

# ICELAND

25 JUNE – 3 JULY 2005

## TOUR REPORT

**LEADER:** DAVE FARROW

This was the second Birdquest 'Birds and Whales' tour to Iceland, a great tour with wonderful birds, cetaceans and landscapes, featuring no less than five boat trips in search of the various thrills on offer. Although this sub-arctic island has a reduced species list, the quality of the avian delights is high, and we enjoyed such good birds as the gorgeous Harlequin Duck, Barrow's Goldeneye, Red Phalaropes (breeding here alongside the plentiful Red-necked Phalaropes), five species of auk including Brünnich's Guillemot, Great Northern Divers in breeding dress, and White-tailed Eagles and Gyr Falcons both attending their eyries. The mammals were good too, and although this wasn't a year for Blue Whales, we had stunning encounters with a dozen Killer Whales, ten Minke Whales and the final flourish of a confiding Humpback Whale.

We arrived in thick drizzle and rain, and headed to the small port of Olafsvík, perched near the end of the spectacular Snaefellsnes peninsula and our home for the next four nights. The weather was grim yet the journey still yielded some excellent birds, with a pair of superb Great Northern Divers, Red-throated Divers and some very richly coloured Icelandic Black-tailed Godwits. Olafsvík is an ideal centre for exploring this area, and we began our birding here around the tip of the rocky peninsula. On a blustery morning we found Brünnich's Guillemot standing on ledges on the rugged cliffs alongside Common Guillemot, Razorbills and messy colonies of Black-legged Kittiwakes. Northern Wheatears bounced about on the jagged lava fields, and on fresh pools we saw our first Red-necked Phalaropes, Dunlin, Tufted Duck and flocks of Glaucous Gulls of all ages. The lanes here were littered with Arctic Terns, standing in loose groups alongside their colonies on the adjacent green sward where European Golden and Common Ringed Plovers scuttled about.

From Olafsvík we embarked on the first of our five boat trips on this tour, the whale-watching excursion aboard the powerful catamaran 'Brimrun'. We powered our way out onto the open ocean to the accompaniment of hordes of Atlantic Puffin flying back and forth, Northern Fulmars, Northern Gannets, a few Great and Arctic Skuas, and rafts of auks that lay thickly on the surface. Bouncing a little as we headed further out, the dulcet tones of the captain announced our first cetacean sighting – Killer Whale! We hove-to alongside the first of two pods of these stunning beasts and had close views of bulls, cows and calves, a scene to be repeated just a few miles away with another group that were

even more obliging. A couple of Northern Minke Whales passed by stealthily, and before we knew it, six hours had passed and we were back in port. This coincided with a sunny spell (the weather here changing by the hour!) so we nipped down the road for some more land-based birding, finding a colourful collection of 13 Harlequin Ducks loafing by the beach, mostly males which leave the breeding duties to the drabber females who remain on the rivers of the interior. Standing nearby was a group of demure Purple Sandpipers, a misnomer for these dull brown fellows at this season! In spite of the no show so far this year by the big blue one, today had been quite a show! It was hard to believe we had seen so much already and we had only been in the country for a day!

The following day was a varied one, and we began with a slow drive through the dramatic landscape along the north side of the peninsula. In the many lagoons and coves we studied flocks of Glaucous Gulls, found many Common Eiders – the females guarding their attendant flotillas of fluffy chicks, while the drakes lounged about, scratching and moulting. We also saw our first Greater Scaup, Red-breasted Mergansers, and summer-plumaged Ruddy Turnstones. We embarked from Stykkishólmur on the sister ship of the previous day's cruise for a rather gentler ride around the beautiful bay of Breidafjörður with its myriad islets. Finding our target of White-tailed Eagle was never easier, our boat operator having a license to approach a nest where a pair of these huge birds sat looking majestic on a low skerrie. Their nest was almost out of view, but a large chick was briefly visible, before the captain reversed away quickly to leave them in peace. We enjoyed close looks at Atlantic Puffins standing by their nest burrows, European Shags with well-grown chicks, noisy Black-legged Kittiwakes on the cliffs and dapper Black Guillemots swimming in the calm inshore waters. Before returning ashore we were treated to raw scallops that were scooped from the seabed for our delectation. We paused for a fine lunch in the strangely named 'Sea Bastard Café', passing on the offer of pan-fried Puffin! A brief look in a conifer plantation revealed a notably high-density of Redwings, many of which were very vocal.

The next part of our adventure was to take the ferry from Stykkishólmur across the Breidafjörður to the enchanting island of Flatey. This tiny piece of land has more than its fair share of birds, and soon after stepping onto land we were beset by many noisy Common Redshanks, and Common Snipe 'chipping' away or buzzing overhead in their drumming displays. Snow Buntings sang from the houses, and Red-necked Phalaropes spun at our feet, in puddles in the middle of the village! Arctic Terns kept up a constant mobbing and Black Guillemots carrying fishy morsels sped to and from their nests tucked away in the boulders along the shore. We had come in search of the rare Red Phalaropes as the seaweed-strewn bay here hosts one of their only European breeding grounds. After much scanning across the cove, we eventually found four of these bright waders though they remained flighty and never came close, cryptic among the equal-sized Common Eider chicks. We returned late to our hotel, not that it ever got dark for the duration of the trip! A visit to Flatey must rank as one of the best birding experiences available in Iceland, a wonderful close encounter with so many birds.

The next day we again visited the rocky headland of Ondverdanes, successfully finding a confiding pair of Rock Ptarmigan strolling about on the mossy rocks. The weather looked tempestuous, but the more seaworthy in our group headed off on the 'Brimrun' once more in search of cetaceans, while the landlubbers headed off for a full circuit of the Snaefellsnes peninsula. The sailors added White-beaked Dolphin to our tally with great views of some breaching in front of the boat, plus a dozen more Killer Whales. Meanwhile, on land we stopped to enjoy rich banks of orchids and a plethora of other flowers, a colony of Brünnich's Guillemot's high on a volcanic stack and Harlequins bobbing about on a foaming sea. Arctic Terns were still incubating, lifting off their eggs to go into attack whenever they were approached, and Whimbrels called noisily around us. Explorations of the ponds and lakes in the shadow of the rugged mountains yielded Great Northern Divers, our first Horned

Grebes in splendid breeding dress, Eurasian Wigeon, Northern Shoveler and gorgeous Black-tailed Godwits.

A long journey was necessary to reach our next destination, and as we coursed along the north side of the Snaefellsnes peninsula we found a remarkable gathering of 600 Whooper Swans in a shallow bay. We paused for lunch at the harbour of Blonduos on the north coast, finding a yodelling Great Northern Diver, a large gathering of drake Common Eiders and a drake Long-tailed Duck (curiously in full *winter* plumage!) We found scores of Pink-footed Geese with goslings along a broad river valley, saw two different Short-eared Owls, and, as we neared Lake Myvatn, we saw our first Barrow's Goldeneyes on the Laxa river.

From the well-appointed hotel at Myvatn, it was a short stroll to the lakeshore where we found numerous Horned Grebes, some sitting on their nests very close to the shore. We circumnavigated the lake, darting out of the vehicle when the weather allowed! In the birch woods on the shore we watched a 'mighty' Icelandic Wren pumping out his loud song, while Common Redpolls bounded overhead. The lake itself was covered in waterfowl. We found hundreds of Barrow's Goldeneyes, a single Common Goldeneye, Greater Scaup, Tufted Ducks, Red-breasted Mergansers, Long-tailed Ducks, Common Scoters, Mallard, Gadwall, Eurasian Teal and Eurasian Wigeon and we had a great look at a drake American Wigeon. A few drake Northern Pintail were seen and a duck was put off a discreet nest holding six eggs. Red-necked Phalaropes dotted the shallows and many female Harlequins bobbed and dived in the rushing River Laxa. The landscape and geology entertained us as well, with numerous volcanic features all around including the scary boiling mud pools and fuming fumaroles of Hverar, and at the end of the day a session in the warm blue waters of the geothermal spa was a treat for some. The highlight however of this rich area was the top predator – Gyr Falcon! We had fantastic encounters with these during our stay, with a rain-lashed and Merlin-mobbed male sat on a roadside hillock, but best of all a nest located on a hillside, its position betrayed by the white splash and two mewling youngsters clambering about on a ledge. The pallid female sat close-by, looking windswept as it surveyed the landscape, launching into flight and soaring over her domain. Flushed with success, we had one last boat trip to make, and from 66 degrees north and the port of Húsavík we headed into the calm bay of Skjálfandi. Atlantic Puffins and Northern Fulmars abounded, and before long we met a pod of Northern Minke Whales, their noses bouncing out of the water as they surfaced around our ship. A Humpback Whale came to join the fun, and languidly snorted on the surface in between shallow dives, too lazy to raise his flukes!

The time had come to leave and head south, and after last looks at Barrow's Goldeneyes and Harlequin Ducks on the river Laxa we paused at the powerful waterfall at Godafoss, where a female Merlin shot by and Whimbrels called nervously from the roadside. After a windswept picnic the weather closed in again and eventually our journey drew to a close in Keflavik. We enjoyed a final supper, (mention must be made of the high quality of the food throughout!) and reflected on our fun, varied and exciting trip to this fascinating island.

So many wonderful sights, and it never got dark for the whole of our stay! We saw virtually everything possible, a small birdlist that is more than made up for by the dynamic and intimate experiences with the breeding birds, and the cetaceans seen from well-organised whale-watching boats. Where better to enjoy the midsummer of the higher latitudes than in Iceland?

## SYSTEMATIC LIST

Species which were heard but not seen are indicated by the symbol (H).

Species which were not personally recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (NL).

### GAVIIDAE

Red-throated Diver *Gavia stellata*: Several fine examples seen on small lakes where they breed, but only around the Snaefellsnes peninsula.

Great Northern Diver *Gavia immer*: Some superb views of these goliaths, including a pair (or two) on small lakes on the south side of Snaefellsnes, a calling bird on the sea at Blonduos and up to four on and around Myvatn. This is the only area in Europe where this primarily North American species breeds.

### PODICIPEDIDAE

Horned Grebe (Slavonian G) *Podiceps auritus*: Our first birds were seen on the small lakes on the south side of Snaefellsnes, then we entered the main breeding area at Myvatn where they could even be seen from ones hotel room! We found several birds sitting on their nests around the shores of the lake, with 30 or more recorded there in a day!

### PROCELLARIIDAE

Northern Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis*: Common throughout, numerous at sea and many were seen at nest cliffs such as at Olafsvík, but also often some way from the shore. We saw a large gaggle of them gathering by the harbour at Húsavík.

### SULIDAE

Northern Gannet *Morus bassanus*: A few were seen from our pelagics on the 'Brimrun', also from the end of Snaefellsnes and in the bay at Húsavík.

### PHALACROCORACIDAE

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*: A small number were seen around, such as at Borganes, and then many more on the islets around Stykkishólmur.

European Shag *Phalacrocorax aristotelis*: Some excellent close views of birds on their breeding cliffs on our Breidafjörður cruise, plus several seen around the Snaefellsnes cliffs.

### ANATIDAE

Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus*: Plenty were seen throughout the tour, many with cygnets, often on small roadside lakes plus we saw a remarkable gathering of 600 in the shallow bay of the Alftafjorder near Stykkishólmur.

Pink-footed Goose *Anser brachyrhynchus*: We found a large gathering (120+) of adults with goslings along the Heradsvotn river near Varmahild, seen on the way out and on the way back!

Greylag Goose *Anser anser*: Plenty of 'wild' birds around the island, many with large goslings.

Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope*: Numerous around Myvatn, also seen on the small lakes near Hoftun. Mainly drakes were visible though a couple of females with big parties of chicks were also seen.

American Wigeon *Anas americana*: A splendid male and then a female were found with a flock of the preceding species, on Lake Myvatn.

Gadwall *Anas strepera*: Not uncommon on Lake Myvatn.

Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca*: A small number were found on Myvatn, with odd singles seen elsewhere.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*: Seen daily in typical habitats.

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*: A few were seen around Myvatn including males in smart breeding plumage, and a female was put off a hidden nest in low waterside bushes that held six eggs.

Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata*: At least eight were seen on the small lakes at Hoftun on the south side of Snaefellsnes.

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*: Hundreds were seen on Lake Myvatn, and odd birds were encountered on Snaefellsnes.

Greater Scaup *Aythya marila*: Hundreds of these dapper ducks were seen on Lake Myvatn, and several more were seen along sheltered coasts on Snaefellsnes.

Common Eider *Somateria mollissima*: Very numerous all around the coasts of Iceland, with the males beginning to gather in post-breeding moulting-flocks such as at Blonduos, the females staying in sheltered coves with their crèches of chicks. The race of Eider here is *borealis* that ranges from Iceland to Eastern Canada, and has stronger yellow tones on the bill and stiffer, modified long scapulars that form little sails on the back. The Icelandic population is resident.

Harlequin Duck *Histrionicus histrionicus*: One of the flagship birds of Iceland, we were blessed with multiple encounters with these marvellous creatures. Our first was a group of 13, mostly males, loafing by the shore near Olafsvík. We found three more bobbing in the surf at Malarrif, and a more docile couple of males at Hellnar. We then found ten or more in their nesting habitat on the Laxa river at Myvatn, all but one were females as the males flee the area as soon as children are mentioned!

Long-tailed Duck *Clangula hyemalis*: Our first were three flying by on our whale trip out of Olafsvík, then we found a splendid male in the harbour at Blonduos that was in full *winter* plumage! A couple of dozen more on Lake Myvatn were in their breeding dress although all were distant.

Common Scoter *Melanitta nigra*: A couple of males and females seen at Myvatn.

Barrow's Goldeneye *Bucephala islandica*: Plenty of these seen at Myvatn, with at least 200 counted. The only European population of this North American species is on Iceland, and the estimated population of 2000 birds are mostly resident.

Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula*: A drake was seen near our hotel at Myvatn.

Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator*: Frequently encountered around the rocky coastlines, also there were many on Lake Myvatn.

#### ACCIPITRIDAE

White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla*: A fantastic close look at a pair perched on a rocky islet on our Stykkishólmur boat trip. There was at least one chick visible on their nest that was mostly hidden to us.

#### FALCONIDAE

Merlin *Falco columbarius*: Four birds were seen; one zapped past the bus on our first evening, another sped by on the Snaefellsnes peninsula, one briefly mobbed a perched Gyr Falcon at Myvatn and another female gave a better view close to Godafoss.

Gyrfalcon *Falco rusticolus*: We were fortunate to have some fantastic views of a cliff side nest with two large chicks, fidgeting about and calling loudly. The attendant female sat up prominently and gave us one good aerial display. We also had a great look at another bird, sitting on a hillock in the rain. Certainly the 'bird-of-the-trip' for the leader!

#### TETRAONIDAE

Rock Ptarmigan *Lagopus mutus*: A pair were enjoyed at close range at Ondverdanes near Olafsvík, with another single seen nearby. It was interesting to see them just yards from the shore, at this latitude sea-level must correspond to the much higher altitude in Scotland where they are generally not found below 800m!

#### HAEMATOPODIDAE

Eurasian Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*: Plentiful throughout except at Myvatn, favouring the rocky coasts.

#### CHARADRIIDAE

Common Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*: Seen on all but one day, usually just in ones and twos in suitable nesting habitat.

European Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria*: A pleasingly common bird seen daily, with some nice close looks at birds in the Olafsvík area.

#### SCOLOPACIDAE

Purple Sandpiper *Calidris maritima*: Small parties were seen around the coasts, with eight near Olafsvík, three near Stykkishólmur, two on Flatey and three at Malarrif.

Dunlin *Calidris alpina*: Fairly thin on the ground and only encountered in small numbers, although we heard their gravelly-sounding song on a couple of occasions.

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*: Common throughout, and very vocal with their 'chipper' calls as well as their enchanting aerial displays, the stiff outer-tail feathers that make the drumming noise visible in close overhead views.

Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*: Some good views of gorgeous summer-plumaged birds of the race *islandica*, on the south side of the Snaefellsnes peninsula and around Myvatn. They are clearly brighter and more boldly patterned than the Western European birds, and their bills appeared clearly shorter and thinner.

Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*: Quite a few of these seen during the course of our trip, with memorable birds near Stykkishólmur with two chicks, and an alarmed pair at close range close to Godafoss.

Common Redshank *Tringa totanus*: One of the commonest and certainly the noisiest bird in Iceland!

Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*: Two were seen near Grundafjorder, and another four were seen on Flatey, all in fine summer plumage. They breed a lot further north than Iceland!

Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus*: Some delightful encounters with these, in ditches and on pools throughout our tour route plus a large number found around the shores of Lake Myvatn. Most memorable were the tame birds around the houses on Flatey.

Red Phalarope (Grey P) *Phalaropus fulicaria*: We had distant views of at least four at Flatey, although elusive, flighty and distant across the bay! Another North American species that has one of its only European breeding population here on Iceland.

#### STERCORARIIDAE

Arctic Skua *Stercorarius parasiticus*: Seen often cruising over open country and along the coasts, with some great looks at both dark and light phase birds.

Great Skua *Catharacta skua*: Three were seen on our first whale cruise from Olafsvík, then one more on our last trip at Húsavík.

#### LARIDAE

Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus*: Found all over the island, with some well grown juveniles flapping about by our hotel at Myvatn.

- Mew Gull (Common G) *Larus canus*: A few seen along our route, along the Heradsvotn river valley near Varmahild, and in the Akureyri area.
- Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*: Numerous around the coasts with some larger flocks around Snaefellsnes.
- Herring Gull *Larus argentatus*: Almost the scarcest large gull around the coasts, we saw singles near Olafsvík and at Blonduos, plus 10 or so at Húsavík.
- Glaucous Gull *Larus hyperboreus*: Some large flocks of birds in all plumages, on the lagoons and beaches around Snaefellsnes and along to Stykkishólmur, with a handful more seen at Húsavík.
- Great Black-backed Gull *Larus marinus*: Plenty around the coasts with some big flocks around the Snaefellsnes peninsula.
- Black-legged Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla*: Seen commonly at sea, plus we had good looks at colonies at Ondverdanes, Hellnar and near Stykkishólmur.

#### STERNIDAE

- Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea*: Very common throughout, with a memorable colony near Rif that defended their eggs with attacks to the head. They were also a feature of Flatey where they could be seen attacking sheep!

#### ALCIDAE

- Common Guillemot *Uria aalge*: Plenty of these were seen out to sea beyond Snaefellsnes, and quite a few around the cliffs at Ondverdanes and Malarrif. A small proportion of their number were of the 'Bridled' form.
- Brünnich's Guillemot *Uria lomvia*: Good looks at our first of these on the cliffs at Ondverdanes, where eight or more huddled up with the above species. We saw some forty or more on the impressive stacks at Malarrif, and a couple were picked out on our first whale cruise.
- Razorbill *Alca torda*: Only seen around the rocky peninsula of Snaefellsnes, either around the cliffs at Ondverdanes or out on the open ocean.
- Black Guillemot *Cephus grylle*: Seen close inshore usually, around Olafsvík, Stykkishólmur, Húsavík, and most memorably on Flatey where we saw many birds nesting among the boulders above the tideline, carrying food (sand-eels?) to their hungry chicks.
- Atlantic Puffin *Fratercula arctica*: Surely no birder ever tires of watching these! Very numerous in Iceland, we saw big concentrations on the sea off Snaefellsnes, and smaller numbers around the Breidafjörður islands and at Húsavík.

#### STRIGIDAE

- Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus*: Some sharp eyes in our bus spotted two different birds in one day! Our first was by the main road near Blonduos, the second was closer to Myvatn.

#### MOTACILLIDAE

- Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*: The default passerine over the whole of Iceland.
- White Wagtail (Pied W) *Motacilla alba*: One of the few songbirds in Iceland, we saw them almost daily. All birds relate to the nominate race.

#### TROGLODYTIDAE

- Winter Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*: We found the mighty Icelandic form of this fellow singing loudly in the birch-woods at Myvatn, sounding slightly different but looking as big as a Dunnock!

## TURDIDAE

Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*: Seen regularly along our route, favouring rocky areas such as on the Snaefellsnes peninsula.

Redwing *Turdus iliacus*: Numerous and vocal wherever there were trees or other cover, they seemed to be at a very high density in the plantation at Stykkishólmur and in the birch wood by Myvatn. These of course all refer to the Icelandic race *coburni*.

## CORVIDAE

Common Raven *Corvus corax*: The only corvid on the island, and one of the few predators it would seem. We found them quite widely.

## STURNIDAE

Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*: Odd birds seen, at Olafsvík, Blonduos and in the Reykjavik area.

## FRINGILLIDAE

Common Redpoll *Carduelis flammea*: We saw several of the endemic *islandica* race around the birch 'woods' of Myvatn, though mostly in flight and in poor weather!

## EMBERIZIDAE

Snow Bunting *Plectrophenax nivalis*: Seen often in ones and twos, from Keflavik airport to Myvatn, favouring either the more barren and rocky areas, or singing from houses such as some delightful pairs on Flatey!

## MAMMALS

Grey Seal *Halichoerus grypus*: Two were glimpsed on our boat ride around the rocky islets of the Breidafjörður, and a single pup was seen at sea off Húsavík.

American Mink *Mustela vison* (NL): Roger saw one of these in Olafsvík.

Northern Minke Whale *Balaenoptera acutorostrata*: Two or more were seen very briefly from the 'Brimrun', and then we had full satisfaction with up to eight animals seen off Húsavík, including some very close views!

Humpback Whale *Megaptera novaeangliae*: A single animal on a very calm sea off Húsavík was confiding but languid, too lazy to lift his flukes when diving but nevertheless very thrilling, and the icing on the cake of our many boat rides!

Killer Whale *Orcinus orca*: A good dozen were enjoyed at close range for a long period on our first ride on the 'Brimrun', with bulls, cows and calves all seen very close to the boat. The second trip on the 'Brimrun' enjoyed more great views of these fantastic beasts.

White-beaked Dolphin *Lagenorhynchus albirostris* (NL): Some eight were seen on the second outing on the 'Brimrun'.