

# Iceland

19–23 May 2005

**Participants:**

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**Leader: Andy Jones**



**Brünnich's Guillemot**

A northerly airflow in spring almost always means bright weather in Iceland and this was certainly the case with the 2005 Birdfinders trip. Cold, clear weather on arrival set the pattern for the next five days affording us wonderful views of Iceland at its scenic best – even if it did mean a woolly hat was needed much of the time! In all we recorded a very respectable 68 species with wonderful views of most of them, particularly Harlequin Duck and Barrow's Goldeneye. The brief journal that follows mentions the places we visited and some of the highlights of the trip. A full list of all birds recorded is also included.

**Day 1:** A late afternoon arrival at Keflavík Airport allowed time for a quick visit to some nearby seabird colonies to search for Brünnich's Guillemots and other auks. On the way we had some good views of Arctic Skua, Arctic Tern, European Golden Plover and Common Snipe. The walk to the cliffs produced some Snow Buntings and Northern Wheatears as well as Eurasian Whimbrel, Common Raven, Lesser Black-backed Gull and Common Ringed Plover. The black basaltic cliffs at Hafnaberg are very impressive and it wasn't long before we had found a few Brünnich's Guillemots amid the far more numerous Common Guillemots on the cliff ledges. Very obligingly, one of the Brünnich's Guillemots was standing alongside a Common Guillemot allowing an easy comparison of these sometimes confusing species. We also enjoyed watching Razorbills, Black Guillemots, Northern Gannets and Black-legged Kittiwakes and had a glimpse of a Great Skua as well. On our way to the hotel we were lucky enough to see our first Harlequin Ducks in the River Brúará. Nearby was a drake and duck Barrow's Goldeneye and it was a real treat to see these two special species almost side by side. Red-throated divers, Dunlins, Black-tailed Godwits and Whooper Swans were also very much in evidence. Our hotel was at Skálholt – a wonderful place with the adjoining fields full of breeding waders making midnight birdwatching a new experience for all members of the group.

**Day 2:** Another bright day with a strong north-easterly wind. We headed in the direction of Iceland's famous volcano, Hekla, with the hope of encountering Pink-footed Geese and Gyr Falcon. Shortly after starting we stopped to enjoy a splendid view of a male Willow Ptarmigan still showing a considerable amount of his white winter plumage. As we traveled along the valley of Þjórsá we encountered the first of several hundred Pink-footed Geese that we were to see during the day. Most of the world's Pink-feet breed in Iceland and the birds we saw were on their way to their remote breeding grounds in the country's interior. We enjoyed several excellent views of different flocks, sometimes with Greylag Geese as well. We also recorded two Barnacle Geese – stragglers on the way to their breeding grounds in Greenland. A search of some likely-looking Gyr Falcon country was unsuccessful but in compensation we had tremendous views of some awe-inspiring volcanic scenery as we looked towards Mount Hekla and visited the impressive waterfall at Hjalparfoss. As we settled for a picnic lunch in the shelter of some birch woods we saw a pair of Willow Ptarmigan scuttling away. We took a walk alongside the river and had some spectacular views of two males and a female Harlequin Ducks as they surfed along the fast-flowing stream. We travelled to the glacial waterfall at Gullfoss and the hot spring area at Geysir to see the geysers before heading back to the hotel for a very pleasant meal and an evening chorus of Black-tailed Godwit, Common Snipe, European Golden Plover, Eurasian Whimbrel, Eurasian Oystercatcher and Redwing.

**Day 3:** We started our day with a quick visit to a volcanic crater before heading off for some fairly-intensive birding in and around the lake of Þingvallavatn. We saw our first Greater Scaup of the trip before we encountered more Barrow's Goldeneyes and our first Red-necked Phalaropes. At Þingvellir we saw two pairs of Great Northern Divers, and picnicked near a small pool with two remarkably unconcerned and fast-asleep Red-throated Divers. The area is incredibly beautiful and geologically fascinating as it lies on the junction of two tectonic plates separating Europe from North America. We then traveled around Hvalfjörður and had a very rewarding spell of birdwatching around the shores of the fjord. We saw Red Knot, Ruddy Turnstone, Dunlin, Purple Sandpiper and Common Ringed Plover very well; the Red Knot resplendent in their breeding plumage. Common Eider are very numerous in this part of Iceland and we were treated to some wonderful views. On our way to Borgarnes we recorded a White-tailed Eagle languidly flapping along the cliff face and on some mud-flats nearby we saw a real Iceland rarity – Common Shelduck. We then traveled to Snæfellsnes, a long peninsula jutting out into the Atlantic Ocean from the west of Iceland. Some pools on the south coast were very productive with Slavonian Grebe and another scarce bird in Iceland, Northern Shoveler, amidst the far more numerous, Tufted Duck, Eurasian Wigeon, Greater Scaup and Eurasian Teal. We arrived at Grundarfjörður, which was to be our base for the next two nights and saw large groups of Glaucous Gulls. Before we arrived at our harbourside hotel and had a very pleasant supper of freshly-caught fish.

**Day 4:** After breakfast we spent a very enjoyable hour or so looking at gull flocks and teasing out some Iceland Gulls from the predominant Glaucous Gulls of the area. Iceland Gulls are winter visitors to Iceland and most had already left for their breeding grounds much further north, nevertheless we had some good views and were able to compare the differences with Glaucous Gulls. We also saw more Harlequin Ducks and even witnessed a pair mating. At the very tip of Snæfellsness peninsula whilst scanning the sea for shearwaters we saw some Killer Whales (Orca) offshore. After a picnic we traveled from Stykkisholmur by boat to the island of Flatey. On the journey we had a glimpse of White-tailed Eagle and rather better views of Atlantic Grey Seals. Lots of Atlantic Puffins and Black Guillemots were recorded, too. On our walk around Flatey we were treated to some exceptionally good views of Red-necked Phalaropes – just a few feet from us on a small pool. We also had very close views of singing Snow Buntings and were delighted to see Pale-bellied Brent Geese in some of the more sheltered bays. This species passes through Iceland on its way to its breeding areas in Greenland. Our return boat trip produced a Sooty Shearwater, more seals but, despite a thorough search, no more eagles.

**Day 5:** A brief visit to Reykjavík, Iceland's capital city, preceded the last birdwatching of the trip on the Reykjanes peninsula. At Garðskagi we saw some seabird movements with good numbers of gannets, auks and gulls flying past. We also recorded Sanderling on the nearby sandy beach. We later learned that a large three-masted sailing ship we could see offshore was a training ship from the Ukraine and on its way to Britain. A quick visit to a nearby pool produced a real rarity – Black Duck! It was time to dash off to the airport for the return flight to London. All agreed it had been a great trip and everyone was left with many pleasant and happy memories not only of the special birds we saw, but of Iceland as well.

Species recorded between 19 and 23 May 2005

1 Red-throated Diver <i>Gavia stellata</i>	35 Whimbrel <i>Numenius phaeopus</i>
2 Great Northern Diver <i>Gavia immer</i>	36 Common Redshank <i>Tringa totanus</i>
3 Slavonian Grebe <i>Podiceps auritus</i>	37 Ruddy Turnstone <i>Arenaria interpres</i>
4 Northern Fulmar <i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	38 Red Knot <i>Calidris canutus</i>
5 Sooty Shearwater <i>Puffinus griseus</i>	39 Sanderling <i>Calidris alba</i>
6 Manx Shearwater <i>Puffinus puffinus</i>	40 Dunlin <i>Calidris alpina</i>
7 Northern Gannet <i>Morus bassanus</i>	41 Purple Sandpiper <i>Calidris maritima</i>
8 Great Cormorant <i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	42 Red-necked Phalarope <i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>
9 European Shag <i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	43 Great Skua <i>Stercorarius skua</i>
10 Whooper Swan <i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	44 Arctic Skua <i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>
11 Pink-footed Goose <i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>	45 Common Gull <i>Larus canus</i>
12 Greylag Goose <i>Anser anser</i>	46 Great Black-backed Gull <i>Larus marinus</i>
13 Barnacle Goose <i>Branta leucopsis</i>	47 Glaucous Gull <i>Larus hyperboreus</i>
14 Pale-bellied Brent Goose <i>Branta hrota</i>	48 Iceland Gull <i>Larus glaucooides</i>
15 Common Shelduck <i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	49 Herring Gull <i>Larus argentatus</i>
16 Eurasian Wigeon <i>Anas penelope</i>	50 Lesser Black-backed Gull <i>Larus fuscus</i>
17 Eurasian Teal <i>Anas crecca</i>	51 Black-headed Gull <i>Larus ridibundus</i>
18 Mallard <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	52 Black-legged Kittiwake <i>Rissa tridactyla</i>
19 Black Duck <i>Anas rubripes</i>	53 Arctic Tern <i>Sterna paradisaea</i>
20 Northern Shoveler <i>Anas clypeata</i>	54 Common Guillemot <i>Uria aalge</i>
21 Tufted Duck <i>Aythya fuligula</i>	55 Brünnich's Guillemot <i>Uria lomvia</i>
22 Greater Scaup <i>Aythya marila</i>	56 Razorbill <i>Alca torda</i>
23 Common Eider <i>Somateria mollissima</i>	57 Black Guillemot <i>Cepphus grylle</i>
24 Harlequin Duck <i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>	58 Atlantic Puffin <i>Fratercula arctica</i>
25 Barrow's Goldeneye <i>Bucephala islandica</i>	59 White Wagtail <i>Motacilla alba</i>

26 Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator*  
27 Goosander *Mergus merganser*  
28 White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla*  
29 Rock Ptarmigan *Lagopus mutus*  
30 Eurasian Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*  
31 European Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria*  
32 Common Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*  
33 Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*  
34 Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*

60 Feral Pigeon *Columba livia*  
61 Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*  
62 Eurasian Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*  
63 Redwing *Turdus iliacus*  
64 Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*  
65 Common Raven *Corvus corax*  
66 European Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*  
67 Common Redpoll *Carduelis flammea*  
68 Snow Bunting *Plectrophenax nivalis*