



Midnight sun Gyrfalcon - no. 1 highlight of the tour! (Mike Watson

ICELAND

8 – 16 June 2019

LEADER: MIKE WATSON

Back again, this time after only a two years gap we enjoyed another very memorable visit to the '*Land of Ice and Fire*'. There were many birding highlights in the stunning volcanic landscape including: a pair of Gyrfalcons at the nest; two pairs of White-tailed Eagles; 25 Harlequin Ducks; 150+ Barrow's Goldeneyes; a Red and countless Red-necked Phalaropes on the delightful islet of Flatey and elsewhere; Long-tailed Jaeger (or Skua) at its only breeding site in Iceland and Thick-billed Murres (or Brünnich's Guillemots) on their breeding cliffs on the Snaefellsnes Peninsula. Other northern specialities included Rock Ptarmigan, King Eider, Pale-bellied Brent Geese, Common Loon (or Great Northern Diver), Horned (or Slavonian) Grebe, Purple Sandpipers singing on their breeding grounds, Glaucous and Iceland Gulls. '*Land bird*' species were few, in fact we only just made it into double figures. We also saw a couple of rarities in the form of Iceland's 18th White-winged Tern and a lone Atlantic Canada Goose. We recorded 74 bird species this time, concentrating on specialities.

Mammals were also few and only two of them on dry land - Arctic Fox and the much less welcome American Mink, an unfortunate introduction. The marine mammals included Humpback Whales, White-beaked Dolphins and (at last!) the big one, Blue Whale! We diverted from the birding trail several times to visit non-avian wonders of this incredible island including: Godafoss ('Falls of God'); Dettifoss (Europe's most powerful waterfall by volume of water); Gullfoss ('Golden Falls'); Geysir (the site of the origin of the word of geyser, where the impressive '*Strokkur*' was blowing regularly during our visit) and finally a quick look at Þingvellir (the site of Iceland's first parliament, set in a natural amphitheatre right on Mid-Atlantic ridge). Did I mention the delicious seafood and wonderful people?



White-winged Tern, Gardur Pools (Mike Watson)

Away from the hustle and bustle of the incredibly busy Kefavik Airport, we made a short detour to Gardur on the north coast of the Reykjanes Peninsula. Unfortunately the hoped-for White-winged Tern was no longer still on the 'middle pool' where it had been feeding only an hour before the tour started but we were pleased to get some Manx Shearwaters passing close inshore at nearby Gardur Lighthouse, a very welcome bird for our non-British contingent! You cannot see it on many Birdquest tours. There were some Greenland-bound Sanderlings still here in their smart breeding plumage and a steady stream of auks (three species – Razorbill, Common Murre (or Guillemot) and Atlantic Puffins) moving west out of the huge Faxaflói ('Faxi's Bay'). We needed to be on our way, already delayed by a late flight but there was just enough time for another quick look at the 'middle pool'. As soon as we rolled up, there it was again, hawking insects out in the middle of the small lagoon, a pristine breeding plumaged White-winged Tern. It was only the 18th record for Iceland and a fantastic welcome and start to the tour! Coincidentally our '*Welcome to Iceland*' rarity last time was also white-winged, the scoter. We lingered for a while to admire this terrific bird before starting our long journey to our accommodation on the Snæfellsnes Peninsula.

The overwhelming first impression of the Icelandic landscape on the Reykjanes Peninsula at this time of year is of a rugged tree-less countryside, covered by ancient lichen-clad lava flows with gaudy patches of blue Nootka Lupins, which seem to be ever more prolific each year. A little further north, towards the capital Reykjavik the lava flows give way to birch and willow trees on the outskirts of the city. One can usually count on a Eurasian Blackbird on this journey but not today. The soft southwest was the first part of Iceland to be permanently settled, by the Vikings in AD871 (+/- 2 as the exact date is uncertain). The slightly milder climate here allowed trees and crops to grow and within a hundred years or so all the original woodland cover around Reykjavik had been cleared either for fuel or use as agricultural land. We paused briefly along the way at a White-tailed Eagle eyrie but the birds were keeping a low profile in the brisk and cold northerly wind, so we pressed on – better views would have to wait until later. On a sunny evening we drove west, green pastures and marshes flew by with shaggy-maned Icelandic ponies here and there, overlooked by towering escarpments. Of course there were some birds too. In fact it is impossible to get away from shorebirds at this time of year in Iceland. Eurasian Whimbrels, Icelandic Black-tailed Godwits, Common Redshank and European Golden Plovers were commonly seen throughout the tour and it was particularly nice to hear their songs for a change. The drumming fights of Common Snipe were also almost always heard as soon as we got out of the van 24/7, no matter where we were. We also saw our first waterfowl including common breeding birds like Greylag Goose, Whooper Swan,



Red-necked Phalarope (Mike Watson)

Mallard and Tufted Duck. Northern Fulmars wheeled around over fjords next to their breeding cliffs (another common sight in coastal Iceland) and a Parasitic Jaeger (or Arctic Skua) patrolled roadside meadows as we passed by. After going through the 5km long Akranes Tunnel we eventually crossed the mountainous spine of the Snæfellsnes Peninsula and descended to Stykkisholmur, another small town with a spectacular modernist church, its tower in the shape of a ship's bow. The Snæfellsnes Peninsula is described as '*Iceland in miniature*'. It has a bit of everything: menacing volcano cones; reindeer moss-covered lava felds; snow-capped mountains; impressive basalt sea cliffs; dramatically styled modernist churches; pretty brightly painted buildings and the ubiquitous blue swathes of lupins.

Next came one of our most enjoyable days in Iceland, our day trip to delightful Flatey ('*Flat Island*'). We boarded the Ferry Baldur ('*Baldy*') after breakfast, which passed by numerous small skerries in Breiðafjörður ('*Broad Fjord*') dotted with eiders, shags, puffins and Black Guillemots. Barely off the quay on Flatey, the first Red-necked Phalaropes greeted us. They were everywhere all over the island, in every tiny little marsh and ditch and ultra tame as usual. Continuing further, Snow Buntings were singing from the rooftops of the pretty wooden houses and were feeding recently fledged young amongst pink clumps of thrift. Common Redshanks and Arctic Terns scolded us as we passed through their territories and then we began our search for our own '*Flatey Enigma*', the Red Phalarope. This is often a tough nut to crack, away from the closed bird sanctuary of the northern half of the island. This proved to be the case, maybe as they were keeping to the sheltered side of the offshore islets out of view in the cold north wind? There were even a few unforeseen spots of rain today! So we broke off for lunch and at the second attempt and thanks to some sharp spotting by William we eventually enjoyed some distant views of a brick-red female (well everyone who was paying attention did, oops) along a rocky seaweed-covered shore.

Crèches of eider ducklings were watched over by their mums and aunties and Common Ringed Plovers, Dunlins and Black-tailed Godwits were also in evidence. We also saw at least nine northbound Ruddy Turnstones around the shores of Flatey, the males particularly smart in their brightly contrasting breeding plumage. We do not often see them as bright as this at home! We also enjoyed the lovely phalarope pools in the main 'village' as well as the wonderful coconut curry soup and fish in the adorable little Hôtel Flatey, again without doubt the nicest place we ate at on this tour. Flatey is only two kilometres long and one at its widest and in the summer it is a retreat of artists, writers and wealthy bohemians as well as a number of original families. It is said







Arctic Fox, Snæfellsnes NP Previous pages: Ruddy Turnstone, Arctic Tern and Snow Buntings (Mike Watson)

that money cannot buy you a house on the island, you can only acquire one by marrying into an island family or through inheritance. Its small church was built in 1926 and has an incredible mural painted on the ceiling featuring island life. Flatey has a winter population of only five people and is also the setting for Viktor Arnar Ingolfsson's 2012 acclaimed novel '*The Flatey Enigma*', which refers to the Flatey Book, an important medieval manuscript written between 1387 and 1394 by the monks who lived at the monastery here. Sadly, all too soon it was time to catch the ferry to the mainland, along with the other day-trippers. A trip to the phalarope island of Flatey is a must for birders visiting Iceland and I'm happy to have been able to spend time there several times, photographing the tame birds, hanging out in the hotel and watching the world go by... and by the way, did I mention the delicious food? Err the basic offerings for dinner on the ferry itself were less than gourmet standard but were tasty enough and no-one seemed to mind.

Off the ferry at last we still had some way to go before we reached our accommodation. As we drove west along the Snæfellsnes Peninsula, passing the famous landscape photography site of Kirkjufell, where everyone takes the same photo of a waterfall, with quintessential mountain background. Well, it's your own photo and it is a magnificent composition after all. It is also now famous as a filming location in Game of Thrones. It appeared twice, in season 7, episode 6 when the heroes go to north of the wall, described as the '*Arrowhead Mountain*'. It had obviously shifted somewhat as it also appeared in season 6 episode 5, with Kirkjufellsfoss in view, when the children of the forest created the Night King. This was the first of five GOT filming locations that now happen to be on our itinerary!

We rolled up in the sunshine at our hotel at a planned but rather antisocial hour. No problem with that as usual in tourist-friendly Iceland although the Bulgarian hotel janitor struggled somewhat in the style of Manuel in *Faulty Towers*. It had been another long day but we were not finished yet. The glorious sunny weather had returned and it would be a shame not to make the most of it so we headed out on a midnight sun excursion. We spent some time exploring the lava fields seeing several male Rock Ptarmigans, still wearing many white feathers of their winter plumage and allowing close approach, as well as a few Northern Wheatears and Snow Buntings. The lava fields are generally inhospitable and hold few species but European Golden Plover is one of the few shorebirds that appears to like them. We also enjoyed some very nice views of an Arctic Fox by the roadside, no doubt especially active when feeding hungry cubs.



Thick-billed Murres, Svörtuloft (Mike Watson)

We began our exploration of the peninsula early next morning starting at a stream that flows into the sea just east of Olafsvik. We had our first views of Glaucous Gulls, which hang around here, just opposite the fish factory. Several Red-throated Loons (or Diver) were on a small roadside pools – they breed in very public places in Iceland! The stars of the morning pre-breakfast recce, however, were a second calendar year Iceland Gull, which gave some very instructive views alongside the Glaucous Gulls, an orange-billed young drake King Eider, which was associating with the small eider flock and finally two Purple Sandpipers on the rocks below. Luckily all three stayed put long enough for the sleepy heads to enjoy a very efficient morning's birding after breakfast! The early morning Common Blackbirds did not put in another appearance though. Our next stop was the impressive bright orange Svörtuloft Lighthouse at Önðverdanes. A well-built viewpoint complete with safety railings etc overlooks some seabird cliff nesting ledges and a very convenient row at the top of the cliff contained Razorbill, Common Murre (or Guillemot) and the highly sought-after Thick-billed Murre (or Brünnich's Guillemot), allowing excellent comparison. The latter high arctic breeders are at the southernmost limit of their range in Iceland but are still easy to find at Önðverdanes. It was interesting to see at least two of the three pairs in exactly the same spots on the basalt cliffs as in 2017. Also here were a few Black Guillemots and Northern Gannets and lots of puffins offshore.

Inland from the basalt cliffs lie the immense lava fields emanating from snow-capped Snæfellsjökull (1446m). It is probably best known as the setting for French author Jules Verne's 'Journey to the Centre of the Earth' – '*Whoever descends into the crater of Snæfells Yocul can reach the center of the earth*'. Fancy living on a volcano, remembering that its 1100 known of years of dormancy is only the blink of an eye in geological time? Research has shown that the Snæfellsjökull system has erupted at least 25 times in the last 10,000 years. I wonder when the next one will be? Iceland continues to experience much seismic activity and some of its volcanoes do not give much warning of an eruption. For instance Hekla, the 'Witch Volcano' in Southern Iceland was considered to be the gates of hell until the 1800s. It ought to be feared as it is aseismic and there is sometimes a warning of only an hour or less of an eruption, eruptions can last for years and there have been 20-30 of them since the first documented in AD1104. Traces of its eruptions have been detected in Scottish bogs, while in Ireland up to a decade of negligible growth can be seen in tree rings, all making the 2010 eruption of the well-known Eyafjallajökull seem rather insignificant. Another reason to fear Hekla is that the longer a volcano remains dormant then the more violent the eventual eruption is expected to be. We will all be in big trouble if it blows in our lifetime.



Snaefellsjokul, above and Birdquest at Svatuloft (Mike Watson)

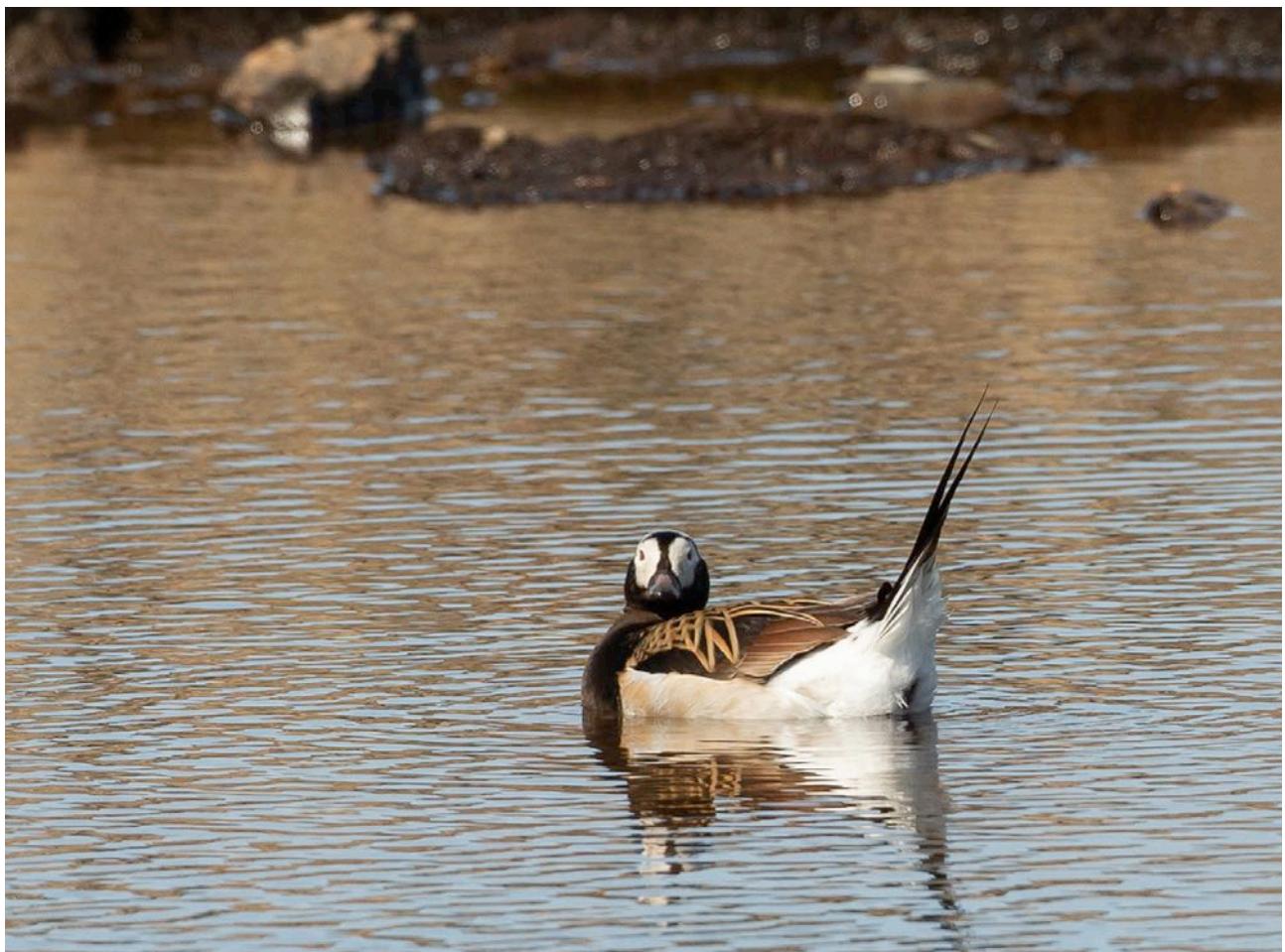


Rock Ptarmigan, Northwest Fjords (Mike Watson)

On a glorious sunny day, with hardly a cloud in the sky we continued to the southern coast of the peninsula to Arnastapi. The pool on the cliff top held Red-necked Phalaropes and Kittiwakes and shags were nesting nearby. A lone Thick-billed Murre was in the harbour. The café we visited at Arnastapi, like many others, has been extended, to cope with the tourist busloads of ‘100 things to see before you die box-tickers’ that can be seen at so many sites of interest these days. Top tip – get your order in early. The poor couple in the café were helplessly swamped by the time we left. We continued along the south coast of the Peninsula before heading north, adding Horned Grebe to our triplist. Eventually we arrived at a very nicely situated hotel and enjoyed a great evening grill buffet meal, including horse, which tasted very much like beef to me. No wonder it can be passed off as such in ready meals!

Early next morning we were on our way again, this time to carry out some exploration far into the Northwest Fjords. Summer had already arrived here this year and we were able to get everywhere we wanted to but sadly this time we had no road closure excuse for failing to find Snowy Owl, perhaps they are not here this year as there have been no reports? However, other birds had already returned to the high mountain lakes including Whooper Swan, Long-tailed Duck, Purple Sandpiper and Common Loon. Pretty, yellow Arctic Poppies and Moss Campion cushions were found by the gravel road but there was little else up here apart from the occasional Parasitic Jaeger and some singing Snow Buntings. As always, all too soon it was time to leave as we now had an even more daunting drive than usual of many hours to reach our accommodation for the night in the northeast. This long journey was livened up by our first Pink-footed Geese, including a roadside colony with many goslings and as we crossed the Laxá a nice flock of around 20 Barrow’s Goldeneyes was gathered by the bridge. We ended the day with the first of many unsuccessful attempts to see a Gyrfalcon. They had never given me such trouble before and we constantly drew a blank at two nest sites, which had both been occupied a couple of weeks earlier. Maybe they had failed or maybe they had been robbed, time will tell when the nests are examined. The adults can be very secretive when they have small young but not to this extent surely? We didn’t bump into any during our general birding up north either.

We take two whale-watching boat trips out of the small port of Húsavík on this tour and today saw the first of them. Húsavík (‘Bay of Houses’), population 2,667 was the first place in Iceland to be settled by a Norse man, in AD870, when Viking Garðarr Svavarsson spent a winter here. According to history he owned land in Zealand (Denmark) and was married to a woman from the Hebrides. During a voyage to those isles to claim



Purple Sandpiper and Long-tailed Duck, Northwest Fjords (Mike Watson)



Arctic Alpine tundra, Northwest Fjords and Arctic Poppies (Mike Watson)



White-beaked Dolphin, Skjalfandi Bay (Mike Watson)

his inheritance from his father-in-law, he sailed into a storm, which pushed his ship far to the north until he reached the eastern coast of Iceland. Húsavík is an outlet for silica mined at Lake Myvatn and there is now a large silica processing plant being built just to the north of the town. However, its other sources of income are fishing and tourism (particularly whale-watching). The whale watching trips are perfect in every respect. We received flawless narratives from the well-trained callers and even hot chocolate and cinnamon buns for the return dash to port.

Sea conditions on our first trip were again the calmest I've experienced here so far, which certainly aided cetacean spotting. The nine o'clock boats had found some Humpback Whales, which had been feeding out towards the island of Flatey (there is one in the north as well and it also has Red Phalaropes!) and again we enjoyed some great surface action with these incredible creatures. Our guide explained that during their migration from the Caribbean they lose around a third of their body weight so they arrive in North Icelandic waters very hungry! The waters of the bay are not so deep and the food is near the surface so the whales do not have to dive for long, surfacing every five minutes or so. Therefore we got a lot of views, albeit mostly just a blow from the nostrils, some back and dorsal fin and tail flukes to end each series of views. Some were pretty close to the boat and the sound of the blow was often the first sign of a whale surfacing nearby. We estimated there were at least six animals involved in our encounters today. However, the highlight of our first whale-watching trip was the awesome views of White-beaked Dolphin, which were sadly ignored in favour of the whales. I have seen far fewer dolphins than whales on these trips out of Husavík but of course the bucket listers want whales and any whales will do! Other birds seen on the boat trip of note were Parasitic Jaegers, Atlantic Puffins, Common Murres and Black Guillemots as well as many Northern Fulmars, Arctic Terns and Black-legged Kittiwakes. We spent the rest of the day in the Lake Myvatn area visiting two Gyrfalcon eyries without any luck except for a female Merlin perched up near one of them! We also checked the margins of the lake itself from a few points seeing lots of Gadwall, Eurasian Wigeon, Long-tailed Duck, Barrow's Goldeneye, Red-breasted Merganser and adding Greater Scaup to our trip list. Harlequin Ducks were sadly not in their usual resting spot, thanks to the constant presence of anglers, there seemed to be more than usual this year unwittingly disturbing them and all the other birds that nest along the riverbank here. I hear that Harlequin Duck is in decline in Iceland and no one knows why yet. There were still a few Harlequins around but no close views yet.



Whale watching boats and Humpback Whale, Skjalfandi Bay (Mike Watson)





Blue Whale, Skjalfandi Bay. Previous page: Eurasian Wren and Common Redpoll (Mike Watson).

Another circuit of Lake Myvatn included a ‘*Lord of the Flies*’ experience on the Laxá with some gorgeous point blank Harlequin Ducks and then a lovely little birch wood with a carpet of Wood Crane’s-bill (*Geranium sylvaticum*) and Alpine Bartsia (*Bartsia alpina*) where we enjoyed some excellent views of a pair of Icelandic Wrens, as well as many Redwings and we also had great views of the Icelandic version of Common Redpoll. This was in fact near our second Game of Thrones filming location, the lava towers at Höfði, which featured in S3E5 as where Mance Rayder (The ‘*King beyond the Wall*’) set up camp. We also visited some fascinating hot springs at Hverir, where the black mud of foul-smelling sulphurous hot springs bubbled away and jets of steam were emitted from vents. Traces of beautiful, yellow sulphur could be seen everywhere on the ground. This location featured in GOT S3’s opening scenes where Sam is wandering through an impenetrable blizzard, the blizzard is in fact the thick mist emanating from the geothermal vents! We called in for lunch at Dimmuborgir, a large and strangely formed lava field and yet another GOT filming location, which appeared in S3E1,2 & 5 as the Wildlings’ camp north of the wall. Common Scoters seemed in short supply this year but we finally managed to find a pair of them towards the end of our circuit, right where I usually see them in fact!

Our second whale-watching trip started quite calm but became steadily more bumpy. Before we had reached the cluster of small boats obviously watching more Humpback Whales out towards Flatey our announcer called a ‘*very powerful blow*’ up ahead and immediately set a course for it. There was another boat ahead in pursuit and they must have known what they were following but our sudden increased speed could mean only one thing, the big one, Blue Whale. They do not bother to speed around for other commoner species as I know from many previous trips with them. It was indeed a Blue Whale and we could soon see its enormous broad mottled blue back, the huge nostrils and of course its big vertical blow! Wow! I had been hoping for one of these for a while now. The crew commented that if there is a chance of Blue Whale they always go for it and there were a lot of happy dudes on the boat today, holding up their smartphones trying to get a photo or video. We enjoyed more Humpback Whale encounters today, including around ten animals, including some surface feeding and barnacle encrusted pectoral fins seen and we also had a flyby Great Skua that only us birders bothered to look at when I called it. A good lifer for our Greek birders! Stocked up again with pastries we headed north this time around the Tjörnes Peninsula. Our first stop was Lón, where a Black Tern had returned for its fourth summer to an Arctic Tern colony, sadly we did not connect this time with this novelty value attraction. We did have another Great Skua here much to Petros’s delight. Our second stop, at Vikingavatn featured a lot more Red-necked Phalaropes, hundreds in fact scattered all over the lake and a few Northern Shovelers but not much else. Many

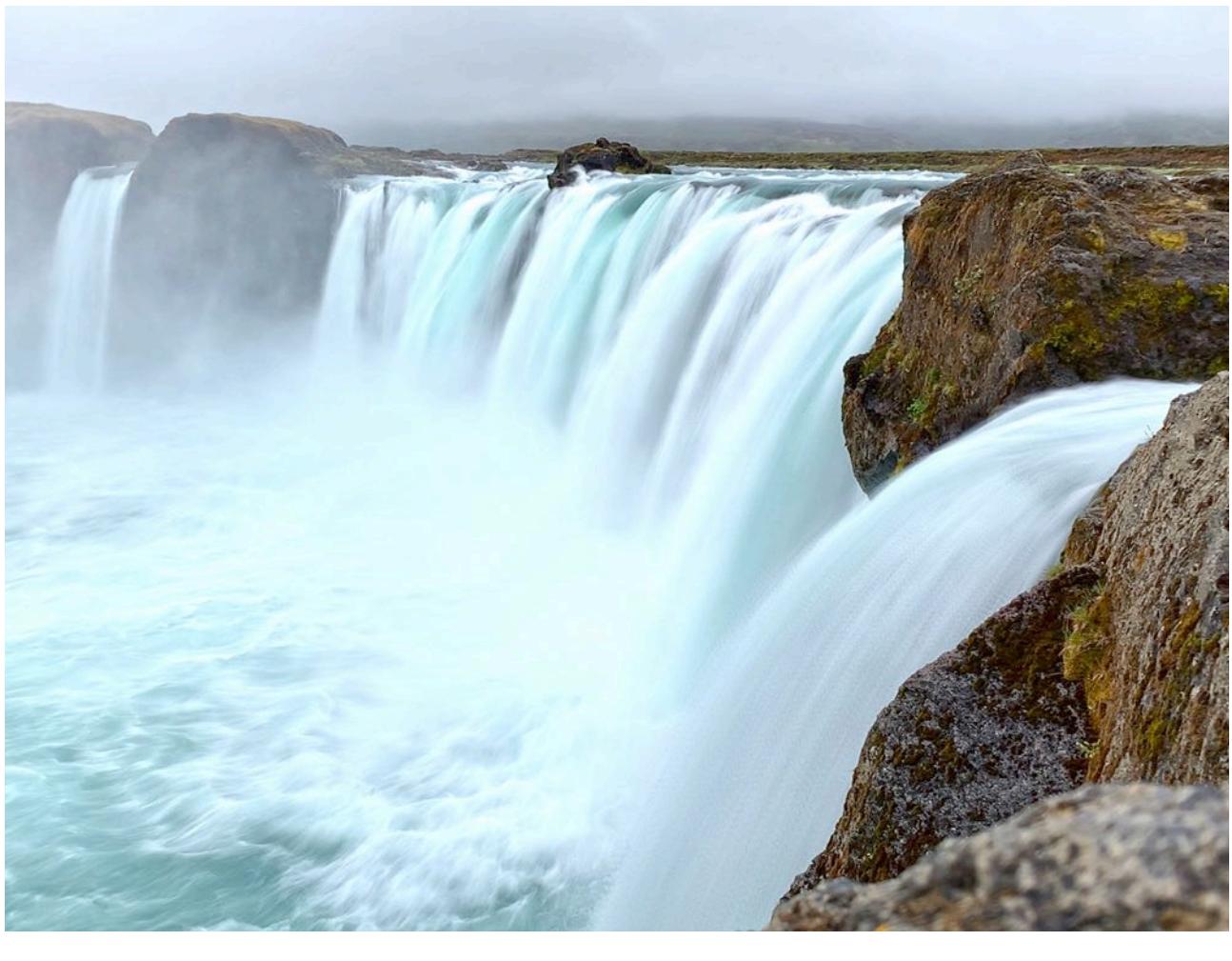




Horned Grebe on nest at Lake Myvatn and previous page: Game of Thrones filming locations! From top - the lava field of Dimmuborgir, geothermal mud pools at Hverir and the Mid-Atlantic ridge at Thingvellir (Mike Watson).

of the eutrophic lakes in this area were created by subsidence during earthquakes, one large lake as recently as 1977 during the '*Krafla volcano-tectonic episode*', its name Skjálfavatn meaning '*Shaking Water*'. We had a quick look at the mid-Atlantic ridge, which is actually a rift in northern Iceland, which is growing by c2cm per year with the Eurasian and North American plates being torn apart. Here Europe stands taller than America with a rift between them. We ended the day today at Dettifoss ('*Collapsing Falls*'), Europe's most powerful waterfall by volume with 193 cubic metres per second going over the 100m wide/45m high drop into the narrow canyon of the Jökulsá á Fjöllum river, which is a glacial melt river of the Vatnajökull ('*Lakes Glacier*'). It was a sound as well as a sight experience as the huge volume of brownish glacial water thundered over the falls making the rocks around it shake! The waterfall appeared in the 2012 sci-fi film '*Prometheus*' as an alien planet landscape. Richard particularly enjoyed recreating this scene! Again we viewed it from the east, which despite being on the least accessible side of the river and the opposite side to the visitor centre (which is on the closest side to Myvatn, for day trippers from Husavík!) has by far the best aspect.

Whilst staying at our lovely accommodation in the Myvatn area we had a number of nice bird sightings. Rock Ptarmigan would regularly appear in the car park at '*night*', a Short-eared Owl occasionally drifted by and Common Loons were breeding on the lake by the hotel, where they had a young chick that they sometimes carried on their backs. The food was particularly nice here, especially the daily catch of trout from the lake. Next came a very long driving day partly re-tracing our previous route, which passes by the impressive Godafoss ('*God Falls*'), a very nice looking horseshoe waterfall that we spent some time admiring and photographing. On the long journey we detoured for a pair of White-tailed Eagles again at the unlikeliest of sites for an eyrie. In Iceland they sometimes nest on tiny skerries in the fjords. We were lucky to see one of the eagles perched out in the open too! We followed this with some very relaxed sightseeing, first the impressive Strokkur geyser at the small hamlet of Geysir – the origin of the word. This is the most active of Iceland's geysers, erupting every few minutes and it even did a couple of double blows for us again. The photo challenge is to capture a sequence including the surreal looking blue dome of water of the geyser, just before it bursts to send a steaming jet into the air. Next came the excellent Gullfoss ('*Golden Falls*'), with its thundering staggered double step falls and deep canyon. The programme for the final morning of the tour was simply another of the '*golden circle*' tourist attractions, Þingvellir ('*Assembly Fields*'), the site of Iceland's first parliament, established in AD930. The mid-Atlantic ridge runs right through it and it was a place where the first Icelanders gathered, some of them travelling overland for weeks to get there, to hear the law recited, disputes settled and sometimes punishments dished out, like an adulterous women being drowned in a sack! There were lots of other reasons for ordinary people to come here. It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and now has extra fame as our fifth and final GOT filming location (all purely by chance!), appearing as the '*Entrance to the Eyrie*' in S1E5, S4E5 & S4E8. It appeared as the narrow path leading to the Eyrie, when Littlefinger and Sansa Stark arrive at the Eyrie and when Catelyn Stark arrives in season 1 to see her sister. Our next port of call was a small woollen mill on the





Long-tailed Jaeger, 'in the middle of nowhere'. Previous page: Godafoss, above and mighty Dettifoss (Mike Watson)



Gullfoss (Mike Watson)



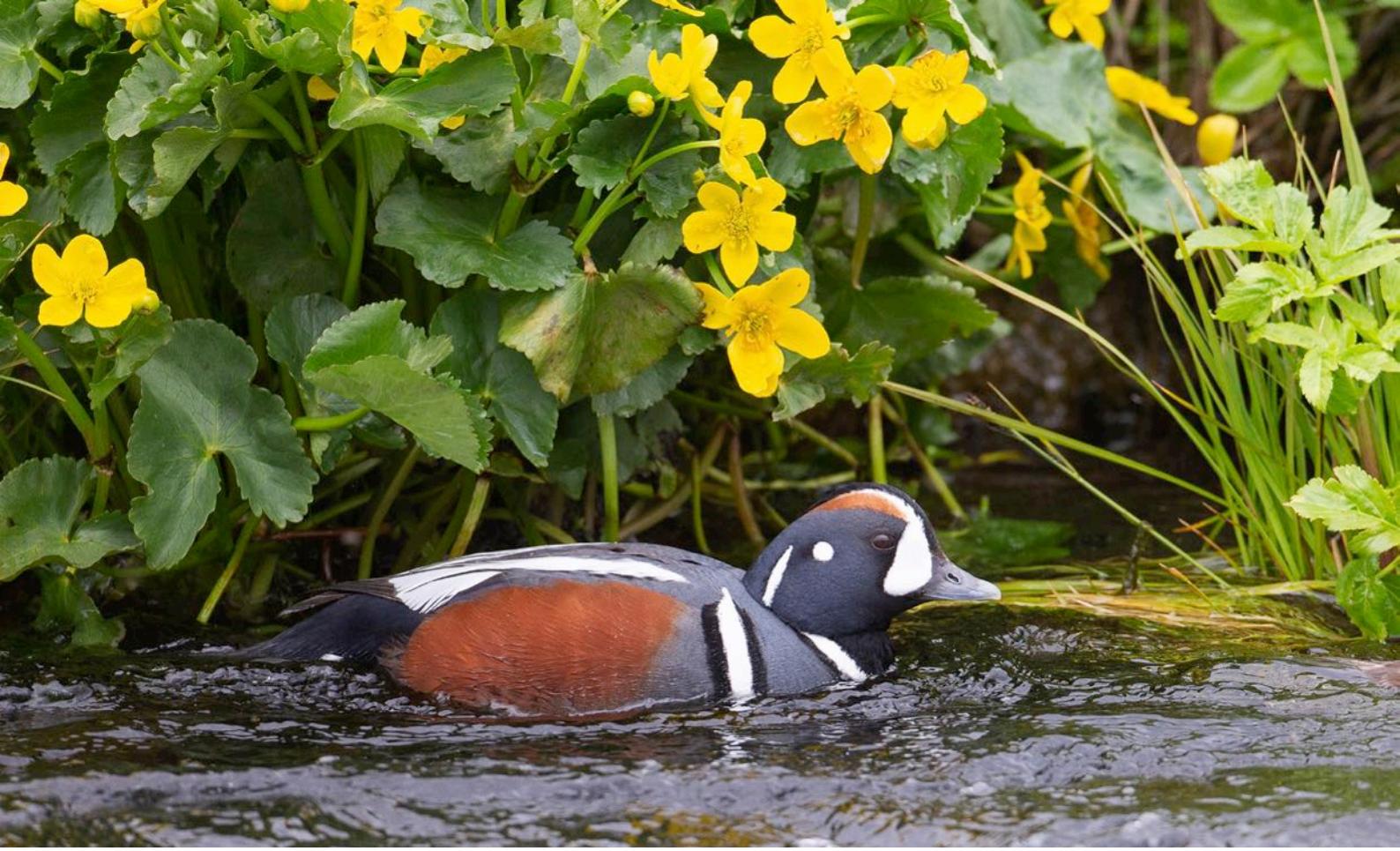
Gyrfalcon (Mike Watson)

outskirts of Reykjavik, a special request for some '*non tourist-fleecing-centre shopping*' for classic yoke design Icelandic woolly jumpers. Reykjavík does not feel like a city at all, with a population of 119,000. It is smaller than High Wycombe and would only just scrape into the top 60 largest towns and cities in the UK, ahead of Eastbourne but behind Accrington! The whole country's population is only 322,900, significantly smaller even than Luxembourg, Malta or the Bahamas! Before the tour ended we had time for some final birding on the Reykjanes Peninsula, where it all started over a week earlier but we could only add a lone vagrant Atlantic form Canada Goose looking a little out of place on the seaweed covered rocks at Sandgerði with some eiders and on the mammal front a couple of Atlantic Grey Seals and an American Mink at Gardur pools, a very unwelcome introduction!

We did finally have some luck with Gyrfalcon, thanks to some local help, with a pair nesting in a secret location that we were able to watch on a couple of occasions from inside the van, a couple of hundred metres away without disturbing them. The male even disgraced himself by landing quite close to the road we were watching from! At last, a relatively close roadside view! They had three little white chicks which popped up from their otherwise hidden nest location when an adult brought in food one evening just before twelve. Another great midnight sun birding experience! On another occasion again we found ourselves '*in the middle of nowhere*' as the locals call it, at a breeding site of the ultra-graceful Long-tailed Skua, their only one in Iceland. We found a single bird foraging in a farmer's field for invertebrates. They were first discovered here around 14 years ago but have still only established a toehold in Iceland. We also visited a remote barren plain, covered with tiny black lava pebbles, where a pair of Great Skuas (or Bonxies) checked us out, soon joined by a third bird as well as a couple of Parasitic Jaegers. Finally thanks to our very enthusiastic group of Birdquesters who made this birding road trip so much fun, we always seem to have a lot of laughs here. Thanks also to our friends in Iceland, without whose help we would certainly have seen fewer birds.

Highlight of the tour (as voted for by the group):

1. Gyrfalcon
2. Harlequin Duck
3. Great Skua
4. Blue Whale
5. Dettifoss



Harlequin Duck, drake on the Laxá near Lake Myvatn (Mike Watson)

SYSTEMATIC LIST OF BIRD SPECIES RECORDED DURING THE TOUR

The species names and taxonomy used in the report mostly follows Gill, F & D Donsker (Eds). **IOC World Bird Names**. This list is updated several times annually and is available at <http://www.worldbirdnames.org>.

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

Species which were only recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (LO).

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

Species marked with the diamond symbol (◊) are either endemic to the country or local region or considered 'special' birds for some other reason (e.g. it is only seen on one or two Birdquest tours; it is difficult to see across all or most of its range; the local form is endemic or restricted-range and may in future be treated as a full species).

Conservation threat categories and information are taken from Threatened Birds of the World, BirdLife International's magnificent book on the sad status of the rarest 10% of the world's avifauna, and updates on the BirdLife website: <http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/home> E = Endangered, V = Vulnerable, NT = Near Threatened, DD = Data Deficient.

Brant Goose (Brent G) ◊ *Branta bernicla* Four on Flatey. Ssp *hrota* 'Pale-bellied'.

Canada Goose *Branta canadensis* One at Sandgerdi.

Pink-footed Goose ◊ *Anser brachyrhynchus* c200 plus many goslings by the Héraðsvötn and several flyover flocks.

Greylag Goose *Anser anser* Common throughout, many with goslings.

Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus* Common throughout.

Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna* Up to c10 at Borganes.

Northern Shoveler *Spatula clypeata* c10 at Vikingavatn.

Gadwall *Anas strepera* Around 80 at Lake Myvatn.

Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope* Around 1000 at Lake Myvatn and small numbers elsewhere.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* Very common throughout.

Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca* Small numbers throughout.

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula* Small numbers throughout.

Greater Scaup *Aythya marila* Small numbers throughout with a maximum of c.30 at Lake Myvatn.

Common Eider *Somateria mollissima* Abundant along the coast. **NT**



Common Ringed Plover, Gardur (Mike Watson)

King Eider *Somateria spectabilis* Single second calendar year drake at Olafsvik.

Harlequin Duck ♀ *Histrionicus histrionicus* A total of 25, mostly drakes with a maximum of 10 at Blönduós.

Common Scoter *Melanitta nigra* A pair at Lake Myvatn.

Long-tailed Duck *Clangula hyemalis* A scatter of c50, the first at Lake Myvatn. **VU**

Barrow's Goldeneye ♀ *Bucephala islandica* A total of 150 counted, mostly in the Lake Myvatn area.

Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator* Common throughout.

Rock Ptarmigan ♀ *Lagopus mutus* A total of 27 logged, including several at sea level. Ssp *islandorum*.

Red-throated Loon (R-t Diver) *Gavia stellata* A scatter of 25.

Common Loon (Great Northern Diver) *Gavia immer* A scatter of 13 seen, most in breeding plumage.

Northern Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis* Abundant along the coast with many on breeding ledges.

Manx Shearwater ♀ *Puffinus puffinus* c10 off Gardur during a very brief seawatch on day 1.

Horned Grebe (Slavonian G) *Podiceps auritus* Around 80 logged, particularly common at Lake Myvatn. **VU**

Northern Gannet *Morus bassanus* c25 off Gardur, c10 off Önöverdanes and c15 in the north.

European Shag *Phalacrocorax aristotelis* Common in Breiðafjörður. It is on the menu in Iceland!

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* Small numbers in the coastal southwest.

White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* Two pairs in SW Iceland.

Eurasian Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus* Common in the southwest. **NT**

European Golden Plover ♀ *Pluvialis apricaria* Common throughout, a main feature of the tour.

Common Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula* Common throughout, many with tiny chicks. Ssp *psammodromus*.

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* Common, many still performing drumming display flights. Ssp *faroeensis*.

Black-tailed Godwit ♀ *Limosa limosa* Common, particularly in the northeast. Ssp *islandica*. **NT**

Eurasian Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* Common throughout, their display flights particularly nice.

Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres* Nine on Flatey.

Sanderling *Calidris alba* c15 at Gardur.

Purple Sandpiper ♀ *Calidris maritima* One Snaefellsnes NP, two at Olafsvik and six Northwest Fjords.

Dunlin *Calidris alpina* Small numbers throughout, their buzzing display flights were very enjoyable. Ssp *schinzii*.

Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus* Common, especially on Flatey, Lake Myvatn and Vikingavatn.

Red Phalarope *Phalaropus fulicaria* ♀ One female on Flatey, Breiðafjörður.

Common Redshank *Tringa totanus* Common throughout.

Black-legged Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla* Small numbers throughout. **VU**



Great Skua (Mike Watson)

Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus* Common throughout.

Mew Gull (Common G) *Larus canus* Decidedly uncommon with only c.15 logged.

Great Black-backed Gull *Larus marinus* The most common large gull throughout.

Glaucous Gull ♀ *Larus hyperboreus* Common along the coast and much hated by ducks, shorebirds and terns alike.

Iceland Gull ♀ *Larus glaucopterus* Singles at Olafsvík and Húsavík. Both second calendar year birds.

European Herring Gull *Larus argentatus* Common in the southwest and northeast.

Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus* Common, particularly in the southwest. Ssp *graellsii*.

Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea* Common throughout, particularly on the Snæfellsnes Peninsula.

White-winged Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus* One continuing bird at Gardur, the 18th record for Iceland.

Great Skua ♀ *Catharacta skua* One while whale watching, three at a breeding site plus another in the north.

Parasitic Jaeger (Arctic Skua) *Stercorarius parasiticus* Small numbers noted throughout.

Long-tailed Jaeger (Long-tailed Skua) *Stercorarius longicaudus* One in 'the middle of nowhere'. Ssp uncertain.

Thick-billed Murre ♀ (Brünnich's Guillemot) *Uria lomvia* Six at Svötu loft and one at Arnastapi.

Common Murre (C Guillemot) *Uria aalge* Steady passage at Gardur and small numbers Önöverdanes and in the north.

Razorbill ♀ *Alca torda* Steady passage at Gardur and common at Önöverdanes. NT

Black Guillemot ♀ *Cephus grylle* Common in the southwest and small numbers in the northeast. Ssp *islandicus*.

Atlantic Puffin ♀ *Fratercula arctica* Steady passage at Gardur and many in Breiðafjörður and Skjálfandi Bay. VU

Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus* One at our accommodation several times in the northeast.

Merlin *Falco columbarius* One near a Gyrfalcon eyrie in the northeast. Ssp *subaesalon*.

Gyrfalcon *Falco rusticolus* ♀ A pair plus three small chicks at a nest.

Northern Raven *Corvus corax* Small numbers throughout. Ssp *varius*.

Eurasian Wren ♀ *Troglodytes troglodytes* Two seen at Lake Myvatn. Ssp *islandicus*.

Common Starling (European S) *Sturnus vulgaris* Common in the southwest.

Common Blackbird *Turdus merula* Seen in Hellisandur, Blönduós and Gardur.

Redwing *Turdus iliacus* Common throughout with many singing and carrying food. Ssp *coburni*. NT

Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe* Small numbers throughout, commonest in the southwest. Ssp *leucorhoa*.

White Wagtail *Motacilla [alba] alba* Common throughout.

Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis* Very common throughout, the default passerine on Iceland. NT

Common Redpoll *Carduelis flammea* Small numbers noted, first seen well by all at Lake Myvatn. Ssp *rostrata*.

Snow Bunting *Plectrophenax nivalis* ♀ Small numbers throughout, singing and feeding young on Flatey. Ssp *insulae*.



Humpback Whale, Skjalfandi Bay (Mike Watson)

Mammals

Arctic Fox *Alopex lagopus* One at Snaefellsnes NP.

American Mink *Neovison vison* One at Gardur. A very unwelcome introduction.

Grey Seal *Halichoerus grypus* Singles at Gardur and Sandgerdi.

White-beaked Dolphin *Lagenorhynchus albirostris* Six from a Skjálfandi Bay whale-watching trip.

Blue Whale *Balaenopterus musculus* One from a Skjálfandi Bay whale-watching trip. **EN**

Humpback Whale *Megaptera novaeangliae* c.15 from the Skjálfandi Bay whale-watching trips.