



This was an opportunistic trip planned when RK had work commitments in Iceland conveniently timed with mid-summer. After a few hours of local birding around Reykjavik, RK was joined by AM late in the afternoon on 16<sup>th</sup>. A further four full days (well, 94 hours) were then spent travelling and birding in the north and west regions of the country.

This was an excellent time to visit Iceland as daylight was 24 hours and biting insects were not present. Fantastic weather throughout helped enormously, especially on the long drives. A quick web search indicates that the prevailing summer weather in Iceland is rather similar to that of the UK, i.e. highly variable and almost anything can happen. Presumably then, we were fortunate to hit on four settled days including many long periods of unbroken sunshine.



Four days is ample time to take in all the speciality birds including the big four for UK birders, **Barrow's Goldeneye**, **Gyr Falcon**, **Harlequin** and **Brunnich's Guillemot**. **Gyr** can be difficult but the Myvatn area is a stronghold. It would be possible to try for one of the two resident **Steller's Eiders** if you were prepared to drive the extra miles involved and shorten the time spent at other sites. Both are far to the east however, and they are known to be more difficult to find during summer months. We opted to forego the **Steller's** twitch and instead took advantage of the good weather and a tip off from a Swedish birder by taking a whale watching trip out of Husavik on our penultimate day. Four days is definitely not enough time to even scratch the surface of the many geological phenomena in Iceland if most of your time is spent birding!

Arranging the trip was easy, and travelling around Iceland was a pleasure after the road congestion that is ubiquitous in the UK.

### Itinerary

We'll give this in some detail and it ties in with the map below. The itinerary worked exceptionally well and we would probably not alter it at all with hindsight.

**Killer Whales** are reportedly regular off the tip of the Snaefellsness peninsula and a fairly direct drive from Keflavik to try for these on our first evening may have proved worthwhile. We were keen to see our first **Red-necked Phalaropes** of the trip however, and a number of roadside stops on the way to

Stykkisholmur did give us our first birds. These *ad hoc* stops on the first evening were reasonably successful and a very enjoyable introduction to birding in Iceland.

Whale watching trips are available out of Reykjavik and perhaps a second one on our last morning would have been a good option (though an additional expense). We may even have seen our Gardur **Orcas** from the boat (see Trip Highlights).

Flatey Island is renowned as a site for **Grey Phalarope** in summer; Iceland's northwest peninsula is a dramatically rugged area supporting most of Iceland's **White-tailed Eagles** and immense breeding seabird colonies; and Lake Myvatn needs little introduction being Iceland's undisputed wildfowl Mecca.

Note that we were on the road by around 0800 on each of our four mornings.



- **16 June:** Leave Keflavik Airport 1700; drive across the Snafelsness Peninsula to Stykkisholmur (would be 3 hours non-stop), making birding stops en route at likely looking spots. Night in hostel at Stykkisholmur, turn in at midnight...
- **17 June:** Take ferry to Flatey Island (2-hour ride) departing Stykkisholmur at 0900. Car continues to Brjanslaekur while we have 5 hours on Flatey; depart Flatey on ferry at 1600 (1-hour ride), collect car and drive to Breidavik; check in at hostel, eat and continue to Latrabjarg for late evening birding. Night at Breidavik, turn in at 0200...
- **18 June:** Return to Latrabjarg, leaving late morning. Embark on long drive to Lake Myvatn, with several birding stops along the north west peninsula and as we cross northern Iceland. Eat at Akureyri. Arrive Lake Myvatn 2300, check in at hostel, bird for an hour and turn in at 0100...
- **19 June:** Bird Lake Myvatn for a short morning before driving up to Husavik for the whale watching trip (3 hours duration). Leave Husavik at 1600 and drive to hostel at Saeberg with birding stops en route. Turn in at 0100...
- **20 June:** Drive Saeberg to Gardur birding en route and stopping at the industrial hot springs site at Reykholt. Bird for an hour at Gardur before going to the airport for 1500 check-in.

### Travel, food and hostels

Although driving in Iceland is easy, usually on good roads with little traffic, there is quite a lot of dirt

track in the NW, which necessitates extreme caution and lower speeds of course. Some of the distances between sites are much greater than they appear on our map because the roads snake and zig-zag their way across the country, particularly those on the NW peninsula. Check a road atlas for more detail.

We used a mid-sized 4-door saloon to make the long drives bearable and to allow quick access to scopes on the back seat for the frequent roadside stops. Central Iceland has many remote roads that are only negotiable with a 4x4. Our itinerary avoided these however, and only occasionally did we have to take extra care in nursing the car over particularly rough sections of dirt track.

We had resigned ourselves to a lot of driving but with such good weather and two drivers, it was no problem at all. A more expensive alternative would be to fly up to Akureyri but this would not fit well with visits to Flatey or the NW peninsula.

In a further attempt to keep costs down, we stayed in hostels where we could cook our own food, which was usually at 2200 or 2300 hours. Breakfast was included at one hostel, coffee and tea were free at another (flasks were filled) and we arrived too late at Myvatn to cook so resorted to fish and chips in a roadside café (slightly expensive but very good indeed). We had phoned ahead so were able to stop in Akureyri for the meal before once more leaving civilisation for the lava fields and lakes.

We struggled to buy supplies along the way being out in the wilds for most of the time, but the tea, coffee, pasta, rice, salami and snacks we'd brought with us kept us going with no problems. No beer for us during the trip, it's just too expensive.

All the hostels were great and we thoroughly recommend them. Perhaps an even better way to do this trip would have been with a hired camper van. We didn't investigate this option though.

Car hire, hostels and the Flatey ferry were all booked in advance using web sites. This was relatively straight forward and these services are all easy to find by web searches, though a few sites are given below. We flew from Heathrow with Iceland Air and like many operators these days, booking well in advance results in lower fares.

We struggled to find general information regarding independent travel in Iceland in birding trip reports on the web. Hopefully this will plug a few gaps for birders. The trip was not cheap, but it was not appallingly expensive either. We did very well indeed for both birds and mammals. Would it have been as good if the weather had been worse and, for example, fewer mammals seen...? Well, no, of course not. Taking those risks into account, we would suggest that this is a trip perfectly suited to a larger group of itinerant birders. Significant savings would be made on vehicle hire, and the hostel network would be absolutely ideal (and great fun).

The following web sites come strongly recommended.

**[www.hi.is](http://www.hi.is)** (Drill through to the birding pages)

**[www.hostel.is](http://www.hostel.is)** (Drill through to the relevant pages. We booked an accommodation and car hire package - good value and staff very helpful in sorting out exactly what we would need.)

**[www.farmholidays.is](http://www.farmholidays.is)**

**[www.elda.is](http://www.elda.is)**

**[www.northsailing.is](http://www.northsailing.is)**

**[www.seatours.is](http://www.seatours.is)**

**[www.elding.is](http://www.elding.is)**

We used the following hostels, details of which can all be found via the listed web sites. Each offered a selection of bunk rooms, usually accommodating four or more people, and twin rooms were often available too. Some provided bed linen while your own sleeping bag was required at others. All had good cooking facilities.

- **Stykkisholmur:** an eccentric little hostel perched on the slope overlooking the harbour. Perfectly adequate, with a small kitchen curiously nestling in a rabbit warren of bedrooms and bathrooms.
- **Breidavik:** an isolated, large, modern hostel with superb facilities, and just a 30 minute drive from the Latrabjarg cliffs.
- **Lake Myvatn:** part of the *Elda* complex, ideally located on the north east shore of the lake. Again, very good facilities but cooking only allowed prior to 2200 hours.
- **Saeberg:** another large and modern hostel with excellent facilities.

### Trip Highlights

There are **Arctic Terns** and breeding **waders** everywhere; **Redshank**, **Oystercatcher**, **Snipe**, **Ringed Plover**, **Golden Plover** and **Whimbrel**, with much smaller numbers of **Dunlin**, **Purple Sandpiper** and **Black-tailed Godwit**. **Whooper Swans**, **Redwings** and **Arctic Skuas** were seen often in all areas, plus **Raven**, **Wheatear**, **Meadow Pipit**, **Fulmar**, **Eider**, **Black Guillemot**; **Lesser Black-backed**, **Great Black-backed** and **Black-headed Gulls**. A few Icelandic **Redpoll**, **Common Gull** and **Herring Gull** seen.



Flatey was superb and relaxing, with many **Red-necked Phalaropes** giving brilliant close views in lovely habitat, and a single, male, summer plumaged **Grey Phalarope** found after some effort. Watched for a long time of course. The **Grey Phal** and a **Red-necked** feeding together like **Buff-breasted Sandpipers** on short turf round a camper's tent was a great sight. **Snow Bunting** and **Redwing** both common and feeding juveniles; **Puffins** and **Black Guillemots** everywhere; and 2 **Purple Sandpiper** were the only ones seen on the trip.



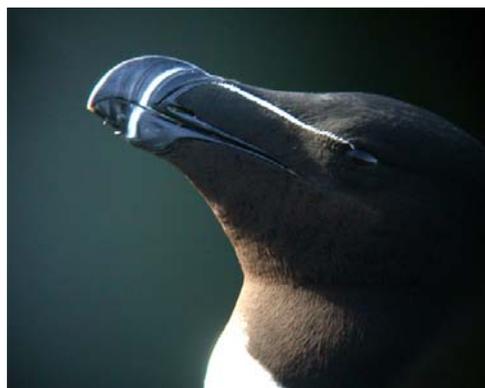
We became a little concerned after finding no sign of **Grey Phalarope** on Flatey after about three hours. We eventually found our bird while eating our lunch on the edge of the restricted area (south shore), and it spent its time commuting between the shore, the grassy fields just inland and the short-turfed camp site. Note that some birders have failed to see them recently on Flatey, while others have seen several pairs.



Three **Arctic Foxes** were watched at length at the most westerly point of Europe, Latrabjarg, which is

a 14km long sea cliff heaving with breeding seabirds and rising to 400 metres. **Puffins** and **Razorbills** down to one metre; **Brunnich's Guillemots** (very common), **Kittiwakes**, etc down to six metres.

The Latrabjarg cliffs are easily accessed from the car park at the end of the road (literally). Closest are the lower cliffs, which offer superb views of all the auks, so we had seen several species well including many **Brunnich's** within minutes of arrival. Note that we also saw **Brunnich's Guillemots** in smaller but good numbers from the 612 road in Patreksfjordur. The **Arctic Foxes** are known to visit the Latrabjarg cliffs late in the evening. Our first appeared at around midnight, and they favoured the area of tundra between the cliff edge, the car park and the road.



A trip highlight was an adult **Gyr Falcon** at 2235 hours as we arrived at Myvatn, perched at 100 metres on a fence post alongside route 848 just north of the Laxa River bridge. After a few minutes, it circled us and flew low across a moss and lichen covered lava field, appearing and disappearing between the jagged mounds of lava. Myvatn is a spectacle in its own way. High numbers of **Slavonian Grebe** and **RN Phal**, **Barrow's Goldeneye**, **Greater Scaup**, **Tufted Duck**, **Gadwall**, **Wigeon** and **Red-breasted Merganser**, with smaller numbers of **Teal**, **Whooper Swan**, **Long-tailed Duck**, **Goosander**, **Common Scoter** and **Pintail**; a drake **Pochard** was unusual; and all in cracking breeding plumage of course. A passing **Gyr** flushed everything the next morning and was mobbed by **godwits** as it flew off. A few **Harlequin** present where the River Laxa joins the lake.

The lake is nice to watch as the shoreline is very convoluted so most birds are in bays and not distant. Smoke-like swarms of flies were annoying, but thankfully not biting - and we were pleased to head off to the coast after just a few hours on the morning of 19th.

**Harlequin** were also seen at several other sites including a superb, close flock of 40 at a broad, shallow confluence of rivers; another **Gyr** watched at great distance perched on a summit a few miles prior to Breidavik; three **White-tailed Eagles** seen (rare in Iceland) and many **Glaucous Gulls**; all these on the NW peninsula, with just one **Iceland Gull** seen.



A few **Red-throated** and (stunning) **Great Northern Divers** at various sites during the trip. Several **Ptarmigan** showed well. Just two **Merlin** seen. Flocks of **Pinkfeet** with crèches inland. Two **Short-eared Owl** seen on the last morning, plugging just about the only significant gap in our list.

One **Blue Whale** watched surfacing several times from the Husavik whale watching trip, plus four **Humpback Whale** and one **Minke Whale**. We basically twitched the **Blue** on a tip-off received from the only birders we met on the trip, which was at midnight at Myvatn. We cut our time short at the lake the next day and the efficient hostel staff booked us onto an afternoon trip as **Blues** had been seen regularly in the preceding week, and the Swedes had seen three the previous day.

Great views of another **Minke** from the 612 road as it cruised Patreksfjordur on the NW peninsula, and a third appeared in our scopes as we watched a pod of **Killer Whales**. They were distant on a mill pond-still sea at Gardur, with two small fishing boats for reference. Appeared to be all female types plus a young male with a slightly straighter and longer fin, perhaps nine animals in total. Totally unexpected as not a site known for whale sightings as far as we knew. They were the last things we watched before packing up and heading for the airport.

There has been a **Black Duck** resident at Gardur for some time now but we did not connect with it during our short visit. A couple of **Glaucous Gulls** were present.

The peak time for **Blue Whale** sightings is from late June to the end of July. The animals at Husavik were, therefore, rather early; and it turns out that the stretch of coast between Gardur and Reykjavik is noted for its whales, **Killers** being especially regular.

We did a 30-minute bird list at midnight at the last hostel from our sulphurous, outdoor hot tub overlooking a fjord, with whiskies and binoculars to hand. 12 species seen: **Redshank, Dunlin, Snipe, Greylag, Arctic Tern, Arctic Skua, Fulmar, GBB Gull, BH Gull, Eider, Raven** and **Ringed Plover**.

Our sincere thanks go to Edward Rickson, Yann Kolbeinsson and Paul James for providing valuable information and fielding our questions prior to the trip.

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