of grey/white on a roadside hill gave us hope. We pulled in carefully, only blocking a third of the road, got out the scopes and were rewarded with a top view of one of these magnificent falcons. We managed to get a couple of pictures, but it looked agitated. As we watched another Gyr Falcon swooped in on it, causing it to take flight. There then followed an aerial battle between the two of them that took them out of range, but that minute and a half had provided the birding spectacle of the trip. It was an honour to witness it.



Above and below: Gyr Falcon



As the weather brightened up for our return, we had decent views of a couple of roadside Red-necked Phalarope near Godafoss Falls, and a Goosander on the river itself.

So, a successful day's birding and sightseeing, with the temperature not getting above four degrees Celsius, and a lot of rain and cold hands. It was nice to be back in the apartment, where we could get ready for another early start the following day.

9th August Grimsey Island

Grimsey Island is the only place where the Arctic Circle runs through Iceland, and that coupled with a chance of seeing more Whales and birds meant that a trip to the Island was high on our agenda. The ferry set sail in choppy

seas from Dalvik, with a lot of people ill on the three-hour crossing. Around the harbour were a few Purple Sandpiper, and many Black Guillemot in the harbour.

During the crossing, there were many Fulmar, Arctic Tern, Kittiwake, Puffin and a few Gannets. A passing Great Skua was the highlight. On arrival at Grimsey there were a group of Long-tailed Duck sheltering in the harbour, and a few Snow Bunting on the rocks. After warming up in the café, an hour walk to the Arctic Circle and associated artwork in cold, wet and windy conditions was brightened up by some superb wildlife encounters.



Above: Snow Bunting

Walking through an active Arctic Tern colony avoiding being pecked was fun, with an adjacent pool giving great views of Golden Plover, three Red-necked Phalarope, a few Dunlin, and always a few Snow Bunting flitting about. At the giant spherical artwork, we had lunch, with many Puffins by their burrows, Purple Sandpipers on the rocks together with a few Meadow Pipits. Many Snipe were flying about during the walk, with a few passing Arctic Skua giving excellent views.



Above: Golden Plover



Above: Purple Sandpiper



Above: Red-necked Phalarope

The ferry ride back was a lot smoother than the journey over, and we spent all three hours on deck looking for wildlife. We were well rewarded, especially as we neared the mainland, with views of Common, Bottlenose and White-beaked Dolphin, some close in. A distant waterspout had us all looking carefully, and we were right to keep watching as we then saw a cracking Humpback Whale breach, followed by a tail fluke dive. Just what we'd hoped for and hi fives all round (Photo T). We spread the word, and more people came on deck, but a few more Common Dolphin and a Harbour Porpoise was their reward. Ours was a minute of pure adrenaline rush for a three-hour watch. Worth it? Totally.

A drive back to Akureyri saw us searching in the twilight for Arctic Fox unsuccessfully, but the breaching Humpback kept us buzzing to late in the night.



Above: Post Humpback celebration

10th August Hofsos

A morning quick hour down by the harbour gave good views of Glaucous Gull, more Black Guillemots and Long-tailed Ducks, Slavonian Grebe, Red-breasted Merganser and both Arctic and Great Skua.

A long journey through the mountains again gave us good views of three Merlin, many Raven, and nearer the town of Hofsos a Greater Black-backed Gull feasting on a Common Snipe. Many Red-breasted Merganser, Common Scoter and Long-tailed Duck were in the lough.

It reached five degrees today!!

11th August Akureyri to Keflavik

The long journey back down south was pretty bleak, but we did see six Great Northern Diver, four Merlin, two Slavonian Grebe, another Iceland Gull, a huge Golden Plover flock, many Whooper Swan and Greylag on the sea, and more Black Guillemot.

A stop near Blonduos for lunch had us seeing a flock of Lesser Redpoll in the woodland, and a superb Short-eared Owl treated us to its quartering near the marshland at Akranes.

In Keflavik itself, a walk along the seafront gave us excellent views of more Iceland Gulls and some very close Gannets. Early night ensued as we had a very early flight back the following day.

12th August Keflavik to Manchester

The only extra bird for the trip was a larger Tern Species flying near the airport which we assumed was a Sandwich, but with our binoculars packed we couldn't be 100% certain.

But 70 bird species was a pretty decent haul, with some unforgettable moments, some spectacular scenery, and many cetaceans to boot. This together with its history and culture and relatively small size makes Iceland a very accessible country for wildlife watching and we would heartily recommend it. But take lots of layers.

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