

Iceland

Spring

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Participants

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Leader Trausti Gunnarsson

Red-necked Phalaropes (Steve Carter)

Day 1 After meeting and greeting at Keflavík Airport this morning we started to explore Reykjanes peninsula. At Njarðvík we saw a few Brent Geese and Greylag Geese and Common Eiders and also Arctic Terns and Lesser Black-backed Gulls, which breed in the area. We recorded our first Common Redshanks, Common Ringed Plovers, Dunlin, Eurasian Oystercatcher and Common Snipe drumming above. All of these birds would become so familiar in the days ahead. In Keflavík, we saw many Iceland Gulls, winter visitors from Greenland that allowed excellent opportunities for photography. We moved on towards Garðskagi lighthouse and on the way we added European Golden-plover and Whimbrel to our wader list – we got wonderful close views and the birds were in splendid breeding plumage. At the lighthouse we added Ruddy Turnstone and Sanderling and there were many birds passing, including Northern Gannet, Northern Fulmar, Manx Shearwater, Common Murre, Razorbill, Atlantic Puffin, Parasitic Jaeger, Black-legged Kittiwake and other gulls. An added bonus was a Humpback Whale that was seen blowing and breaching offshore. After this productive spell of birdwatching we were getting quite hungry. We passed through Sandgerði on the way to Grindavík where we recorded our first Glaucous Gull and enjoyed a lovely lunch of langoustine soup and home-baked bread. Next we drove through the recent volcanic landscape to Reykjanes where plumes of vapour rose into the sky. There are some fantastic rock formations and sea stacks offshore here, and many Black-legged Kittiwakes were nesting; we also added Black Guillemot to our list. Eldey Island loomed on the horizon; this island holds the largest gannetry in Iceland, and is the place where the last Great Auks were killed in June 1844. We moved on east along the coast to Lake Hlíðarvatn where we saw our first Great Northern Divers. There were also at least 50 Long-tailed Ducks and several Greater Scaups. Most impressively, there was a mixed flock of several hundred Ruddy Turnstones and Red Knots, many in excellent breeding plumage, which flew around and settled on the shore. Next we headed for the coast in Selvogur. There was a lot of activity in the Arctic Tern colony – courtship rituals that involved the males doing fish flights, acrobatic flight displays and then gifting a Sand Eel to the female. At the picturesque Strandarkirkja Church, the coastline is amazing. Here, we added Purple Sandpiper and Grey Seal to our list and at Núpar we found our first Black-tailed Godwits. It was now time to head to our guesthouse in Hveragerði where we enjoyed an excellent dinner of Arctic Charr. We were tired but delighted with an amazing start to the trip.

Day 2 The visibility was fantastic as we drove east this morning. We had clear views of Mount Hekla and Eyjafjallajökull and learned about these active volcanos. Eyjafjallajökull famously disrupted flights all over the world in May 2010. On a pool we saw some different wildfowl including Eurasian Teal and Eurasian Wigeon and our first Red-necked Phalaropes, but the views were rather distant. We took a walk to the majestic Seljalandsfoss waterfall and watched the many Northern Fulmars breeding on the cliffs. There were also several Rock Doves and we heard Eurasian Wren in the area. With patience, we all got good views of this *islandicus* race; in all, three Eurasian Wrens were sighted by the group. We then moved on to Skógafoss and

on the river below this impressive cataract we saw our first pair of Harlequin Ducks. We got cracking views of these fantastic birds and had a chance to photograph them. A bit farther east, we walked to the snout of Sólheimajökull glacier. The glacier is retreating quickly and we observed the evidence of these changes and the recent glacial landforms including a pro glacial lake that has formed in front of the terminus. The landscape is stunning but the only bird species recorded here was Northern Fulmar. Next we headed to a breeding area for Parasitic Jaegers and Great Skuas. We had great views and photographed both pale and dark morph Parasitic Jaegers and several Great Skuas. We enjoyed our picnic lunch in this area. By the beach in Reynisfjara we admired the fantastic coastal formations, sea stacks, cave and columnar jointing basalt. There were many Northern Fulmars on the cliffs and Atlantic Puffins on the sea. On the way to Dyrhólaey headland we witnessed an amazing display of three male Black-tailed Godwits competing for the favours of a female. We spent a long while watching and photographing these splendid birds. Out on the headland, the breeze was quite strong but we saw many Atlantic Puffins and Black-legged Kittiwakes. Among other birds recorded here were Iceland Gull, Black Guillemot and Razorbill. We also saw nesting Common Eiders and Arctic Terns. At Markarfljót River there were dozens of Great Skuas and some of them flew past us very close, but it was a pair of Red-throated Divers that stole the show here. Later, at the guesthouse, we did our log, discussed an eventful day and enjoyed another delicious dinner.

Day 3 It was another beautiful morning as we headed out to explore the Sog River. On the way there, Stephen spotted a male Rock Ptarmigan perched on a rock by the road. We walked closer and got fantastic views and the chance to photograph this bird that was still sporting most of its white winter plumage. What a great start to the day! Later, we spotted three other male Rock Ptarmigans in different places. We looked around along the river and soon found a nice group of Harlequin Ducks. We also recorded several Red-necked Phalaropes and Great Northern Divers in this area. Farther upstream we found a group of six drake Barrow's Goldeneyes. Two were in immaculate breeding plumage and we had amazing views of these smart birds. There were also Harlequin Ducks and Red-necked Phalaropes that gave close views and the opportunity for photographs. Many Tufted Ducks, Greater Scaup and Red-breasted Mergansers were also in this area. We then moved on to Lake Þingvellir and the National Park. Þingvellir is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and it was here that the old, open-air Viking parliament was formed in about 930 AD. We headed for the site of the medieval assembly and went for a walk. We were in a rift valley, formed by the movement of the two tectonic plates of North America and Eurasia, and evidence of recent volcanic activity surrounded us. We found a pair of Red-throated Divers and got cracking views of their courtship and mating. We also saw a pair of Great Northern Divers and enjoyed our picnic with them as they interacted and their calls resounded across the lake; it was magical. We also saw a hybrid drake Mallard and Northern Pintail here. Next we did a little sightseeing when we visited Geysir geothermal area and witnessed several spouts from the very active Strokkur Geyser. We also visited the magnificent Gullfoss waterfall. We ended the day with a very productive spell of birdwatching on the coast. At Stokkseyri we noted more Red-breasted Mergansers and Common Eiders, and Great Skua and Northern Gannets were passing offshore. At Eyrarbakki we saw Parasitic Jaegers, Iceland Gulls and we had wonderful views of waders pushed up by the high tide. There was a large mixed flock of Ruddy Turnstone and Dunlin and among them were many Red Knots, Purple Sandpipers and some Common Ringed Plovers and Sanderlings in breeding plumage. We had afternoon tea and cake as we enjoyed watching and photographing these lovely birds. Delighted, we returned to the guesthouse after another great day.

Day 4 Again the sun was shining this morning as we left Hveragerði. On the way to Reykjavík we saw several Rock Ptarmigans in different places. At Elliðaavatn we had excellent views of Red-breasted Mergansers and Great Northern Divers. There were also Red-necked Phalaropes, Eurasian Wigeons, Tufted Ducks and Greater Scaups. At Vífilsstaðavatn we also found many wildfowl and added Horned (Slavonian) Grebe to our list, one pair was nesting and there were several other birds that allowed excellent views and the chance for photographs. On the ponds and fields at Álftanes we saw many waders including breeding-plumage Sanderling, and we added Gadwall to our duck list. Most notable here were hundreds of Brent Geese on the fields around Bessastaðir, the presidential residence, including two birds of the dark-bellied subspecies that normally migrates farther east to western Siberia. On the duck pond in the centre of Reykjavík we saw the usual suspects including Greater Scaup, Tufted Duck, Eurasian Wigeon and Common Eider. We then drove out of Reykjavík and around the end of Hvalfjörður. There were Common Eiders everywhere and we saw

many waders including many Red Knots in summer plumage. We had our picnic in a scenic spot on the fjord while watching the birds. When we drove on, a female Merlin dashed past us just in front of the van and disappeared down over the roofs of a nearby farm. In Borgarfjörður, we saw many Common Shelducks, a recent colonist in Iceland that is obviously doing well. We then drove on to Snæfellsnes peninsula, the volcano Snæfellsjökull, famous from Jules Verne's novel *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, was ahead of us on the horizon. We spent the last few hours on the northern side of the peninsula looking for White-tailed Eagle. Our patience was rewarded when we saw an adult bird in flight and we all got great views. Soon after, we saw a pair of sub-adult birds in flight and we watched them for a long time as they soared and the female rolled in the air and touched talons with the male. We could not believe our eyes when another two birds, juveniles this time, came flying into view, and we also spent a long time watching these magnificent birds playing in the air. What an afternoon! In Grundarfjörður we were greeted by more Brent Geese and the resident Glaucous Gulls. At the end of another great day, we returned to the hotel to discuss our sightings.

Day 5 We stopped at the edge of the village as we left Grundarfjörður this morning. There were Glaucous Gulls and we saw a Grey Seal gliding through the water in front of us. Next we saw a pair of Harlequin Ducks that were feeding in a small stream and showing perfectly in the morning sun, and then an adult White-tailed Eagle flew over the road and we watched it for a long time as it soared in front of the magnificent snow-capped mountain above the village. At Tinguóms we saw many Common Eiders, Brent Geese and about 20 Harlequin Ducks, mostly males competing for a few females. We spent a long time watching these stunning birds. At Ólafsvík, the beach was full of hundreds of Red Knot, Ruddy Turnstones, Sanderlings and Purple Sandpipers that we observed at close range. Nearby we had amazing views of a pair of Red-throated Divers. We walked along the pools at Rif where we encountered many waders including Dunlin, Common Ringed Plover and Black-tailed Godwit. There were Brent Geese and hundreds of Arctic Terns and we spent a long time observing and photographing about a dozen Red-necked Phalaropes at close range in courtship and mating. We then moved on to the tip of the peninsula. On the way there we saw our first Snow Bunting and another Rock Ptarmigan and we had great views of many Red-breasted Mergansers and European Shags in breeding plumage. At Saxhólsbjarg bird cliffs we saw many Black-legged Kittiwakes, Razorbills, Thick-billed and Common Murres, and a single Atlantic Puffin. Northern Gannets and northern Fulmars were passing offshore. We were just starting to watch the birds when a pod of Orca came into view – there were at least a dozen animals including two large males and we had amazing views of these fantastic animals. Soon after they passed, another pod came into view a little farther out. As we watched them, we started to notice angled bushy blows behind them distinctive of Sperm Whale. Over the next hour we saw many Sperm Whales, resting on the surface and blowing and then lifting the tail fluke out of the water to go for a deep dive. It was difficult to judge how many there were, but as soon as one dived, we saw another and sometimes we had up to three Sperm Whales blowing in the same binocular view – amazing! We enjoyed our picnic in this magical place and could have spent the rest of the afternoon here, but in the end we decided to move on and explore the southern side of the peninsula. We saw more Snow Buntings and at Arnarstapi we observed nesting Black-legged Kittiwakes up close and there were more Harlequin Ducks, European Shag, Red Knot and nesting Great Black-backed and Glaucous Gulls. At the pools at Lýsa there were many wildfowl: Mallard, Eurasian Teal, Eurasian Wigeon, Tufted Duck, Greater Scaup, Red-breasted Merganser and single drakes of Northern Pintail and Northern Shoveler. At Hoftún we saw Horned (Slavonian) Grebe and Great Northern Diver. During the day we found a nest of White-tailed Eagle and had views of both adult birds through the telescope, one guarding and one on the nest. We were tired but delighted when we returned to the hotel after another amazing day.

Day 6 Today we had an early-morning drive from Grundarfjörður to Keflavík Airport. What could have been an uneventful road trip turned out to be rather more. Apart from the most common birds, we had another White-tailed Eagle and we saw a pair of Parasitic Jaegers mating next to the road. We saw a total of six Rock Ptarmigans in different places, most of them very close, and the icing on the cake was close views of an Arctic Fox, still with much of its white winter fur. We watched it and it looked back at us for a few seconds before heading off to look for waders' eggs or young in among the tussocks in the meadow. What a great end to a wonderful trip! We said farewell at the airport. Thank you to all the participants for your excellent company and I hope to see you again soon on another Birdfinders trip.

Birds recorded by the group (68 species)

Red-throated Diver

Gavia stellata

Seen every day but one, 28 birds in all, amazing close views at lake Þinvellir and in Snæfellsnes.

Great Northern Diver

Gavia immer

Seen on four days, 22 birds in all, wonderful views and calls at Þinvellir and Elliðavatn lake.

Horned (Slavonian) Grebe

Podiceps auritus

Seen on Víflilsstaðavatn on the 21. and the pool at Hoftún on the 22. 14 birds in all.

Northern Fulmar

Fulmarus glacialis

Iceland's most common bird, seen every day.

Manx Shearwater

Puffinus puffinus

At least 15 birds seen passing Garðskagi lighthouse on the 18.

Northern Gannet

Morus bassanus

Many seen offshore on three days.

Great Cormorant

Phalacrocorax carbo

Seen every day but one.

European Shag

Phalacrocorax aristotelis

At least 20 birds seen in Snæfellsnes on the 22.

Whooper Swan

Cygnus cygnus

Recorded each day, many large flocks.

Greylag Goose

Anser anser

Common, recorded each day.

(Pale-bellied) Brent Goose

Branta bernicla hrota

Recorded on four days, a large flock in Grundarfjörður and many hundreds in Álftanes on the 21. including two birds of the dark bellied subspecies *B. b. bernicla*.

Common Shelduck

Tadorna tadorna

Recorded on three days, including 35 adults near Borgarnes on the 21.

Mallard

Anas platyrhynchos

Common, many seen every day.

Gadwall

Anas strepera

One drake seen at Álftanes on the 21. and another at Rif on the 22.

Northern Pintail

Anas acuta

One drake seen in Snæfellsnes on the 22. One hybrid drake Mallard x Pintail seen at Þingvallavatn on the 20.

Northern Shoveler

Anas clypeata

One drake seen in Snæfellsnes on the 22.

Eurasian Wigeon

Anas penelope

Seen on four days.

Eurasian Teal

Anas crecca

Seen on four days about 18 birds in all.

Greater Scaup

Aythya marila

Seen on four days about three dozen in all.

Tufted Duck

Aythya fuligula

Common, recorded each day.

Common Eider

Somateria mollissima

Very common, seen every day.

Long-tailed Duck

Clangula hyemalis

About 50 seen on Hlíðarvatn on the 18. and a pair in Álftanes on the 21.

Harlequin Duck

Histrionicus histrionicus

52 birds (12 females) recorded on five days. Amazing close views at Sog river on the 20. and in Grundarfjörður and Tunguós on the 22.

Barrow's Goldeneye

Bucephala islandica

Six drakes seen on Sog river on the 20., cracking views.

Red-breasted Merganser
Mergus serrator
Common, recorded every day.

White-tailed Eagle
Haliaeetus albicilla
Seen on the three days in Snæfellsnes, at least 6 different individuals. Great views.

Merlin
Falco columbarius
A bird seen briefly in Reykjanes on the 18. and a female that flew past the van in Hvalfjörður on the 21.

Rock Ptarmigan
Lagopus muta
21 birds recorded on four days nearly all of them males guarding territory some very close views.

Eurasian Oystercatcher
Haematopus ostralegus
Common, recorded each day.

Common Ringed Plover
Charadrius hiaticula
Recorded in small numbers on four days.

European Golden-plover
Pluvialis apricaria
Common, seen every day.

Sanderling
Calidris alba
Seen on four days in mixed wader flocks on the coast, several in breeding plumage great views in Ólafsvík on the 22.

Purple Sandpiper
Calidris maritima
Seen on three days on the coast best views at Eyrarbakki on the 20.

Ruddy Turnstone
Arenaria interpres
Common on the coast recorded every day but one.

Dunlin
Calidris alpina
Seen on four days.

Common Redshank
Tringa totanus
Common, seen every day.

Red Knot
Calidris canutus
Seen every day but one. Some large flocks on the coast, many birds in breeding plumage.

Black-tailed Godwit

Limosa limosa

Fairly common, recorded each day.

Whimbrel

Numenius phaeopus

Common, recorded each day.

Common Snipe

Gallinago gallinago

Common, seen every day.

Red-necked Phalarope

Phalaropus lobatus

Seen every day but one, over 50 birds in total, great views at Rif on the 22.

Great Skua

Stercorarius skua

More than 30 birds recorded in Mýrdalur and at Markarfljót on the 19. and one flying past offshore at Stokkseyri on the 20., some great views.

Parasitic Jaeger

Stercorarius parasiticus

Seen every day, over 40 birds in total, some great views.

Atlantic Puffin

Fratercula arctica

Recorded on three days.

Black Guillemot

Cepphus grylle

Recorded on three days, four birds in total.

Common Murre

Uria aalge

Recorded on two days, great views Snæfellsnes on the 22.

Thick-billed Murre

Uria lomvia

Great views in Snæfellsnes on the 22.

Razorbill

Alca torda

Recorded on three days, great views in Snæfellsnes on the 22.

Black-headed Gull

Chroicocephalus ridibundus

Seen every day.

Common Gull

Larus canus

A few birds recorded in Hvalfjörður area on the 21.

European Herring Gull
Larus argentatus
Seen on four days in the SW.

Lesser Black-backed Gull
Larus fuscus
Seen every day.

Great Black-backed Gull
Larus marinus
Recorded each day.

Black-legged Kittiwake
Rissa tridactyla
Recorded on four days on the coast.

Glaucous Gull
Larus hyperboreus
Recorded on four days, common in Snæfellsnes.

Iceland Gull
Larus glaucoides
Recorded every day but one, most numerous in Reykjanes peninsula.

Arctic Tern
Sterna paradisaea
Seen every day.

Rock Dove (Feral Pigeon)
Columba livia
Recorded on three days including several Rock Dove looking birds seen in cliffs in Eyjafjöll region on the 19th.

Meadow Pipit
Anthus pratensis
Seen every day.

White Wagtail
Motacilla alba
Recorded each day.

Eurasian Wren
Troglodytes troglodytes
Recorded on two days, good views of three birds at Seljalandsfoss on the 19.

Northern Wheatear
Oenanthe oenanthe
Seen every day but one.

Redwing
Turdus iliacus
Seen every day.

Eurasian Blackbird
Turdus merula
Seen on three days.

Common Raven
Corvus corax
Seen every day.

Common Starling
Sturnus vulgaris
Seen every day.

Common Redpoll
Acanthis flammea
Recorded on four days.

Snow Bunting
Plectrophenax nivalis
Four birds seen in Snæfellsnes on the 22.

Wild mammals recorded by the group

Humpback Whale
Megaptera novaeangliae
One seen briefly blowing and breaching at Garðskagi lighthouse on the 18.

Orca
Orcinus orca
Two pods of all together about 20 individuals seen from Snæfellsnes on the 22., great views including spyhopping.

Sperm Whale
Physeter macrocephalus
Many seen from Snæfellsnes, blowing and fluking before deep dives on the 22., amazing.

Common Seal
Phoca vitulina
One seen at Eyrarbakki on the 20.

Grey Seal
Halichoerus grypus
One seen at Strandarkirkja on the 18. and another in Grundarfjörður on the 22.

Wood Mouse
Apodemus sylvaticus
One seen at Þingvellir on the 20.

Arctic Fox
Vulpes lagopus
One seen at close range in Snæfellsnes on the 23.