

# Iceland

## Spring

21–28 May 2011

### Participants

Jean Millen

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**Gyr Falcon**

**Leader** Andy Jones

Travelling in Iceland is exhilarating. The landscape provides a spectacular backdrop to a springtime birding holiday here. This year's trip was further enlivened by the Grímsvötn eruption, which actually started as we were on our way to Iceland! Thankfully the eruption didn't affect our plans too much and we enjoyed Iceland's special birds and landscapes without much volcanic inconvenience.

**Day 1:** We arrive in Iceland on a late evening flight and learn that the volcano at Grímsvötn has just started erupting. As we drive to our hotel we are able to see the eruption column rise high into the sky. We see lightning in the plume. The birds are not forgotten though and in the light night record Lesser Black-backed Gulls, some Mallard, our first Arctic Terns and see some of the breeding waders of Iceland who will become our constant companions in the days ahead.

**Day 2:** Cold northeast wind with temperatures reaching just 5°C. We wake to learn that the eruption has closed Icelandic airspace and continues to send a great plume of ash skywards. Because of this we decide to change the order of our trip and instead of heading north as planned will visit the south coast and Gullfoss and Geysir instead. There's a chill wind blowing – spring arrived late in Iceland this year – so we wrap up warmly to explore the coast near Eyrarbakki. We record many Eider and see our first Red-throated Divers. Offshore are Long-tailed Ducks, Red-breasted Merganser and we note both Iceland and Glaucous Gulls amongst the flocks of Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gulls. There are many Arctic Terns and along the beach we see Eurasian Oystercatcher and Ruddy Turnstone. In the nearby wetlands we record many Whimbrel, European Golden-plover, Common Redshank and Common Snipe. We also have some wonderful views of Red-necked Phalaropes. At Knarrarósviti there is some skua passage and we see several Great Skuas and many more Arctic Skuas. We also record Atlantic Grey Seal here. We move away from the coast and have our picnic lunch in the shelter of some woodland hoping to see Common Redpoll. No luck but we are treated to the sights and sounds of displaying Common Snipe instead. We travel to the geothermal area of Geysir and enjoy watching the spoutings of the geyser. There are several Redwings in the area and we have our first good views of this species. The nearby waterfall of Gullfoss is spectacular though there are few birds around but we enjoy watching the antics of some Common Ravens tumbling overhead. On then to the river system

of Sogið and we strike lucky with some wonderful views of Harlequin Ducks – the first time we see this special species on the trip. We also note Greater Scaup, Eurasian Wigeon, Common Teal and some lovely Black-tailed Godwits. A delicious dinner awaits us in the hotel and we reflect on what has been a great first day in Iceland.

**Day 3:** Brisk northeast wind with temperatures reaching just 5°C. There was also some volcanic ash fall during the night. The eruption at Grímsvötn shows no sign of stopping and we learn of the significant ash fall that has occurred in the areas near the eruption site. We're more than 200km away but the strong NE winds have brought ash near us. We decide to sit tight for a few hours and wait for the winds to drop. Our patience pays off and the weather improves for us as we head towards Þingvellir. We see several Harlequin Ducks on the River Sog and as we are watching them a drake Barrow's Goldeneye flies rapidly past us. We follow in the direction it flew and search some lakes to see if we can find it again. We're unsuccessful but do manage to see more Harlequins including a pair posing gracefully for us on some rocks near the water's edge. We also see Goosander and many more Tufted Ducks here, but there's no sign of the Barrow's Goldeneye. As we munch our lunchtime sandwiches admiring the Harlequins we see another, or was it the same, Barrow's Goldeneye fly past. We travel further upstream and near Úlfjótavatn see a magnificent pair of Great Northern Diver. They're only a few yards from us and we are enthralled as they swim quietly in the river flowing into the lake. We also see our first Common Redpolls here though the views are fleeting as they fly away from us. At Þingvellir, the place of the old Viking parliament and the rift valley between the crustal plates of Eurasia and North America, we see in the distance the edge of the ash cloud from the volcano. We decide to turn around and head back for the clearer air of the coast. Fortified with coffee and Icelandic pancakes in the geothermal town of Hveragerði we finish the day with a very productive spell of birdwatching near Eyrarbakki. On the weed covered rocky foreshore we note many Red Knot. These birds are on their migration to Greenland and they looked wonderful in their breeding plumage. We also noted Great Cormorant, Whooper Swan, Red-breasted Merganser, Ruddy Turnstone and Purple Sandpiper here as well as the familiar gulls and waders that we had seen the day before. Despite our worries about the eruption it's been a great day's birding and we enjoy another delicious meal at our hotel.

**Day 4:** Light northerly wind with sunshine and bright skies. Still cold, with temperatures only reaching 6°C. We're travelling north today to our next base in north Iceland. The day promises fine weather and it's a lovely journey northwards. We see a group of Brent Geese as we drive. At Borgarnes we have an enjoyable spell of birdwatching and tick an Icelandic rarity – Common Shelduck. There aren't many pairs of this elegant duck nesting in Iceland and we have some good views. There's lots of waders feeding on the shore here, too. We note Dunlin, Black-tailed Godwit, Common Redshank, Red Knot, Common Ringed Plover and Sanderling. We also have our first good view of the Icelandic race of Common Redpoll. We explore the rivers near Bifröst in the hope of seeing more Harlequin Ducks. No luck this time but instead we are treated to some great views of the Icelandic race of Eurasian Wren, which puts on a lovely display of virtuoso singing for us. Our picnic is amidst some trees and we sunbathe in the shelter of this small wood. There are Whooper Swans in the valley below, snipe 'drumming' overhead and several Common Redpolls to add even more flavour to the lunchtime sandwiches. Spring came late to Iceland this year and recent snow is very much in evidence as we cross the uplands on our way to Blönduós. We note Great Northern Diver on the way and at the river mouth see a group of a dozen or more Harlequin Ducks. We have great views of Iceland Gull, note more Sanderling and also see a Common Seal offshore. In the wetlands near Blönduós we record our first Slavonian Grebes and as we admire them are treated to some very close views of Red-necked Phalaropes as well. The scenery on our drive towards Akureyri is spectacular and is further improved by our first sightings of groups of Pink-footed Geese, which we find in the broad glacial valleys. We see a Short-eared Owl as we drive towards Akureyri and as we hop out to admire it perched on a fence post also see a Rock Ptarmigan who sits on a tussock also waiting to be admired. It's not long before we reach our guesthouse in lovely Eyjafjörður, which will be our base for the next three nights.

**Day 5:** A light easterly wind with largely clear skies. Still cold with temperatures ranging between 3 and 6°C. We'll be visiting the famous birding area of Mývatn today and the weather looks fine as we start our journey. At Ljósavatn we see some Slavonian Grebes, Eurasian Wigeon and some Common Teal. We stop to look at the very attractive waterfall of Goðafoss on our way to Mývatn itself. At Laxá we have some terrific views of both Barrow's Goldeneye and Harlequin Duck, the latter surfing downstream in the fast flowing river. We also photograph some Red-necked Phalaropes who are feeding in the calmer water. At Skútustaðir we take a walk around the edge of the lake and explore some pseudo-craters formed from steam explosions when lava flows across a shallow lake or marsh. There's lots of wildfowl here: Gadwall, Long-tailed Duck, Greater Scaup, Tufted Duck, Mallard, Common Teal, Eurasian Wigeon and, of course, Barrow's Goldeneye. We also note Great Northern Diver, Slavonian Grebe and our first Snow Buntings of the trip. We enjoy our picnic whilst watching Barrow's Goldeneyes and Slavonian Grebes on the eastern side of the lake then take a lovely walk around the remarkable volcanic landscapes of Mývatn. There are birds everywhere – the waders and wildfowl take most of our attention but we also have some great views of Northern Wheatear, Common Redpoll and Redwing. We move away from the lake and explore the volcanic landscapes of the area. We feel the still warm rocks, see the enormous fissures and admire the craters left from previous eruptions. As we do so a raptor is located flying far in the distance. It's a Gyrfalcon though at this range we don't really see it very well. Back to the lake and the wildfowl. This time we see Common Scoter and watch mating phalaropes before we locate another Gyrfalcon. This one's closer to us and we see it perch on a cliff face. We train the 'scopes on the bird and are treated to some splendid views of this magnificent raptor. Our return journey produces some lovely views of a Merlin. It's sitting on a rock outcrop overlooking a fast flowing river. We also see a Rock Ptarmigan fly towards us and settle on the chimney of a nearby building! A delightful meal rounds off a spectacular day's birding.

**Day 6:** Clear skies and no wind with temperatures reaching 7°C. We've decided to take a morning whale watching boat trip on Eyjafjörður which, as it turns out, was a brilliant decision. We reach the small harbour of Hauganes, see a Merlin sitting on a post, and are soon sailing onto the flat calm waters of the fjord. Minutes after leaving harbour we see the blow from a humpback whale at the same time as we see some Harbour Porpoises near the boat. Size wins on this occasion and we head for the distant whale. We see several more blows; locate the animal on the surface and watch as it dives showing its tail as it does so. Suddenly, we're aware of another whale in the area. It's a Minke Whale and it swims towards us. Our skipper cuts the engines and we spend an enthralling half an hour or so in the company of this animal who seems as interested in us as we are in him. The whale swims around the boat, lolls on the surface, swims under the boat and pokes its head above the water to see what we're up to. On deck cameras are clicking and we all are amazed at the wildlife spectacle we are privileged to witness. A Black Guillemot is added to our bird list but loses out to the might and majesty of the whale before us. The Minke Whale swims away and we sail in search of the humpback. We soon locate the animal and again watch as it dives showing its tail as it does so. We can also see its long flippers. A great whale watching boat trip. We have a sunny picnic on the harbourside then take the short ferry crossing to nearby Hrísey island. We see a Humpback Whale on the journey and after landing scurry to the point hoping to relocate it. We certainly do and in fact there are two of them. We have great telescope views. As we watch the whales we also see some White-beaked Dolphins leaping out of the water. There are perhaps a dozen of them and we are treated to some simply wonderful views. As we walk around the island we see many more Rock Ptarmigans, all the familiar waders, the noisy Arctic Terns and enjoy some good views of Snow Buntings. On our return ferry crossing we see several more Black Guillemots and have a glimpse of some Harbour Porpoise. A great day.

**Day 7:** Overcast with light drizzle at first, brighter but with showers later. Snow still blocks our proposed route southwards across Iceland's interior. No matter, the coastal route has plenty of places to explore and we decide to head first for Hrótafjörður and do some bird watching on the coastal inlet there. There's a light rain falling for much of the journey but it stops when we reach the coast and we enjoy a productive spell of bird-watching. We note Atlantic Puffins and Red-throated Divers, Glaucous and Iceland Gulls, Arctic Skuas and Arctic Terns, all the familiar waders and a Common Seal who spends a lot of time watching us. Bright spells

are interspersed with heavy showers as we continue our journey southwards through the remarkable countryside of west Iceland. The volcanic rocks have been sculpted by the action of ice during the ice age into dramatic landscapes of great beauty. In places recent volcanic activity leaves its own rugged veneer of lava fields and cinder cones on the landscape. As we drive we learn that the Grímsvötn eruption is much reduced and that aviation is returning to normal. At a sheltered spot on Hvalfjörður's north shore we see another Merlin. It dashes off after a Meadow Pipit and we see the aerobatics of both hunter and hunted as they turn and twist in high-speed flight. The pipit escapes on this occasion but another may not have been so fortunate in another chase we witnessed a little later. We see a great flock of Brent Geese on the fjord, listen to the strange calls of Long-tailed Ducks and note more Glaucous Gulls. All around us are the breeding waders of Iceland and we are now adept at recognising them by their calls and songs. We see Rock Ptarmigan nearby as well. It rains heavily as we return to the hotel and are greeted like old friends by the proprietor. It's another delicious dinner to round off a wonderful day's journey.

**Day 8:** Overcast at first but brightening later in the light westerly winds. Temperatures reach 9°C. We drive to the south coast of Reykjanes for our final morning's birdwatching before we need to be at the airport for our afternoon flight to London. At Strandakirkja we record European Shag, Sanderling, Red Knot, Ruddy Turnstone and Ringed Plover. We also see Atlantic Grey Seals offshore. Further west we note all breeding species of Icelandic auks: Atlantic Puffin, Razorbill and Black, Brünnich's & Common Guillemot as well as many Northern Gannets flying past far offshore. At the very southwest tip of Iceland we see more auks and also record Manx Shearwaters as they fly past the headland. We see the island of Eldey where the last Great Auks were killed in 1844 and all too soon it's time to head for Keflavík for the return flight to London.

It's been a great trip.

Andy Jones  
May 2011

**Birds**  
Red-throated Diver *Gavia stellata*

Great Northern Diver *Gavia immer*  
Slavonian Grebe *Podiceps auritus*  
Northern Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis*  
Manx Shearwater *Puffinus puffinus*  
Northern Gannet *Morus bassanus*  
Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*  
European Shag *Phalacrocorax aristotelis*  
Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus*  
Pink-footed Goose *Anser brachyrhynchus*  
Greylag Goose *Anser anser*  
(Pale-bellied) Brent Goose *Branta bernicla hrota*  
Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope*  
Gadwall *Anas strepera*  
Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca*  
Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*  
Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*  
Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*  
Greater Scaup *Aythya marila*  
Common Eider *Somateria mollissima*  
Harlequin Duck *Histrionicus histrionicus*  
Long-tailed Duck *Clangula haemalis*  
Common Scoter *Melanitta nigra*  
Barrow's Goldeneye *Bucephala islandica*  
Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator*  
Goosander *Mergus merganser*  
Merlin *Falco columbarius*  
Gyr Falcon *Falco rusticolus*  
Rock Ptarmigan *Lagopus mutus*  
Eurasian Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*  
European Golden-plover *Pluvialis apricaria*  
Common Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*  
Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*  
Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*  
Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*  
Common Redshank *Tringa totanus*  
Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*  
Red Knot *Calidris canutus*  
Sanderling *Calidris alba*  
Dunlin *Calidris alpina*

Purple Sandpiper *Calidris maritima*  
Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus*  
Great Skua *Stercorarius skua*  
Arctic Skua *Stercorarius parasiticus*  
Common Gull *Larus canus*  
Great Black-backed Gull *Larus marinus*  
Glaucous Gull *Larus hyperboreus*  
Iceland Gull *Larus glaucoides*  
Herring Gull *Larus argentatus*  
Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*  
Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus*  
Black-legged Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla*  
Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea*  
Common Guillemot *Uria aalge*  
Brunnich's Guillemot *Uria lomvia*  
Razorbill *Alca torda*  
Black Guillemot *Cepphus grylle*  
Atlantic Puffin *Fratercula arctica*  
Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus*  
White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*  
Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*  
Eurasian Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*  
Redwing *Turdus iliacus*  
Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*  
Common Raven *Corvus corax*  
Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*  
Common Redpoll *Carduelis flammea*  
Snow Bunting *Plectrophenax nivalis*

### **Mammals**

Atlantic Grey Seal *Halichoerus grypus*  
Common Seal *Phoca vitulina*  
Minke Whale *Balaenoptera acutorostrata*  
Humpback Whale *Megaptera novaeangliae*  
White-beaked Dolphin *Lagenorhynchus albirostris*  
Common Porpoise *Phocoena phocoena*