



North American White-winged Scoter at Sandgerdi (All photos by Mike Watson).

ICELAND

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Back after only a four years gap this time we had what was probably our most successful visit to Iceland to date in terms of quality of sightings and number of species seen, with a new record 80. There were many birding highlights in a stunning volcanic landscape including: three Gyrfalcons; a pair of White-tailed Eagles; 25 Harlequin Ducks; 344(!) Barrow's Goldeneyes; four Red and countless Red-necked Phalaropes on the delightful islet of Flatey and elsewhere; three Long-tailed Jaegers (or Skuas) at their only breeding site in Iceland as well as another in the Northwest Fjords, hundreds of km away and Thick-billed Murres (or Brünnich's Guillemots) on their breeding cliffs. Other northern specialities included Rock Ptarmigan, two adult drake King Eiders, Barnacle and Pale-bellied Brent Geese, Common Loon (or Great Northern Diver), Horned (or Slavonian) Grebe, Purple Sandpiper at its nest, Glaucous and Iceland Gulls. 'Land bird' species were few, in fact we only just made it into double figures, but again this included an Icelandic rarity, in the form of Brambling. We also saw a couple of other rarities Little Gulls, Black Tern as well as Iceland's first Black-winged Stilt.

Mammals were also few and only one of them on dry land - Arctic Fox. The maritime mammals included nine fantastic Humpback Whales and five each of Minke Whale and Orca. We also 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 (or the '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 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?



Harlequin Duck (drake), Laxá.

Away from the hustle and bustle of the incredibly busy Keflavik Airport at last, we made a short detour to Sanðgerði harbour on the west coast of the Reykjanes Peninsula. Almost the first bird of the tour was the best (but only in my opinion!), the long-staying North American White-winged Scoter. It comes and goes from this site but had been present just over an hour before the tour started so we were very pleased to find it still swimming here with a few Common Eiders. A super-smart drake with a striking white 'tick' below its eye, it was a lifer for several of the group and a WP tick for all. What a fantastic welcome to Iceland and start to the tour! We didn't have much time to linger as we had a long journey ahead 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.

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, as was again the case 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, which I had seen the day before were nowhere to be seen, so we pressed on – they 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 flights 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, Mallard and Tufted Duck. Northern Fulmars wheeled around over fjords next to their breeding cliffs (another common sight in coastal Iceland), a couple of Arctic Skuas (or Parasitic Jaegers) patrolled roadside meadows and a lucky few saw a Rock Ptarmigan performing its song flight as we passed by. After going through the 5km long Akranes Tunnel we eventually crossed the mountainous spine of the Snæfell-



Red-throated Diver, Rif.

snes Peninsula and descended to the little fishing village of Olafsvik. The Snæfellsnes Peninsula is described as 'Iceland in miniature'. It has a bit of everything: menacing volcano cones; reindeer moss-covered lava fields; snow-capped mountains; impressive basalt sea cliffs; dramatically styled modernist churches; pretty brightly painted buildings and the ubiquitous blue swathes of lupins.

We began our exploration of the peninsula early next morning starting at a stream that flows into the sea just east of town. Here we had our first views of Glaucous Gulls, which hang around here, just opposite the fish factory. A Red-throated Loon (or Diver) was on a small roadside pool – they breed in very public places in Iceland! We continued to the harbour, where there was a couple of hybrid Glaucous x Herring Gulls with tiny black chevrons on their wing tips. A Harbour Seal was new for the tour and a Black Guillemot was just the first of many! Just a stone's throw further west along the coast, the lagoons at Rif always produce something interesting and we were happy to see that the previous day's drake King Eider was still resting in the eider colony there, although it spent the entire day half asleep in the same spot. We all had to wait for some time before it showed its crazy orange bill. This was a long overdue addition to the Birdquest Iceland list. A Common Shelduck, five Red-throated Loons, 11 Red-necked Phalaropes (also our first of many!), a Mew (or Common) Gull were also present here and a raven was hounded out of town by the nesting Arctic Terns. Soon it was time for our first of a series of excellent breakfast buffets (they really know how to do these properly in Iceland) and then the rest of a long day spent exploring the Snæfellsnes Peninsula.

Our next stop was the impressive bright orange Svörtuloft Lighthouse at Öndverdanen. 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 Öndverdanen. Another bird of a pair seen during the Wild Images tour the previous week was still incubating its massive blue-green speckled egg at another vantage point and in an even nicer position. Before we had time to study the guillemots properly something much more exciting happened. A pod of Killer Whales (or Orcas) was spotted cruising past the cliffs, one of them a bull with a really massive dorsal fin that was so long it flapped about when the huge dolphin surfaced. We also noted that his females had a small calf in tow, a very happy sight! They eventually cruised south and away. Also here were a few Black Guillemots.



Thick-billed Murres (or Brünnich's Guillemots), Svörtuloft.

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 Sneffels Yocul can reach the center of the earth"*. Fancy living on a volcano, remembering that its 1100 known 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.

We spent some hours 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. A Merlin that dashed across the road in front of us was our only one of the tour – they are secretive at this time of year when they are nesting, just like back home in East Lancashire. We also enjoyed some very nice views of Arctic Foxes by the roadside, no doubt especially active when feeding their hungry cubs. Kathy spotted our first Iceland Gull from the moving vehicle, amongst a small flock of Glaucous Gulls, another leftover from the Wild Images tour. On a glorious sunny day, with hardly a cloud in the sky we continued to the southern coast of the peninsula stopping at Malariiff, where we added a Grey Seal in the small bay there and Arnastapi, where we found some shelter from the wind, which had now picked up and looked out to sea. There were some rafts of eider but no King with them (one had been identified from a photo taken here the previous week!). The pool on the cliff top held Red-necked Phalaropes and kittiwakes were nesting in a curious blowhole nearby. The café at Arnastapi served excellent soup and 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 out early while they are all still having breakfast!



Arctic Fox (above) and Ptarmigan, male.



Snæfellsjökull (above) and basalt seabird cliffs at Önóverdanes.



Red Phalarope (female), Flatey.

Next came one of our most enjoyable days in Iceland, our day trip to delightful Flatey ('Flat Island'). As we drove east along the Snæfellsnes Peninsula, passing the famous landscape photography site of Kirkjefjell, 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. We paused at Kolgraffjordur, where sharp-eyed Kathy spotted a group of Pale-bellied Brent Geese as well as another drake King Eider. Outstanding! They should all have been well on their way to Svalbard or Greenland by now.

Eventually we reached Stykkisholmur, another small town with a spectacular modernist church, its tower in the shape of a ship's bow. We boarded the Ferry Baldur ('Baldy'), which passed by numerous small skerries in Breiðafjörður dotted with eiders, shags, puffins and Black Guillemots before we headed below decks for breakfast. 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. Thanks to our visit the previous week with the Wild Images group we had a good idea how to crack this sometimes tough nut, away from the closed bird sanctuary of the northern half of the island and eventually, after a brief fly-by of two birds, we enjoyed some great views of a brick-red female (well everyone who was awake did) along a rocky seaweed-covered shore. Later we switched stakeout sites and saw another four birds, albeit distant this time looking into shimmering waters. 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 particularly enjoyed the lovely phalarope pools in the main 'village' as well as the wonderful soup and cake in the adorable little Hótel Flatey, 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. In fact 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



Snow Bunting, male (above) and Red-necked Phalarope, female, Flatey.



Bird of the trip! Gyr Falcon.

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, 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? Off the ferry at last we still had some way to go before we reached our accommodation, where we rolled up in the sunshine at a planned but rather antisocial hour. No problem with that apparently in tourist-friendly Iceland! Kathy had a couple of roadside Harlequins while others slept. It had been a long day.

After another excellent buffet breakfast we were on our way again, this time to carry out some exploration far into the Northwest Fjords. Spring had only just arrived in the mountains here and there was still about 25% snow cover on the tundra, ultimately including across the road that we were hoping to drive along. However, we did manage to bird quite a large area finding a surprise Long-tailed Skua on territory as well as a pair of Purple Sandpipers at a nest, which allowed very close approach without budging (always nice to leave birds where you find them!). Several birds had already returned to the high mountain lakes including Whooper Swan and Common Loon. There was little else up here apart from Arctic Skuas mobbing a raven and some singing Snow Buntings. As always, all too soon it was time to leave as we now had a daunting drive 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 the roadside colony with many goslings I had seen the previous week, as well as our first wigeon and scaup. I had a drake Harlequin in a tricky spot to stop but no matter there were still plenty of them ahead. There was a possibility we would arrive in the northeast in time to visit a Gyr Falcon eyrie but I decided on a normal end to the birding day after a couple of very long ones. As luck would have it, just as we approached our accommodation a large bird of prey flew across the track in front of us carrying prey – GYRFALCON! It was typically massive, a falcon the size of a buzzard and to our delight it landed on a hillside nearby where we enjoyed some great scope views of it ripping feathers out of its prey. I'm still not sure what the dark bird it had killed was though. The gyr was fairly dark brown with strong streaking on its underparts and a blue cere making it a second calendar year bird. The local godwits were going crazy and there was also a Short-eared Owl gliding over the same hillside. What a great end to another excellent day in Iceland!



Alpine tundra in the Northwest Fjords and Purple Sandpiper on a nest.



Humpback Whale, Skjálfandi Bay.

We started the next day as we had finished the previous one, with a Gyrfalcon. This time it was a male standing guard by an occupied eyrie. However, we did not approach closely to ensure we did not cause any disturbance. We also saw our first regal-looking Barrow's Goldeneyes in this area, the majority drakes and again the first of many on the tour (c.340 this time!). 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 2,237 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 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.

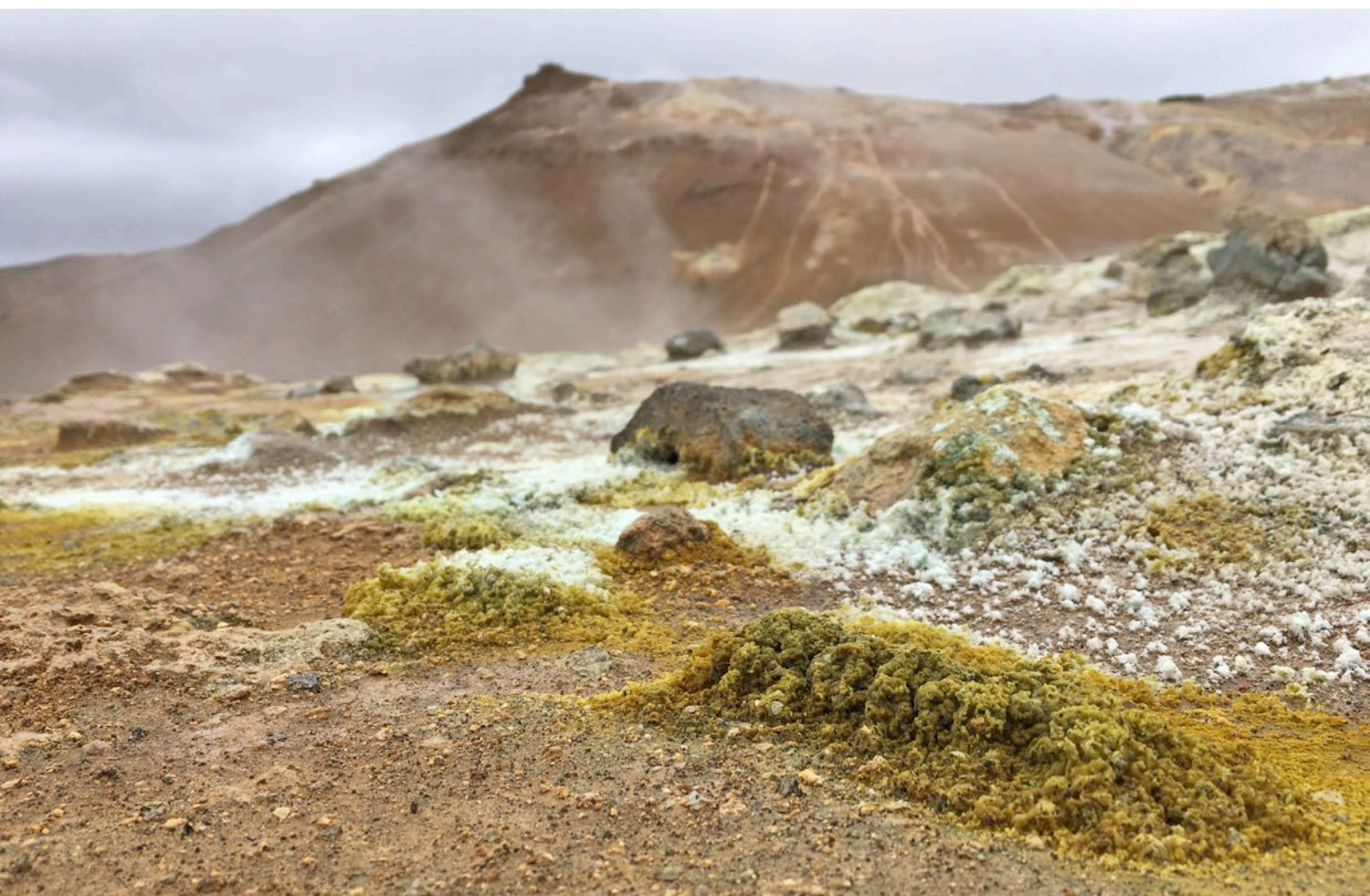
Sea conditions were the calmest I've experienced here so far, which certainly aided cetacean spotting. The nine o'clock boats had found some Humpback Whales, which had been feeding more or less in the same area for the last week and again we enjoyed some great surface action with these incredible creatures. 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. Our guides considered at least five animals were involved in our encounters today. Also seen on the boat trip of note were Great (one) and Arctic (c10) Skuas, Atlantic Puffin, Common Murre and Black Guillemot as well as many Northern Fulmars, Arctic Terns and Black-legged Kittiwakes. There were a few first summer birds amongst the mostly adults of the latter. We also swung by a park in Húsavík where the pair of Belgian-ringed Mandarin was still present. These birds are of captive origin but current opinion is that they got here under their own steam! They presumably hooked up with some Icelandic waterfowl in the Low Countries. There were also some Icelandic Redpolls flying around here.



Barrow's Goldeneye (drake), Laxá.

After stocking up on pastries at a great bakery in Húsavík we headed back to the Lake Myvatn area where we started with some cracking views of Harlequins at their usual resting spot by the Laxá. A delightful place with the torrent of the river rushing past and the immaculate little ducks sitting nearby without a care. Fantastic! We also saw some more Barrow's Goldeneyes here as usual. When I was a child I borrowed John Gooders's 1970 book '*Where to watch birds in Britain and Europe*' from the library numerous times. It has a chapter about Iceland and I remember reading about one site in particular, Lake Myvatn. He wrote "*It is, of course unthinkable that any one should go to Iceland for birds without visiting Myvatn*". Lake Myvatn is full of waterfowl, a magical area of crater lakes and marshes surrounded by volcano cones, root-less craters, historic lava flows and hot springs. Myvatn famously means '*Fly Water*' and fortunately it was quite breezy most of the time when we visited and therefore we only experienced the dreaded swarms of insects on a couple of occasions near the water's edge. Amongst the throng of mostly Eurasian Wigeon and Gadwall just smaller numbers of Tufted Ducks were Northern Pintail, Greater Scaup, Common Scoter, Long-tailed Duck and Red-breasted Merganser. Also on Myvatn's main lake and its many smaller satellite lakes were nesting Horned Grebes and Red-necked Phalaropes. The first of several flocks of Pink-footed Geese seen over the next few days headed north, apparently on their way to Greenland to moult!

We had a full day to spend in the Myvatn area. An initial circuit of the lake included 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 feeding their unseen young in nearby undergrowth, as well as many Redwing parents doing the same. Great views of Icelandic Redpoll included a pale male with completely white under tail coverts – some Icelandic birds are reputed to be indistinguishable from *exillipes* form Arctic Redpoll but interest in this conundrum is due to be washed away when all are lumped together. Finally we caught up with a singing (if you can call its repetitive wheeze that) male Brambling, which was tracked down to a favourite pine tree perch. The Barrow's Goldeneye count went off the scale at 300 including 250 counted from one vantage point. We also visited some fascinating hot springs at Námafjall, 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.



Ancient lava flow at Lake Myvatn (above) and sulphur deposits at Namafjall.



Long-tailed Duck (drake), Myvatn.

Just when we had almost completed our first lap of the lake we got a call that a Snowy Owl had just been seen at the southern end, in an area we had passed through earlier. We made rather fast progress there but as we neared the location we also learned that it had been seen flying high overhead, ugh! Ah well. A little deflated we started to check nearby likely areas, predictably without any luck. However, the owl did lead us to another excellent Gyrfalcon, another second calendar year bird but this time a pale one, perched on a rocky outcrop by the lake and there was also a fine drake American Wigeon with the lake's southern flock. So everything happens for a reason! We ended the day with the sentinel male Gyrfalcon, again in the same spot. After evening meal some of us went on an evening excursion towards Húsavík. We didn't add anything new apart from a second calendar year Little Gull at Kaldbaksnef but we did have lots of nice views of now familiar species like Common Loons in gorgeous low angle evening sunlight. We were still watching Short-eared Owls hunting at 11.30pm and when I closed the blinds of my window one flew right past only a few metres away! Another great day birding in Iceland!

Our second whale-watching trip was just as calm if not calmer than the first. Barely out of the harbour our knowledgeable guide had not even finished his safety briefing when the first whales were called, a couple of fast-swimming Minkes, one of which surfaced quite a lot in the vicinity of our vessel. Also nearby was a couple of Harbour Porpoises. We enjoyed more Humpback Whale encounters, including at least one of the animals of two days previously with a prominent barnacle growth on its tail fluke. It is impossible to tire of Humpbacks! Stocked up again with pastries we headed north this time around the Tjörnes Peninsula. Our first stop was a small stream that runs into the sea and is a regular post-breeding gathering place for Harlequins. By mid June they have already started to leave their upland breeding rivers, letting the females get on with raising their families alone. Here we added another 15 Harlequins to our tally, some already starting to moult into eclipse plumage. Further on at Lón, a Black Tern had returned for its second summer to an Arctic Tern colony. After some great spotting by Sylvia we enjoyed some nice views as it flew back and forth with the Arctic Terns. Why it came here in the first place is a mystery but then why ever did it return for a second lonely summer? Our third stop, at Vikingavatn, was rewarded with a Barnacle Goose (a write-in for this tour, this species has bred in Iceland since 1988, in keeping with the expansion of its breeding range generally) and another Little Gull, this time a second year bird. Many 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. Our



Feel the power of mighty Dettifoss!

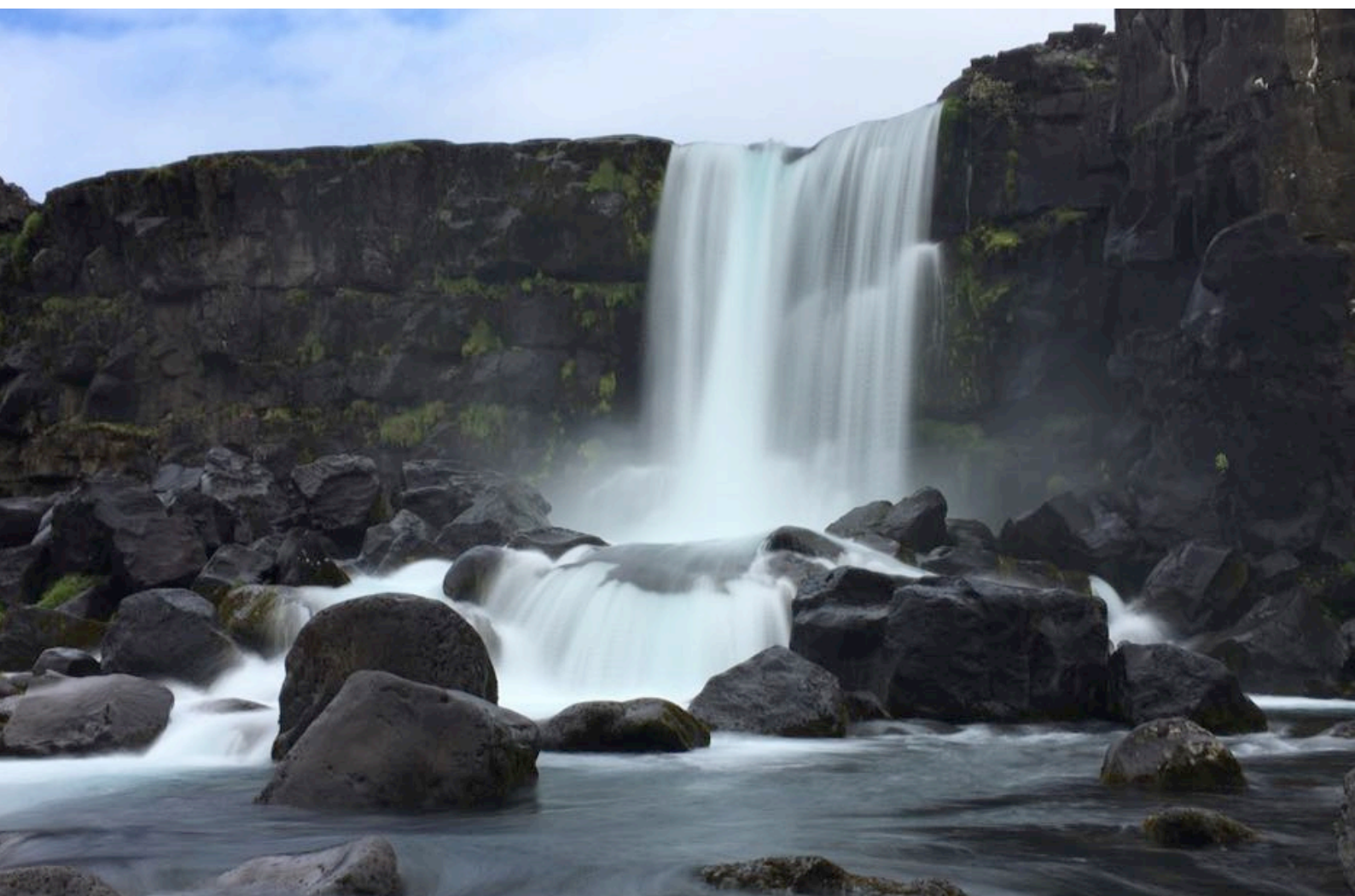
friend Gaukur explained that Iceland is growing by c2cm per year with the Eurasian and North American plates being torn apart. Here Europe stands taller than America with a rift between them. The excellent information centre just along the road at Asbyrgi gave a good explanation of this. We ended the day today at Dettifoss (*'Collapsing Waterfall'*), 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. This time 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 (!?), has by far the best aspect.

The final leg of our journey was a very long driving day partly re-tracing our previous route but detouring for a pair of White-tailed Eagles again at the unlikelyst 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 fly too! Our next port of call was a small coastal pool on the outskirts of Reykjavik, where Iceland's first ever Black-winged Stilt had been relocated the day before. Not of any consequence in world birding terms but fun to see one so badly off course! 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!

The final leg of the tour was simply some very relaxing sightseeing, first the impressive Strokkur geysir 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, something I had not seen before this year. The 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. 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,



Long exposure waterfalls - Godafoss (above) and Dettifoss.



Gullfoss (above) and at Þingvellir, a cascade from America to Europe!



Long-tailed Skua, Northwest Fjords.

merchants, sword-sharpeners, and tanners would sell their goods and people would renew acquaintances and be entertained. What makes this place so special is that it is a dramatic open-air site and is also situated directly on the jagged Mid-Atlantic ridge rift. The only drawback is that everyone else thinks so and it was quite crowded by the time we arrived, with tourists from all over. As the rain poured down it was time to leave and return to Keflavík International Airport, just over an hour away where our adventure ended. Everywhere we went we found the local people incredibly polite and friendly as always. This, combined with a good road network, spotlessly clean hotels, excellent food (especially seafood) makes Iceland a very enjoyable country to travel in. After our 2700km road trip we felt like we had seen quite a lot of it.

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, Gaukur Hjartason, Yann Kolbeinsson and Edward Rickson, without whose help we would certainly have seen fewer birds.

Postscript. Again, during the tour 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 and then a pair in two separate territories. 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 three Arctic Skuas.

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

1. Gyrfalcon
2. Long-tailed Skua
3. Great Skua
4. White-tailed Eagle
5. Harlequin Duck



Iceland's first Black-winged Stilt had moved to Daltjörn in Reykjavik by the time of our visit.

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* Nine at Kolgrafjordur. Ssp *hrota* 'Pale-bellied'.

Barnacle Goose *Branta leucopsis* One at Vikingavatn.

Pink-footed Goose ◊ *Anser brachyrhynchus* c300 plus many goslings by the Héradsvötn and several flyover flocks.

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

Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus* Common throughout.

Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna* One at Rif and up to 205 at Borganes.

Gadwall *Anas strepera* Around 500 at Lake Myvatn plus singles at Vestmannsvatn and Húsavík.

Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope* Around 2000 at Lake Myvatn and small numbers elsewhere.

American Wigeon *Anas americana* A drake at Lake Myvatn.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* Very common throughout.

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta* A single drake at Lake Myvatn.

Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca* Small numbers throughout.

Mandarin *Aix galericulata* A pair of drakes at Húsavík were escapes from captivity, ringed in Belgium.

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula* Small numbers throughout.



Incoming Bonxie! A Great Skua defends its territory in the northeast.

Greater Scaup *Aythya marila* Small numbers throughout with a maximum of c.25 at Lake Myvatn.

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

King Eider *Somateria spectabilis* Single adult drakes at Rif and Kolgrafjördur.

Harlequin Duck ♦ *Histrionicus histrionicus* A total of 28, mostly drakes with a maximum of 15 at Húsavík.

Common Scoter *Melanitta nigra* A total of 22 logged, mostly at Lake Myvatn.

White-winged Scoter ♦ *Melanitta deglandi* The long staying North American drake at Sanðgerði.

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

Barrow's Goldeneye ♦ *Bucephala islandica* A total of 344 counted, mostly in the Lake Myvatn area.

Common Merganser (Goosander) *Mergus merganser* A drake in Kolgrafjördur and another three in the west.

Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator* Common throughout.

Rock Ptarmigan *Lagopus mutus* ♦ A total of 14 logged, including several at sea level. *Ssp islandorum*.

Red-throated Loon (R-t Diver) *Gavia stellata* A scatter of 26.

Common Loon (Great Northern Diver) *Gavia immer* A scatter of 26 seen, most in breeding plumage.

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

Horned Grebe (Slavonian G) *Podiceps auritus* Around 60 logged, particularly common at Lake Myvatn. **VU**

Northern Gannet *Morus bassanus* Three off Önóverðanes and a couple 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* A pair at their nest in SW Iceland.

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

Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus* The first for Iceland was at Daltjörn, Reykjavík.

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 psammmodromus*.

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.

Common Redshank *Tringa totanus* Common throughout.

Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres* Three on Hellisandúr Beach.

Sanderling *Calidris alba* Three on Hellisandúr Beach.

Purple Sandpiper ♦ *Calidris maritima* One on Hellisandúr Beach and a pair at a nest Northwest Fjords.



Long-tailed Skua at a breeding site 'in the middle of nowhere'.

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

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

Red Phalarope *Phalaropus fulicaria* ♦ At least four on Flatey, Breiðafjörður

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

Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus* Common throughout.

Little Gull *Larus minutus* Single second years at Húsavík and Víkingavatn. An Icelandic rarity.

Mew Gull (Common G) *Larus canus* Decidedly uncommon with only c.25 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 glaucooides* One Snæfellsnes and another at Húsavík. Both second calendar year birds.

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

Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus* Common in the southwest. Ssp *grællsii*.

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

Black Tern *Chlidonias niger* One at Lón in the northeast.

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

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

Long-tailed Jaeger (Long-tailed Skua) *Stercorarius longicaudus* Four birds in three different territories. Ssp uncertain.

Thick-billed Murre ♦ (Brünnich's Guillemot) *Uria lomvia* Five amongst the other auks at Önverðarnes.

Common Murre (C Guillemot) *Uria aalge* Small numbers at Önverðarnes and in the north.

Razorbill ♦ *Alca torda* Only noted at Önverðarnes on the Snæfellsnes Peninsula where common. **NT**

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

Atlantic Puffin ♦ *Fratercula arctica* Many in Breiðafjörður on the Flatey trip and also in Skjálfandi Bay. **VU**

Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus* Four sightings in the northeast.

Merlin *Falco columbarius* One flew across the road in Snæfellsjökull National Park. Ssp *subaeson*.

Gyr Falcon *Falco rusticolus* ♦ Two second year birds in the Lake Myvatn area plus an adult male at a nest site.

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

Eurasian Wren ♦ *Troglodytes troglodytes* Seen Myvatn and Þingvellir plus another heard Vestmannsvatn. Ssp *islandicus*.

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

Common Blackbird *Turdus merula* Seen in Reykjavík and Húsavík.

Redwing *Turdus iliacus* Common throughout with many singing and feeding young. Ssp *coburni*. **NT**



The distinctive Icelandic subspecies of Eurasian Wren at Lake Myvatn.

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**

Brambling ♦ *Fringilla montifringilla* A male singing at Lake Myvatn, one of Iceland's only known breeding pair.

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*.

Mammals

Arctic Fox *Alopex lagopus* Four sightings following our blank last time around.

Grey Seal *Halichoerus grypus* Singles at Kolgrafafjörður and Latravík.

Harbour Seal *Phoca vitulina* One Olafsvík harbour.

Northern Minke Whale (Minke W) *Balaenoptera acutorostrata* Five from the Skjálfandi Bay whale-watching trips.

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

Harbour Porpoise *Phocoena phocoena* Three from the Skjálfandi Bay whale-watching trips.

Killer Whale (Orca) *Orcinus orca* A pod of five off Önöverdanes included a large bull and a small calf.