

Iceland, June - September 2001

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General Information

The island of Iceland, a little more than 100 000 square km, is situated just south of the Arctic Circle in the north Atlantic, about 1 000 km north of the British Isles and 800 km west of Norway. Greenland is 300 km to the north, only separated from North America by a small strait.

It's a volcanic island and the landscape is stunningly beautiful and spectacular with its glaciers, lava fields, lakes and large rivers. The coast is deeply forked by fjords and steep cliffs with the exception of the south coast. Major lowlands are found north of Egilsstaðir in the east, north of Borgarnes in the west and particularly the south coast. The highlands consists of uninhabitable barren mountain terrain. Vegetation is very sparse all over the island except for scrubs and tree plantations, mostly near cultivated and inhabited areas.

The total population is less than 300 000 and the vast majority of Iceland's residents live in the Reykjavik area. The second town is Akureyri in the north.

Climate

The climate is influenced by the Gulf Stream that sends a steady supply of warm water up past Iceland in the otherwise cool ocean. There are no great differences in winter and summer temperatures, but the weather changes rapidly due to frequent depressions crossing the Atlantic, and you can expect all kinds of weather in one day. We had very few days with temperatures above 12 degrees so one needs to bring warm clothes.

Wildlife

The situation itself makes birding on Iceland interesting. About 338 different species have been seen, most of them autumn vagrants. Others are a few passage migrants and winter guests. There are only about 75 regular breeders, most of them seabirds and waders with very large populations. Breeding passerines are few.

Iceland is, however, the only breeding place in Western Palearctic for the Great Northern Diver, Barrow's Goldeneye and Harlequin Duck.

The only original terrestrial mammal on Iceland is the Arctic fox, but the marine mammals such as seals, dolphins and whales occur here in large numbers. Particularly the large whales that can be spotted in the summer months has become a major tourist attraction, as well as fly-fishing for trout in rivers and lakes.

Useful information

Buying a return ticket from Sweden, the best and only offer is with Icelandair. Check their website for campaign prices. If you're going to the US several airlines offer a stop-over on Iceland. There are also specially designed weekend tours sold by travel agencies. High season is from June-September when prices for car rentals and hotels rise in this already undoubtedly expensive country.

The best offer we could get for a small rentalcar, one week-free mileage, was at AG bilaleiga, Reykjavik. It costed us about 3 800 SKr with insurance at the end of August. Note that all numbered national highways are not paved and some not open except in the summer. If you plan to visit the highlands you must have a 4WD. It's about 500 km from the very west to the east and about 300 km from the south to the north. Driving in Iceland takes time due to the sometimes poor roads and hairpin bends. The always present cheep by the roadside will help you to stay alert. If you're short of time or on your own it's worth considering the domestic airlines for competitive prices on some destinations. Buses are another alternative, although quite irregular, at least outside the Reykjavik area.

Hostels costs from SKr 200 per person, but some are only open in the summer. Another nice alternative is private boarding at a farm, in the same price category, or perhaps camping. There are hotels available in larger villages along Highway nr 1.

Almost all travel planning information is available on the internet. Try searching at www.google.com and for the birds the monthly updated birdsite www.fuglar.is. Any additional information could be obtained from the tourist centre downtown Reykjavik. They have all the information you need as well as detailed maps over the most popular areas.

Itinerary

Me and my girlfriend spent the summer on Iceland due to work at the hospital in Reykjavik. We had limited access of a car so most of the birding was done in the Reykjavik area on spare time. We had the last week off when we drove Highway 1, anti-clockwise, around the island.

Sites

In and around Reykjavík

Heidmörk, southeast of Reykjavík, including **Vífillstadavatn** and **Ellidavatn**, is a recreation area to the Reykjavickers with walking- and horsetrails. There are scrubs and planted trees in the otherwise barren landscape. Ellidavatn is the bigger lake of the two and there are also some smaller ponds. From Ellidavatn a river flows north to the sea through **Ellidaárdalur**, also with planted trees and good for passerines. We lived at Vífillstadir during our stay so these sites were visited on several occasions.

In northwest Reykjavík is a neck of land called **Seltjarnarnes** with a smaller pond, **Bakktjörn**, at it's end. It's a good spot for seabirds and waders and other passage migrants. It was visited 22/7, 28/7 and 2/8.

Alftanes peninsula south of Seltjarnarnes is another nice place with a lot of breeding birds as well as migrants. From the presidential building at Bessastadir you overlook a lake and grazed meadows popular with ducks and geese. It was visited 17/6, 20/6, 13/7 and 31/7.

Reykjavíkstjörn, the downtown lake, is also well worth a visit. The same goes for **Astjörn**, a small lake above Hafnarfjörður, south of road 41 to Keflavík. The latter was visited 17 and 20/6.

The churchyard and tree plantations at **Fossvogur** is a good place for passerines, situated southeast of the domestic airport in Reykjavík. Just offshore, north of Reykjavík, is a small island named **Videy** that offers good views of breeding seabirds. The latter visited 10/6.

The Reykjanes peninsula

The whole of the peninsula offers good and varied birding, although some places are more suitable than others. All sites are within an hours drive from Reykjavík. **Gardskagi** at the very northwest corner is probably one of the best places for migratory birds and for watching seabirds. Also look for whales and dolphins. Visited 16/6, 17/7 and 13/8. Getting there from Keflavík you pass **Gardur**. The small harbour and the inundation/pond, just northwest of it, is good for roosting gulls.

The coast south of Gardskagi down to **Sandgerdi** is very good for waders. Visited 16/6, 9 and 10/8. Further south between Hafnir and Reykjanes is a birdcliff, **Hafnaberg**, with lot's of breeding auks, including **Brünnich's Guillemot**. **Grindavík**, south of the Blue Lagoon and **Reykjanes**, the very southwest point of the peninsula are also good for seabirds. These sites were visited 30/6.

Tingvallavatn and the Sog river

About 50 km east of Reykjavík lies lake **Tingvallavatn**. From the lake the **Sog river** flows south to the sea. This is probably the nearest site from Reykjavík in the breeding season for **Harlequin Duck** and possibly the only site, except Myvatn, with a chance for **Barrow's Goldeneye**. It's a national park with a varied birdlife and scenic views. We saw the Goldeneyes at a pond by the bridge just south of the hydro-electric plant and the Harlequins further upstream at the very beginning of the Sog. There were also Harlequins at the northern side of the lake. Several **Great Northern Divers** were also seen in the area.

Following the the Sog river south you can drive down to the coast to **Stokkseyri** from Selfoss. The site is good for various seabirds and waders and highly recommended. The sites were visited 24/6 and 5/8.

Snaefellsnes

The Snaefellsnes peninsula is known for it's scenic beauty. Driving north from Reykjavík you pass **Borgarnes** about halfway to the peninsula. The **Borgarfjörður** is good for waders and a good stop, especially at low tide. **Mýrar** north of Borgarnes is an area with meadows, marshlands and small ponds. It's good for waders, ducks, divers and other waterbirds. At **Hoftún** along the south coast of Snaefellsnes there are some ponds that were good for ducks and horned grebes. Further west at **Arnarstapi** and **Hellnar** the coast is steep with large numbers of breeding seabirds. **Rif** west of Ólafsvík on the northwest coast of the peninsular is good for waders and gulls. If you want to go whalewatching there are tours operating from Ólafsvík. Borgarfjörður was visited 21/7 and the Snaefellsnes peninsula 19-20/8.

Highway 1, the "Circle road", around Iceland, 0827 - 0902

From Reykjavik we drove to **Skaftafell National Park**, south of Vatnajökull, where we spent the evening and next morning. The surrealistic beauty of the nature in the area is overwhelming at the feet of the Vatnajökull glacier. From there we continued east, passing **Hof í Öraefum** and **Reynivellir**, to **Tveit** í Nesjum. The latter a lake and marshy area about 20 km northwest of **Höfn** just by the main road. Next day we birded the coast between Höfn and **Djúpivogur**, passing **Hvalnes í Lón**. From Djúpivogur we drove northwest through **Breiddalur - Egilsstaðir** and up to **Lake Myvatn**. Lake Myvatn is a popular tourist destination due to the volcanic activity and natural beauty. To birders it's famous for its varied and thriving duck population. All the duck species of Iceland breed in the area and much more. From Myvatn we set course north to **Husavik** and up to **Raudinúpur** at the northwest corner of **Melrakkasletta**. The last day before going back to **Reykjavik** we went whale watching from Husavik.

References/literature

Mullarney, K., Svensson, L., Zetterström, D. and Grant, K. J. (1999) **Fågelguiden**. Albert Bonniers Förlag. Stockholm.

Gudmundsson, H and Hlíðberg, J. B. (1997) **Birdwatching** - Iceland Nature Guides. Ritsmidjan. Reykjavik.

Acknowledgements

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Systematic list of birds following

<http://ni.is/bliki/listar/1111.htm>

Skrá yfir íslenska fugla - List of Icelandic Bird Species. **Rare birds** are listed in **bold**.

Red-throated Diver	Fairly common. Seen at most sites in suitable habitat.
Great Northern Diver	About 60 birds seen altogether at several locations. At least 2-3 pairs in Ellidavatn/Vífilsstaðavatn the whole summer. Several at Lake Myvatn.
Slovenian Grebe	Breeds at Astjörn. Also seen in small numbers at Snaefellsnes peninsula, along the southcoast, Breiddalur and Melrakkasletta. Common at Lake Myvatn.
Northern Fulmar	Very common. Also seen quite far from the coast.
Manx Shearwater	Only seen off the southwest coast usually in small numbers. Although 180-200 at Gardskagi on the 16 th of June.
European Storm-petrel	4 at Gardskagi on the 13 th of August.
Northern Gannet	Common off the coast.
Great Cormorant	Seen at several sites around Iceland although in small numbers.
European Shag	Seen at several sites around the Reykjanes peninsula up to Snaefellsnes where probably most numerous. Not seen elsewhere.
Mute Swan	1 ad male at Skjálftavatn/Melrakkasletta, northeast Iceland, on the 1 st of September. Apparently this bird has been seen during summer in this area since a few years back.
Whooper Swan	Very common with larger concentrations of moulting birds in the south- and northeast.
Pink-footed Goose	Breeds in the highlands. I only saw 2 birds! Both times with Greylag Goose. One ad at Alftanes in June and one ad at Breiddalur on the 30 th of August.
Greylag Goose	Very common.
Brent Goose	1 ad (hrota) moulting with Eider Ducks at Gardskagi on the 17 th of July.
Common Shelduck	Rare breeder. 4 ad and 5 juv at Borgarfjörður on the 21 st of July.
Eurasian Wigeon	Very common.
American Wigeon	One ad male in eclipse with Eurasians at Vífilsstaðavatn on the 23 rd and 25 th of August.

Gadwall	Fairly common around Reykjavik. Also at Tveit i Nesjum and Melrakkaslétta. Very common at Lake Myvatn.
Eurasian Teal	Common.
Mallard	Very common.
American Black Duck	One ad male at Gardur on the 16 th of June and the 17 th of July. This bird has been at this site for a few years.
Northern Pintail	Scattered records around Reykjavik and Borgarnes. Common at Tveit i Nesjum, Melrakkaslétta and at Lake Myvatn.
Northern Shoveler	Rare breeder. One pair at Hoftun on the 19 th of August.
Ring-necked Duck	One male in eclipse at Tveit i Nesjum on the 28 th and 29 th of August.
Tufted Duck	Very common.
Greater Scaup	Very common.
Common Eider	Very common.
Harlequin Duck	5 at Sog River on the 24 th of June. One male at Gardskagi on the 17 th of July. 2 at Tingvallavatn on the 5 th of August. 15 at Arnarstapi on the 19 th of August. 1 at Breiddalur on the 30 th of August. Breeds by fast flowing rivers all over the country. Tingvallavatn/Sog river possibly being the nearest breedingsite from Reykjavik. Outside the breedingseason the birds gather in great numbers at sea. At that time common off the coast in west and southwest Iceland.
Long-tailed Duck	2 at Alftanes the whole summer, 2 at Myvatn on the 31 st of August and 25 at Skjálftavatn/Melrakkaslétta on the 1 st of September.
Black Scoter	3-5 at Myvatn on the 31 st of August.
Barrow's Goldeneye	1 female at Sog River on the 24 th of June. 11 at Sog River on the 5 th of August. Very common at Lake Myvatn.
Red-breasted Merganser	Common.
Goosander	One at Sog River on the 5 th of August.
Ruddy Duck	One ad male at Astjörn on the 17 th of June.
White-tailed Eagle	One subad at Videy on the 10 th of June.
Merlin	Several scattered records. None in the southwest.
Gyr Falcon	One juvenile at Raudinúpur on the 1 st of September.
Rock Ptarmigan	1-3 birds at Heidmörk, Tingvallavatn and Melrakkaslétta.
Eurasian Oystercatcher	Common.
Ringed Plover	Common.
European Golden Plover	Very common.
Red Knot	Very common passage migrant. Large numbers in late July along the west- and south coast.
Sanderling	Fairly common passage migrant. Only seen in the westsouthwest of the country.
Purple Sandpiper	Common.
Dunlin	Very common
Common Snipe	Common.
Black-tailed Godwit	Common.
Whimbrel	Common.
Common Redshank	Very common.
Common Greenshank	One juvenile/first winter at Tveit i Nesjum on the 29 th of August.
Ruddy Turnstone	Common passage migrant.
Red-necked Phalarope	Common. No records from mid August onwards.

Arctic Skua	Common.
Great Skua	Common. Largest concentrations along the southwest coast.
Little Gull	One ad winter migrating southwest with Black-headed Gulls at Hvalnes on the 29 th of August.
Black-headed Gull	Very common.
Mew Gull	Four scattered records around Reykjavik. Several at Tveit and Akureyri.
Lesser Black-backed Gull	Very common.
Herring Gull	Very common.
Glaucous Gull	Common. Most birds seen in the west, eg Snaefellsnes peninsula.
Great Black-backed Gull	Common.
<i>Herring Gull x Glaucous Gull</i>	About ten records of this hybrid. Note greyish tip on outer primaries in ad plumage.
Black-legged Kittiwake	Very common.
Arctic Tern	Very common.
Common Guillemot	Common.
Brünnich's Guillemot	5 at Hafnaberg on the 30 th of June.
Razorbill	Common.
Black Guillemot	Fairly common.
Atlantic Puffin	Very common.
Rock Pigeon (domestica)	Fairly common in Reykjavik. Also seen at Myvatn and Höfn.
Common Swift	2 at Raudinúpur on the 1 st of September.
Barn Swallow	One ad at Videy on the 10 th of June.
Meadow Pipit	Very common.
White Wagtail	Common.
Winter Wren	Very few scattered records, most of them around Myvatn on the 31 st of August.
Northern Wheatear	Common.
Common Blackbird	Rare breeder. One pair with pull at Fossvogskirkjugardur, the cemetery, on the 10 th of July. 1 ad male, 1 ad female and 4 juveniles on the 28 th of July.
Fieldfare	Summerrecords very rare. A flock of 7 near Keflavik Airport on the 5 th of June.
Redwing	Very common.
Goldcrest	3-4 at Ellidaardalur on the 11 th of August.
Common Raven	Common.
Common Starling	Common.
House Sparrow	Rare breeder. One male and one juv/female at Hof í Öraefum on the 28 th of August.
Eurasian Siskin	Irregular rare breeder. 1 male and 2 females/juveniles at Reynivellir on the southcoast on the 28 th of August.
Mealy Redpoll	Common.
Common Crossbill	One of the larger invasions to Iceland occurred during our stay. From mid July - mid August several birds were seen around Reykjavik, with the largest flock of 68+ at Heidmörk on the 19 th of July.
Snow Bunting	Common.