

Iceland in Summer

Sunday 5 – Wednesday 15 July 2009

Tour Leader

Andy Jones, Iceland
Mike Read, Hampshire

Daily Diary

Sunday 5th July

Those flying from the UK today all met up at Heathrow and were in the departure lounge in plenty of time. The flight departure was delayed by about 10 minutes and we landed at Keflavík just after 3p.m. It took a while for our bags to appear but once they had, we progressed on through, met up with Andy Jones, the Falconers and those that had flown in a day or two early. Soon we were making our way across the Reykjanes Peninsula towards Reykjavík and then on towards our hotel near Hverager_i.

Throughout the journey Andy kept us informed regarding the geological features we were passing including the Mid Atlantic Ridge, the area where the North American and the European tectonic plates joined. There were many flowers to be seen. These included lots of Alaskan Lupins and Wild Thyme plus Alpine and Common Ladies Mantle, Angelica, Thrift, Wood Cranesbill and Northern Bedstraw. Our first Redwing was seen before we left the airport car park and just a short distance down the road we added many Lesser Black-backed Gulls and Arctic Terns. At one point two groups of terns took flight as an Arctic Skua flew low over their nesting colony and further on we saw waders including Common Snipe, Common Redshank and Oystercatchers. As we came in sight of the sea we noted a large group of Greylag Geese, a lone Mallard and a couple of Common Eiders.

As we neared the Reykjavík conurbation we saw a few Common Starlings and a small lake held the first of 2 or 3 Whooper Swans that we encountered. A Northern Wheatear flew across the road just in front of the bus, a Black-headed Gull and a few Common Gulls flew over roadside fields while Ringed and Golden Plovers were also added before we turned into the track leading to our hotel. Once we had settled in we had a fine Icelandic dinner to end the first day of the tour.

Monday 6th July

As we prepared for our departure at 9 a.m. there were a few birds to be seen around the hotel. These included the common waders of the area namely Common Snipe, Oystercatcher, Golden Plover and Whimbrel. As we drove towards Hverager_i we saw more of each of these species and added Common Redshank, Arctic Terns, Starling and Redwing to the list. At the edge of town we visited the newly formed hot springs that appeared during a minor earthquake just over a year previously. At this location we also saw a few birds and these included good views of a Redwing, Northern Fulmars gliding along the cliffs high above us and one or two Common Redpolls. The most surprising record here was of a group of about 15 Common Crossbills that flew past and off into some distant conifers. This was the first record of this species by a *Travelling Naturalist* group in Iceland and we learned that a crossbill 'invasion' was underway. Flowers noted here included lots of Silverweed that was colonising the rather bare ground in places.

After a quick visit to the bank in town we saw a Common Raven feeding on some scraps near a restaurant and beside it was 2 Lesser Black-backed Gulls that seemed to be waiting their turn. From here we drove to the sheep sorting pens at Reykjarettir where Whimbrel, Oystercatcher and Golden Plovers were seen. The latter species had 2 well-grown youngsters. Meadow Pipit, White Wagtail and Northern Wheatear were also noted and as usual there were plenty of flowers carpeting the ground. These included Common Moonwort, a close relative of the ferns, 2 species of Lady's Bedstraw and Fleabane.

Later we drove along beside the glacial river of Jörðsa and kept a watchful eye open for geese but sadly none were seen. We stopped at a viewpoint overlooking the river and towards Hekla, an active volcano. More flowers were noted including Northern Green and Small White Orchids, Thrift, a couple of diminutive Alpine Gentians, Biting Stonecrop and lots more.

After our picnic lunch we drove on up through the valley and on to the dirt road towards Stöng. The pseudo craters, now covered in ash from the various eruptions of Hekla, stood as dark mounds above the valley floor. At Stöng itself we visit the former farmstead that was buried by the ash from Hekla's eruptions in 1104. It is hard to believe that as many as 40 people may have lived in this one building. Along the side of the small river there was a good amount of Arctic Riverbeauty growing and many more flowers lined the footpath we took to the nearby waterfall. A couple of the Icelandic subspecies of Winter Wren were singing and calling in the trees but we could not find them. A fly-by Common Redpoll was seen by some of the group and Redwings were encountered a few times as were a pair of White Wagtails. Best bird here by far was a female Harlequin Duck that appeared, stood on a rock in the river for some time and then just seemed to vanish when nobody was looking.

We began the return journey but soon turned off for one final stop of the day. A quick visit to Hjalparfoss enabled those with cameras to secure some images of this lovely waterfall before we returned to the minibus and were on our way. Along the valley we encountered a group of perhaps 20 Greylag Geese and throughout the rest of the journey there were plenty of sightings of the common wader species we had already seen and a couple of group members also saw a Black-tailed Godwit to add to the list. This completed a super day of geology, flowers and birds set among spectacular scenery.

Tuesday 7th July

Throughout much of our route east along route 1 we were catching glimpses of the usual 5 wader species (Oystercatcher, Snipe, Redshank, Golden Plover and Whimbrel) as well as occasional Arctic Terns, Lesser Black-backed and Black-headed Gulls. At one point a couple of Black-tailed Godwits were flying to the left of the road as a Common Teal flew off to the right. After a brief stop in Hvolsvollur we continued our journey and saw our first Great Skua just before making a stop at Seljalandfoss where many of the group walked behind the actual waterfall itself. Here they found Alpine Snow Saxifrage. Other members of the group walked a short distance along beneath the slopes and could hear 2 Icelandic Winter Wrens singing among the Angelica and Wood Cranesbill. We searched for these birds for some time and eventually located one of their offspring quite close to us. This bird gave everyone excellent views including through the 'scope. During this visit, Northern Fulmars were constantly present as many pairs were nesting on the cliffs above us.

We returned to route 1 and headed further east and a little before we reached Skögar we paused briefly to overlook a bay where numerous Common Redshanks and a few Oystercatchers were feeding along the waters edge while out on the water were a few Common Eiders. On a freshwater pool were a few Mallards and Common Teals but these birds flew off as we stopped however our first two Red-necked Phalaropes continued to swim around feeding.

After a few more kilometres we turned on to a dirt road and drove out to the Solheimjökull 'finger' of the Myrdalsjökull glacier where a short walk took us on to the edge of the ice itself. Many photographs were taken and we soon made our way back to the vehicle and a short distance back along the track we made a lunch stop. During our picnic we found many good plants including Lesser Twayblade, Hairy Stonecrop and many plants which were new-ground colonists. Birds noted here were just a few more Northern Fulmars and single Whimbrel and Arctic Skua.

Further east we were somewhat delayed, for the second time, by a group of Icelandic Horses that were being driven along the main road and over a bridge. Our slow progress enabled us to see a couple of Whooper Swans and then further on we saw half a dozen Tufted Ducks on a roadside pool. At Reynisfjara we walked out on to the beach where large rafts of Atlantic Puffins were resting on the sea. Many of these were nesting on the cliffs above us and we were able to get excellent views of them. A couple of barking dogs at the edge of the sea drew our attention to an Atlantic Grey Seal that was swimming just a short distance out while beyond there were a couple of stacks that held a few pairs of

nesting Common Guillemots and Black-legged Kittiwakes. Arctic Skuas passed by occasionally while Great Skuas were constantly on the lookout for a meal by patrolling the Puffin colony or harassing those on the sea.

A short drive had us looking at another seabird colony near Vík where many more pairs of Atlantic Puffins, Northern Fulmars and Black-legged Kittiwakes were breeding. Just offshore was another Atlantic Grey Seal and a number of Arctic Terns were fishing between the waves while further out was a male Red-breasted Merganser. Having concentrated on the birds, we suddenly noticed that we had been ignoring the plants and here we found a fine group of Scots Lovage growing among other flowers.

After a brief stop in Vík we began the journey back to the hotel and there was just enough time for a stop at the spectacular waterfall of Skogarfoss. Photos secured we were soon on our way again and arrived back at the hotel ready for another fine meal.

Wednesday 8th July

We departed from the Hotel at 9 a.m. and began the journey towards _ingvellir. A few kilometres off of route 1 we paused to overlook the river Sogje_. Common Snipe and Meadow Pipit were with us throughout the stop as was a Whimbrel that perched on the top of a telegraph pole. Arctic Terns fished in the river and the damp soil conditions proved perfect for Water Avens and Meadowsweet. When we moved on from here we soon saw 2 female Red-breasted Mergansers on the river. As we approached _ingvellir, we paused to look across the valley where, standing on the edge of the Eurasian tectonic plate, we could see the edge of the North American plate a few kilometres away. As we stand there or take photos, a Winter Wren is heard singing and a couple of Whooper Swans flew past. At the _ingvellir visitor centre we begin to notice the black flies as there is virtually no wind but our attention is soon diverted by close views of Golden Plover and Redwing.

After visiting the waterfall ‘coming over the edge of America’, we walked along to the place where the ancient Icelandic parliament is thought to have been held. On the way we see another Redwing, a Redpoll as well as distant Whimbrel, Black-tailed Godwit and Golden Plovers.

During lunch beside _ingvallavatn we see many Arctic Terns which are nesting nearby and a Common Snipe which frequently gives its drumming display flight. Out on the lake itself are 2 pairs of Great Northern Divers and one pair has 2 young. Just before we leave a female Rock Ptarmigan is found but proves difficult to see. After a brief stop at the top of the cliff for some photos of the area, we head on towards the Snæfellsnes Peninsula. For many kilometres birds are few and far between, or so it seemed but at Hvalfjör_ur which translates as Whale Fjord. Here waders, particularly Redshanks and Oystercatchers, are abundant as are Common Eiders, Arctic Terns and Northern Fulmars. During a brief stop we also see a few Mallards and a single Black Guillemot. Around the far side of the Fjord our first Glaucous Gull is seen.

Close to Borgarnes we see more Eiders, waders and terns as well as our first Great Cormorant which flew under the road bridge. On a bay at the far edge of town we see a great Icelandic rarity, Common Shelducks. There are two pairs present and one pair has a family of at least 10 ducklings. Also in the bay are many Common Redshanks and Oystercatchers as well as a few Dunlins and Ringed Plovers. Most endearing of all here were the female Common Eiders that were each leading small groups of ducklings in a procession across the muddy bay. From here we drove on to Snæfellsnes and saw a pair of Red-throated Divers on a pool and there was a Whooper Swan right beside the road. Soon we cut across the peninsula and came in sight of the north coast and Brei_afjör_ur or Broad Fjord. We paused for a few minutes to look at a jumbled mass of rocks from a 2000 year-old lava flow before completing the journey to our base for the next 3 nights in Grundarfjör_ur. Along this part of the coast there were many more Arctic Terns and Common Eiders to be seen and as we approached the town there were many Glaucous Gulls at the waters edge.

After dinner a few of the group headed out to look at the masses of Northern Fulmars, Common Eiders and a few Purple Sandpipers that were close to the hotel. Some even took a few photos in the glorious evening sunshine.

Thursday 9th July

After breakfast we departed from the hotel at about 9 a.m. and stopped just outside the town to look over the bay. There were good numbers of birds present the usual Common Eiders, Arctic Terns and Redshanks as well as thousands of Northern Fulmars. These were species that would be with us more or less throughout the day. A Great Cormorant and perhaps 20 Glaucous Gulls were on a small island and just before we left we found 2 Ruddy Turnstones hidden among the stones on the beach. A little further west we found a group of waders by a stream and these included Ringed Plovers, Dunlins and about 40 Red-necked Phalaropes. Nearby were 2 Whooper Swans and at least 3 Arctic Skuas.

We drove onwards to look over a bay and here we found Northern Fulmars, Glaucous Gulls, 3 Atlantic Puffins, Meadow Pipit, White Wagtail and a flock of about 25 Common Crossbills. By a small estuary there were a good number of Common Eiders, 4 more Ruddy Turnstones, a dozen European Shags, 2 Red-throated Divers and a female Harlequin Duck. Our next stop produced 4 species of Gulls namely Great and Lesser Black-backed, Black-headed and Glaucous and offshore there were thousands of gulls and terns involved in what can only be described as a feeding frenzy. Birds were milling around and diving into the water from all directions!

Rif Pools are rightly renowned for their birds and today was no exception. Thousands of Arctic Terns were nesting or just hauled out at the edge of the pool. A dozen or more Dunlins and a lone Iceland Gull were in the shallows while another pond held Mallard and Tufted Ducks both with young. Best of all here were the Red-necked Phalaropes and a conservative count put the numbers at over 600! Wow!

From here we drove to the western end of the Snæfellsnes Peninsula and here we looked at a good seabird colony. Needless to say there were a fair number of Northern Fulmars breeding as well as lots of Black-legged Kittiwakes, Razorbills, Common and Brünnich's Guillemots and a few Atlantic Puffins. A passing Painted Lady Butterfly was a first record of this species by a *Travelling Naturalist* group in Iceland. After our picnic lunch overlooking the seabird colony, we moved to a nearby area and along the shore were about a dozen Red-necked Phalaropes while among the rocks were a few Meadow Pipits, White Wagtails and 3 Snow Buntings. As we drove away from the area we saw an Arctic Fox go running from the roadside and it rapidly disappeared into the distance.

Along the southern side of the peninsula we made our final stop at Arnarstapi where we saw thousands of pairs of nesting Black-legged Kittiwakes. At times we were very close to them and everyone had exceptional views of this gentle looking gull. Many of them had good-sized chicks, lots of nests held two young. To complete our birding for the day we saw a male Harlequin Duck on the sea. This bird was constantly diving for food. Despite the pleasure of finding a male of this species, it had started to moult into its drab autumn plumage. However our spirits rose again when a second bird appeared from behind the rocks and this one was in near-perfect breeding plumage still. We walked back from here to a small café for a warming drink as the weather had somewhat closed in and it had begun to drizzle.

Our return drive took us over the mountains and back to the northern shore of the Snæfellsnes Peninsula and as we descended towards the shore the sun was shining and we completed the journey back to the hotel in good spirits after another fabulous day.

Friday 10th July

We left the hotel at 07.50 to enable us to get to Stykkishólmur in good time to catch the 9 o'clock ferry to the island of Flatey in Breiðafjörður. As we left the ferry port there were the usual Eiders around including some ducklings. Atlantic Puffins, Northern Fulmars and many other seabirds were spread in their thousands across the flat, calm sea. Knowing which way to look was almost a problem! Occasional Arctic or Great Skuas would harass a passing Arctic Tern or Kittiwake and get them to drop their fish. However the smooth sea did enable us to search more easily for cetaceans and close to the island of Elliðaey we found some on either side of the boat. There were 3 Orcas close to the island and a group of 5 or 6 Harbour Porpoises on the other side. Everyone concentrated on the Orcas and later we did manage to see more Porpoises as well as perhaps 5 or 6 different Minke Whales and a group of 8 White-beaked Dolphins during the entire crossing.

We arrived on Flatey at 10.35 and were soon strolling along the quieter pathway towards the centre of the island. Common Redshanks called noisily at our passing while Common Snipe were in their drumming display flights overhead. A few Red-necked Phalaropes were on the freshwater pools and along the edge of the sea where they mingled with Eiders and their young. A group of 7 Purple Sandpipers perched on a rock as did a few Black Guillemots. We strolled through the small settlement on the island and beyond were able to see occasional Snow Buntings. Arctic Terns were numerous on their breeding grounds here and everyone had to run the gauntlet of aerial attacks as we neared the limit of our walk. Here we sat on the top of a small cliff and watched as Puffins wheeled around just a short distance away. Northern Fulmars and Black-legged Kittiwakes were also passing along the coast while a Red-necked Phalarope wandered in the grassland just behind us.

After our picnic we wandered back towards the village and found a Phalarope with 3 tiny chicks. Some of the group wandered over to the church while others retraced their steps along the grassy path beside the shoreline to be shouted at by more Common Redshanks. Everyone assembled in good time to board the 13.15 return ferry crossing and soon we were on our way back towards Stykkishólmur. Seabirds seemed less numerous as we went but perhaps this was related to the state of the tide which had dropped somewhat compared to the outward crossing.

After we had landed we headed to a hidden picnic site in the woodland just outside the town. Here we completed our lunch and were able to watch a few birds in the area. These included a family group of Common Redpolls, Redwing and a lone Common Crossbill. We suspected there were more of the latter species tucked away in the trees somewhere. From here we ventured out on to the countryside near Helgafell where we were able to see many waders including Ringed Plovers, Redshanks and Whimbrels with well grown chicks. One pool held a female Red-breasted Merganser, a moulting male Mallard and some breeding Back-headed Gulls. Also here were 5 Red-throated Divers which were in 2 separate family groups.

As we headed back towards Grundarfjörður we paused to look more closely at the jumbled mass of lava either side of the road and also to photograph or just admire the Arctic Poppies that were blooming along the way. Further on we spotted a large bird in flight and this turned out to be a second or third summer juvenile White-tailed Eagle. We were able to watch this for some time including as it landed on the grassy slopes high above the road and then as it soared off into the distant blue sky. On a lake we noted at least 87 Whooper Swans and then we paused to photograph the glorious views across a lake to the sun-lit mountains beyond. As we arrived back at the hotel to prepare for another excellent meal, everyone agreed it had been another fabulous day.

Saturday 11th July

We left the hotel at 9a.m. and began the journey east towards Iceland's second largest city, Akureyri. As we drove along there were fabulous views to the mountains to the south of us and there were plenty of Common Eiders on the sea when we stopped for a quick photo back towards Grundarfjörður with the Queen Victoria cruise ship moored in the bay. Close to Stykkishólmur we turned on to a dirt road and a couple of Ptarmigan were seen by two members of the group. Soon we came in sight of Alftafjörður where we could see hundreds of Whooper Swans. A conservative estimate put the numbers at somewhere in excess of 1000 birds! We continued on along the edge of Hvammsfjörður where more Eiders could be seen and along our route there were occasional Common Redshanks, Golden Plovers, Whimbrels and Common Snipe.

We made a break for coffee at Búardalur and then headed up the hill into Laxádalur where the various waders could again be seen occasionally. On reaching Hrótafjörður we turned south and soon paused to look at the plants along the shore. Here we found Oyster Plant, Sea Sandwort and Babbington's Orache. Birding was not bad either with numerous Atlantic Puffins flying past while a group of Eiders rested on the peninsula just beyond the small town. A Purple Sandpiper put in a brief appearance while just offshore throughout most of our stay was a Great Northern Diver. Further offshore was a Red-throated Diver and two more birds of this species flew past.

We completed our picnic lunch and were soon on our way again. Staying on route 1 meant we made good progress and soon we stopped at Blönduós where we went for a brief walk by the Blandá River. Here Redwings and Redpolls were the main birds noted while the botanists and photographers were kept busy with various plants. These included Frog, Small White and Northern Green Orchids, Bilberry, Bog Bilberry, Fleabane and Grass of Parnassus. A brief stop was then made at Varmahli_ but soon we were heading onwards again. Greylag Geese and our first Pink-footed Geese were seen by the river and a small pond held 11 Slavonian Grebes, a female Great Scaup plus a couple of Tufted Ducks and 6 Red-necked Phalaropes.

After this we made our way over the pass and into Öxnadalshéi_ and here we paused to photograph the fabulous jagged ridge rising beyond Hraun. Soon after that we were in sight of Akureyri and after passing through the edge of town, we crossed the river and arrived at our hotel where we would stay for the next 3 nights.

Sunday 12th July

After breakfast we headed east towards M_vatn and the usual waders were seen along the way. As we approached Kambsstá_ir Farm there were 2 Short-eared Owls seen over the grassy fields. One bird hunted its way along fairly close to the road and made a kill not far from a track. We then watched as it took its prize back towards a presumed nest. At Ljósavatn there were a few Greylag Geese as well as a female Greater Scaup with ducklings and a Slavonian Grebe. Further along the road there was a Black-tailed Godwit with a family of youngsters while on the Laxá River we saw a female Harlequin Duck and 3 female Barrow's Goldeneyes.

As we drove around M_vatn there were lots of ducks to be seen but we sped past these in the hope of reaching Dimmuborgir before the masses of Sunday visitors. Unfortunately there were already lots of people present but this did not cause a problem for our 'target species' as there were 2 Gyr Falcons in full view. We spent some time watching these charismatic birds in the hope of some activity but unfortunately both birds seemed rather sleepy.

We then moved towards the shores of M_vatn where we went for a walk along a marked trail. Hawkweed-leaved Treacle Mustard, Golden Plovers and Northern Wheatears were seen before we had even left the car park. Within the first couple of hundred metres we had obtained close views of Redwings, perhaps 30 Barrow's Goldeneyes, a Slavonian Grebe with young and Tufted Duck with a family of ducklings in tow. Round in the next bay there were more ducks to be seen including a Eurasian Wigeon while in the waterside Birches there were at least 8 Redpolls. Ducks continued to feature as we strolled onwards and soon we found a female Common Teal with young and 2 female Common Scoters were diving for food for their chicks. Then in a sheltered bay we found a large flock of moulting male Barrow's Goldeneyes; we estimated the flock to be in excess of 220 birds.

Back at the car park we saw a couple of Dunlins fly past as we were having lunch while the ground around us was sprinkled with Frog and Northern Green Orchids and masses of other flowers. Our next stop was at a location where there was much of geological interest where there was water to be seen beneath a huge fissure in the lava. Many people visited both the water and the top of the fissure. Another fissure held some interesting flora including Herb Paris and lots of Wood Cranesbill and many more plants. We then paused at a service station before continuing our circuit of M_vatn. On small ponds beside the main lake there was a Red-throated Diver and a few ducks but it was on the main lake where the main concentrations of wildfowl were to be found. These included at least 60 Whooper Swans, countless Greater Scaup and Tufted Duck families, a few Greylag Geese with their young, 4 female Long-tailed Ducks with attendant ducklings plus a few Eurasian Wigeon and a lone female Northern Pintail. In two separate bays there were Great Northern Divers close to the shore while on top of a pseudo crater another Gyr Falcon seemed threatening enough for Common Redshanks and Whimbrel to occasionally mob it.

Reluctantly we left the shores of this fabulous lake and began the journey back towards our accommodation near Akureyri but made one final stop on the way. A look at the Laxá River just before we rejoined route 1 provided excellent views of a couple of female Harlequin Ducks and a total

of 5 young. This completed our watching and we made our way back to the hotel feeling elated at such a superb ending to a fabulous day.

Monday 13th July

We left the hotel at 08.15 and set off for Húsavík where we were to head out on a whale watching trip. Greylag Geese and Eiders were numerous close to Akureyri and there were the usual waders interspersed along our route. Ljósavatn held a couple of female Red-breasted Mergansers while on smaller bodies of water there were occasional Tufted Ducks and their families, a female Long-tailed Duck with ducklings. A Red-necked Phalarope and a couple of Whooper Swans were noted and we even sped past a Snow Bunting. In the end we reached Húsavík in time to secure our tickets, get kitted out in warm clothing and board the boat just before we set off for the broad bay of Skjáfandi. Unfortunately the weather was rather overcast and we had occasional spells of light rain but this did not dampen our spirits especially when we encountered our first Humpback Whale. We stayed with this for quite a while before moving further out to watch a Minke Whale repeatedly come to the surface, take a breath and disappear beneath the grey sea. Trying to predict where it would resurface was an impossibility! Close to the far shore of the bay we encountered another Humpback and this animal was actively involved in lunge feeding. It would dive after a few breaths at the surface and then suddenly resurface some distance away with its mouth open to take in a large amount of water as well as all of the food items it would contain. Then, beneath the surface, the water would then be expelled through the whale's baleen plates and the retained food would be devoured. As the animal submerged after each lunge, flocks of Arctic Terns would descend to feed on items the whale had missed. All of this was a truly memorable experience. Other birds noted throughout the sailing included Northern Fulmars, Atlantic Puffins, Black-legged Kittiwakes and a few Black Guillemots. As we made our way back to Húsavík, we resighted the same Humpback that we had first encountered and another individual was seen in the distance.

Back at the harbour we were able to watch a few Common Eiders before we headed off to visit the spectacular waterfalls called Go_afoss. Here we made the most of photographic opportunities before driving through the beautiful Fnjóská Valley in improving weather. Birds seen included Golden Plover, Whimbrel and a pair of Whooper Swans with 3 downy cygnets. At the far end of the valley we were in bright sunshine and we could see the full width of the Island Fjord, Eyjafjör_ur. We then spent an hour at the Laufás Museum that was based in turf-roofed houses which were rather more spacious than they appeared from the outside.

After this we completed the journey back to the hotel and later enjoyed the delights of a traditional Icelandic Christmas dinner to complete the day.

Tuesday 14th July

We departed from our hotel at 9a.m. to begin the exciting journey across the centre of Iceland to the south-west corner in preparation for our journey homewards the following day. As we left Varmahli_ and headed towards Akureyri we saw a few Common Gulls, Black-headed Gulls Common Eiders and Redshanks along the way. We passed through the edge of town without too much trouble but were held up briefly at one set of traffic lights. However, we did have the consolation of knowing that these would be the last traffic lights before our visit to Reykjavík the following day! As we climbed away from Akureyri various waders were seen including Black-tailed Godwit, Golden Plover, Common Snipe and Whimbrel. Despite rather low cloud and intermittent light rain, the scenery was still full of atmosphere and was quite stunning. As we neared Varmahli_ we noted Greylag and Pink-footed Geese fairly close to the road and we paused to obtain good views of these birds which were mostly adults with young.

After a brief pause in Varmahli_, we continued west along route 1 and then turned on to the road that would take us across the centre of Iceland. Just before our turning we saw a quantity of birds on a lake and these included 2 Great Northern Divers, 8 Whooper Swans and at least a dozen Tufted Ducks. A few kilometres along the dirt road we had seen Ringed Plover, Whimbrels, White Wagtail and Meadow Pipit and as we reached higher ground there were occasional Golden Plovers, Dunlins and Snow Buntings. At the lake that fed the hydro-electric production plant with its water, we saw a few groups

of geese and these were more Pink-footed. Birds seemed to peter out the further we ventured along the road but as we approached Hveravellir they increased once more with increasing sightings of Snow Buntings especially.

We spent an hour at Hveravellir with some of the group venturing into the hot springs while others just admired the steam vents and other local geothermal features as well as a couple of juvenile Snow Buntings and a Common Snipe. Picnic lunch completed we set off at 13.30 and once more crossed rather barren looking countryside with the ice caps of Hófsjökull and Langjökull now evident. Eventually, as the weather began to improve, we saw a couple of Golden Plovers and a Purple Sandpiper and as we neared our next stopping place more of the usual waders became evident.

Gullfoss really is a spectacular waterfall and with many of the group determined to obtain more permanent memories of the location via photographs; it seemed that the hour we spent here was not really enough. However we did have time to explore both the upper and lower trails before we moved on to Geysir. This area just a short distance down the road contained many steaming pools and the original 'Geysir' from which all others of its type are named. However, the geyser named Geysir only erupts occasionally while the nearby Strokkur erupts every 4 to 8 minutes. It was this one that everyone concentrated on for their photos. Here we did see a couple of Redwings but with so many people about it seemed unlikely to be a birding hotspot!

We then completed the journey to our hotel at Hverager_i seeing groups of Starlings and the occasional Redwing and wader as we went. As we approached the town a recently cut field held a mixed flock of Oystercatchers, Golden Plovers and perhaps 50 Whimbrels. Obviously post breeding flocking had begun. Soon after seeing this, we arrived at the hotel and soon were enjoying a fine evening meal to end another fascinating and enjoyable Icelandic day.

Wednesday 15th July

We woke to another fine and sunny day and soon after breakfast we departed towards Reykjavik. As we climbed up on to the European side of the Mid Atlantic Ridge just outside Hverager_i, we pulled into a layby to take in the view back towards town and beyond we could see the Westman Islands including Surtsey. Just as we were getting back into the bus we could hear a Golden Plover calling and then a Merlin came dashing overhead. The raptor we had been constantly seeking since day one had finally put in an appearance!

From here we drove through lava fields that date back to the year 1000AD and beyond and Andy kept us informed of happenings related to the beginning of Christianity in Iceland. We noted a few birds on the way into the city and soon we were arriving at Perlan where we gained fabulous views over Reykjavik and beyond. We could even see right out to the ice cap/glacier close to the end of the Snæfellsnes Peninsula. There were few birds to be seen here but we did note White Wagtail, Redwing and a few distant gulls. We left Perlan at 10.15 and then were given an informative tour of various parts of Reykjavik. Again, Andy's knowledge of events, customs and important landmarks shone through.

At 10.50 most of the group were deposited close to the lake in the centre of the city and from here were able to explore shops, streets and the park in search of coffee, last minute bargains or even birds. A few people actually encountered a new species, Common Blackbird. The lake held good number of Greylag Geese with smaller quantities of Mallard, Tufted Ducks, Greater Scaup and Common Eiders. Many of these birds had young in tow and at the 'airport end' of the lake system there were many pairs of nesting Arctic Terns. Some of the group had their picnic lunch beside the lake and this seemed to arouse the interest of the birds. However, in this case the birds mostly went hungry. This was not the situation all around the lake as many people were bringing bread to feed the birds. This attracted many gulls especially Lesser Black-backed and Black-headed.

At 1 p.m. we set off for Keflavik airport and as we went there were occasional birds noted. These included more Common Eiders, frequent Starlings and a few Golden Plovers. Close to the terminal buildings a couple of dark phase Arctic Skuas flew around and seemed to be chasing each other which was lucky for the Arctic Tern that flew past carrying a fish. Soon we bade farewell to our super guide

Andy Jones and I headed into the terminal to check in for our respective flights back to the UK and Canada. Soon we were in the departure area waiting for our flight which departed on time.

SPECIES LIST:

BIRDS

(Rock) Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus muta</i>	1 on 8 th at _ingvellir and then 2 near Stykkishólmur on 11 th
Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>	At least 35 near Varmalhi_ on 11 th then more seen in the same area on 14 th
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	A group of at least 40 seen near Keflavik on 5 th was our first then seen on every other day of the tour

Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	3 seen during the drive to Selfoss on 5 th then seen every other day except 15 th . There was a concentration of over 1000 at Álftafjör_ur (Swan Fjord) on 11 th ; a fabulous sight to see 4 adults and at least 10 ducklings seen near Borgarness on 8 th
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	Just a couple seen at M_vatn on 12 th
Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	Seen on the way to Akureyri on 11 th and then around M_vatn on 13 th
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	A couple seen on the way to Reykjavík on 5 th then noted on a further 8 days of the tour
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	Just a single female seen at M_vatn on 13 th
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	Only specifically identified on 7 th and 12 th
Eurasian (Common) Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	Seen on 7 days of the tour in widely spaced locations
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	Seen on the way to Akureyri on 11 th and then around Myvatn on 13 th and in Reykjavík on 15 th
(Greater) Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>	A few seen along the coast on arrival in Iceland on 5 th then seen in good numbers at every coastal location every day from 7 th and also on Reykjavík pond on 15 th
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	A female on 6 th at Stöng was our first. We then saw a female and 2 males on the Sæfellsness Peninsula on 9 th and 2 females and a total of 4 young on the Laxá River on 12 th
Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>	3 females each with a family of ducklings seen at M_vatn on 12 th
Common (Black) Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>	4 females and many young seen at M_vatn on 12 th and then a female was seen close to Húsavik the following day
Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>	Large numbers seen around M_vatn on 12 th with one flock of over 200 males moulting into eclipse plumage all gathered in one sheltered bay. There were also a few females noted with families of ducklings there too
Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>	First noted on 7 th then seen on a further 4 days
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	Small numbers seen on 6 successive days from 8 th
Red-throated Diver (Loon)	<i>Gavia stellata</i>	Seen on 8 th at _ingvellir where there were 2 pairs each with 2 youngsters and there may have been one more bird present that day.
Great Northern Diver (Loon)	<i>Gavia immer</i>	Also noted on 3 further occasions with the best/closest views reserved for M_vatn on 12 th
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	Common. Seen every day of the tour except 5 th
Slavonian (Horned) Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>	At least 11 seen on 11 th close to Blönduós and the also seen at M_vatn the following day
Northern Gannet	<i>Sula bassana</i>	At least 4 seen from the western end of the Snæfellsnes Peninsula on 9 th
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	2 on 8 th on the way to Grundarfjör_ur then seen on the following 2 days
European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	Seen on 9 th & 10 th in the Grundarfjör_ur area
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>	A single sighting of what is usually a slightly more frequently encountered species. Our bird was seen on the final morning (15 th) close to Hverager_i
Gyr Falcon	<i>Falco rusticolus</i>	3 seen in the M_vatn area on 12 th . The first 2 were close to a breeding site at Dimmuborgir and the third was sat on top of a pseudo crater further around M_vatn

White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>	A single juvenile was seen close to Grundarfjörur on 10 th
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	Seen every day
European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	Seen every day
[Common] Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	Seen every day in small numbers except 6 th & 7 th
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	Seen every day except 15 th
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	Seen every day except 5 th & 15 th
Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	Seen every day
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	Seen every day
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	6 seen on the Snæfellsnes Peninsula on 9 th
Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>	A few were close to the hotel at Grundarfjörur on 8 th then the species was noted on a further 3 days
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	Small numbers seen on 5 days of the tour
Red-necked Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>	Noted on 7 days with the largest concentration at Rif Pools on 9 th and here there was a flock of over 600 birds
Common (Mew) Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	Noted in small numbers, particularly in the north of Iceland. Seen on 9 days of the tour
Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>	First noted on 8 th at Hvalfjörur then encountered in good numbers around Grundarfjörur and on other parts of the Snæfellsnes Peninsula later that day and over the following 3 days
Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>	2 seen on 9 th with the first being at Rif pools
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	Common. Noted every day
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	Much less common than the previous species. Just seen in small numbers on 5 consecutive days from 7 th
Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	Seen every day of the tour
(Black-legged) Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	Noted every day from 7 th except 12 th . In places, this is a very common breeding bird around Iceland and we saw lots of nesting colonies.
Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	A very common species that we saw every day
Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>	Seen on 7 th on the south coast and then seen on 10 th & 11 th during the ferry crossing to and from Flatey and during the journey to Akureyri respectively
Arctic Skua (Parasitic Jaeger)	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>	Seen every day in small numbers
Brünnich's Guillemot	<i>Uria lomvia</i>	Just noted on 9 th at the western end of the Snæfellsnes Peninsula
(Thick-billed Murre)		
Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>	Seen on 7 th near Vík and then on 9 th at the western end of the Snæfellsnes Peninsula
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>	Seen on 9 th at the western end of the Snæfellsnes Peninsula
Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>	First one seen in Hvalfjörur on 8 th and then seen around Snæfellsnes on 9 th & 10 th . Also seen on 13 th during our whale watching trip from Húsavík
(Atlantic) Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>	Good numbers seen near Vík on 7 th and then noted on a further 4 days. This was by far the most numerous auks that we saw during the tour
Rock Dove (Feral Pigeon)	<i>Columba livia</i>	Seen on 5 th , 6 th , 9 th and 15 th
Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>	Two, presumably a pair, seen near Kambsstáir Farm on 12 th
Northern (Common) Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	Seen every day, except 5 th & 13 th , in small numbers

(Winter) Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	2 heard at Stöng on 6 th then 2 adults heard singing and 2 recently fledged juveniles seen at Seljalandsfoss the following day then heard or seen on a further 3 days. This is the Icelandic sub species
Common (European) Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	Seen on the outskirts of Reykjavík on 5 th then noted every other day except 12 th & 13 th
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	First noted at Keflavík airport on 5 th then seen every day of the tour
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	Seen during the drive from Keflavík and by the hotel on 5 th then seen every other day up to 13 th
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba alba</i>	Seen every day
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	Seen every day except 5 th
Common (Mealy) Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>	Seen on 6 days whenever we were near any trees
Common Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>	A group of about 15 individuals seen near the Hverager_i hot springs on 6 th . On 9 th there were about 25 along the north coast of the Snæfellsnes Peninsula when there was not a tree in sight and a single individual was noted near Stykkisholmur on 10 th . This was the first time a <i>Travelling Naturalist</i> group has recorded this species in Iceland; the birds are part of an irruptive appearance in Iceland this year.
Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>	3 on 9 th at the western end of the Snæfellsnes Peninsula and then seen on a further 4 days with the most being on 14 th during our trek across the interior of Iceland
MAMMALS		
Arctic Fox	<i>Alopex lagopus</i>	A brief but close view of one in western Snæfellsnes on 9 th
Common (Harbour) Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>	1 seen on 10 th on a small islet off the coast of Flatey
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>	2 on 7 th near Vik and 1 on 9 th on Snæfellsnes. 3 seals seen during the ferry return from Flatey on 10 th were probably this species
White-beaked Dolphin	<i>Laenorhynchus albirostris</i>	At least 8 seen during the ferry crossing to Flatey on 10 th
Orca (Killer Whale)	<i>Orcinus orca</i>	Three seen during the ferry crossing to Flatey on 10 th
Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>	At least 10 seen during the ferry crossing to Flatey on 10 th
Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>	Perhaps half a dozen seen during the ferry crossing to Flatey on 10 th and then one well seen on 13 th during our whale watching trip from Húsavík
Humpback Whale	<i>Megoptera novaeanglia</i>	2 seen for prolonged periods of time during our whale watching trip from Húsavík on 13 th

INSECTS

Painted Lady Butterfly

Vanessa cardui

The huge numbers of this migrant species seen in Britain earlier this year produced some 'Icelandic overspill' and the 2 that we saw on 9th were not only our first Painted Ladies in Iceland, they were in fact our first butterflies!

FISH

Brown Trout

Salmo trutta

Stickleback spp

Pungitius spp

FLORA

Fir Clubmoss

Huperzia selago ssp. Arctica

Water Horsetail

Equisetum fluviatile

Marsh Horsetail

Equisetum palustre

Field Horsetail

Equisetum arvense

Shady Horsetail

Equisetum pratense

Common Moonwort

Botrychium lunaria

Beech Fern

Thelypteris phegopteris

Brittle Bladder-fern

Cystopteris fragilis

Juniper

Juniperus communis

Marsh Marigold

Caltha palustris

Meadow Buttercup

Ranunculus acris

Arctic Buttercup

Ranunculus hyperboreus

Alpine Meadow-rue

Thalictrum alpinum

Arctic Poppy

Papaver radicum

Dwarf Birch

Betula nana

Downy Birch

Betula pubescens ssp. Czerepanovii

Babington's Orache

Atriplex glabriuscula

Blinks

Montia fontana

Sea Sandwort

Honckenya peploides

Lesser Stitchwort

Stellaria graminea

Common Chickweed

Stellaria media

Alpine Mouse-ear

Cerastium alpinum

Arctic Mouse-ear

Cerastium arcticum

Common Mouse-ear

Cerastium fontanum ssp. Scandicum

Procumbent Pearlwort

Sagina procumbens

Alpine Catchfly

Lychnis alpina

Ragged Robin

Lychnis flos-cuculi

Moss Campion

Silene acaulis

Sea Campion

Silene uniflora

Alpine Bistort

Bistorta vivipara

Common Sorrel

Rumex acetosa

Sheep's Sorrel

Rumex acetosella

Northern Dock

Rumex longifolius

Mountain Sorrel

Oxyria digyna

Thrift

Armeria maritima

Heath Dog-violet

Viola canina

Wild Pansy

Viola tricolor

Dwarf Willow

Salix herbacea

Woolly Willow

Salix lantana

Tea-leaved Willow

Salix phylicifolia

Hawkweed-leaved

Treacle mustard

Erysimum hieraciifolium

Lady's Smock

Cardamine nymani

Northern Rock-cress

Cardaminopsis petraea

Hoary Whitlowgrass

Draba incana

Common Scurvygrass

Cochlearia officinalis

Shepherd's Purse

Capsella bursa-pastoris

Sea Rocket

Cakile arctica

Crowberry

Empetrum nigrum

Bearberry

Arctostaphylos uva-ursi

Heather	<i>Calluna vulgaris</i>
Bilberry	<i>Vaccinium myrtillus</i>
Bog Bilberry	<i>Vaccinium uliginosum</i>
Roseroot	<i>Rhodiola rosea</i>
Hairy Stonecrop	<i>Sedum villosum</i>
Biting Stonecrop	<i>Sedum acre</i>
Purple Saxifrage	<i>Saxifraga oppositifolia</i>
Mossy Saxifrage	<i>Saxifraga hypnoides</i>
Tufted Saxifrage	<i>Saxifraga caespitosa</i>
Alpine Snow Saxifrage	<i>Saxifraga nivalis</i>
Grass of Parnassus	<i>Parnassia palustris</i>
Meadowsweet	<i>Filipendula ulmaria</i>
Stone Bramble	<i>Rubus saxitalis</i>
Marsh Cinquefoil	<i>Potentilla palustris</i>
Alpine Cinquefoil	<i>Potentilla crantzii</i>
Silverweed	<i>Potentilla anserina</i>
Wild Strawberry	<i>Fragaria vesca</i>
Water Avens	<i>Geum rivale</i>
Mountain Avens	<i>Dryas octopetala</i>
Alpine Lady's-mantle	<i>Alchemilla alpina</i>
Common Lady's-mantle	<i>Alchemilla vulgaris</i>
Rowan	<i>Sorbus aucuparia</i>
Tufted Vetch	<i>Vicia cracca</i>
Sea Pea	<i>Lathyrus japonicus</i>
White Clover	<i>Trifolium repens</i>
Nootka Lupin	<i>Lupinus nootkatensis</i>
Rosebay Willowherb	<i>Epilobium angustifolium</i>
Arctic Riverbeauty	<i>Epilobium latifolium</i>
Chickweed Willowherb	<i>Epilobium alsinifolium</i>
Marsh Willowherb	<i>Epilobium palustre</i>
Wood Crane's-bill	<i>Geranium sylvaticum</i>
Cow Parsley	<i>Anthriscus sylvestris</i>
Sweet Cicely	<i>Myrrhis odorata</i>
Scots Lovage	<i>Ligusticum scoticum</i>
Garden Angelica	<i>Angelica archangelica</i>
Wild Angelica	<i>Angelica sylvestris</i>
Alpine Gentian	<i>Gentiana nivalis</i>
Bobgean	<i>Menyanthes trifoliata</i>
Oysterplant	<i>Mertensia maritima</i>
Field Forget-not	<i>Myosotis arvensis</i>
Selfheal	<i>Prunella vulgaris</i>
Wild Thyme	<i>Thymus praecox ssp. Arcticus</i>
Mare's-tail	<i>Hippuris vulgaris</i>
Greater Plantain	<i>Plantago major</i>
Sea Plantain	<i>Plantago maritima</i>
Rock Speedwell	<i>Veronica fruticans</i>
Alpine Speedwell	<i>Veronica alpina</i>
Heath Speedwell	<i>Veronica officinalis</i>
Cold Eyebright	<i>Euphrasia frigida</i>
Alpine Bartsia	<i>Bartsia alpina</i>
Yellow Rattle	<i>Rhinanthus minor</i>
Common Butterwort	<i>Pinguicula vulgaris</i>
Northern Bedstraw	<i>Galium boreale</i>
Slender Bedstraw	<i>Galium normanii ssp. Islandicum</i>
Lady's Bedstraw	<i>Galium verum</i>
Dandelion	<i>Taraxacum spp.</i>
Icelandic Hawkweed	<i>Pilosella islandica</i>
Hawkweed	<i>Hieracium spp.</i>
Alpine Fleabane	<i>Erigeron borealis</i>
Yarrow	<i>Achillea millefolium</i>
Sea Mayweed	<i>Matricaria maritima</i>
Alpine Rush	<i>Juncus alpinus</i>
Three-leaved Rush	<i>Juncus trifidus</i>

Heath Wood-rush	<i>Luzula multiflora</i>
Scheuchzr's Cottongrass	<i>Eriophorum scheuchzeri</i>
Common Cottongrass	<i>Eriophorum angustifolium</i>
Common Bog-sedge	<i>Carex limosa</i>
Common Sedge	<i>Carex nigra</i>
Viviparous Fescue	<i>Festuca vivipara</i>
Alpine Meadow-grass	<i>Poa alpina</i>
Glaucous Meadow-grass	<i>Poa glauca</i>
Annual Meadow-grass	<i>Poa annua</i>
Common Bent	<i>Agrostis capillaris</i>
Velvet Bent	<i>Agrostis vinealis</i>
Meadow Foxtail	<i>Alopecurus pratensis</i>
Timothy	<i>Phleum pratense</i>
Alpine Cat's-tail	<i>Phleum alpinum</i>
Scottish Asphodel	<i>Tofieldia pusilla</i>
Herb-paris	<i>Paris quadrifolia</i>
Northern Green Orchid	<i>Platanthera hyperorea</i>
Small White Orchid	<i>Pseudorchis albida</i>
Frog Orchid	<i>Coeloglossum viride</i>
Heath Spotted Orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza maculata</i>
Lesser Twayblade Orchid	<i>Listera cordata</i>

Iceland is a wonderful wildlife destination and the kind of place that keeps drawing people back time and again. My first ever night abroad was spent in a hotel in Reykjavik and every time I visit I find out something new about this great place. Having said that, I would know much less about Iceland were it not for our local guide, Andy Jones. He knows so much about the birds, plants, geology, sagas and customs that I believe it would be just about impossible to find a better guide for our Travelling Naturalist groups. Then he rounds it all off with a fine sense of humour and a procession of tales that adds so much during each journey. Fabulous!

And the wildlife is not bad either! There were 67 species of birds, including a species new for Travelling Naturalist in Iceland (Common Crossbill) plus good views of 5 species of cetaceans and 3 more species of mammal and a plant list that just kept growing. The weather was really kind to us too. I have never known such a prolonged spell of sunshine there and some days were really quite warm. So warm in fact that Andy actually took his jumper off!!

The accommodation and food were great too (always important on a Travelling Naturalist tour!). All things considered Iceland really lived up to its reputation as being a superb wildlife holiday destination. I hope you all agree and I look forward to seeing you all on a future tour.

*Mike Read
July 2009*