

## The Travelling Naturalist

### Trip Report

### The Faroe Islands July 2010

#### Introduction

July is a great time to visit the Faroe Islands, one of the world's truly special places. The dramatic landscapes and seascapes provide a wonderful scenic background for a natural history holiday and we had the added advantage of some very kind weather.

The trip highlights included:

- the magnificent scenery for which The Faroe Islands are justly famous,
- the breeding seabirds and waders including storm petrels,
- the wild flowers which are at their best at this time of year,
- and, of course, the dramatic geology which was all around us.

What follows is a daily record of the places we visited, the wildlife we saw and lists of the species we recorded. We saw all 18 of the islands and visited nine of them.

#### Monday 19 July 2010

*Overcast with a light east wind. Temperatures reach 14°C.*

We assemble at Vágur Airport and quickly get under way. Our journey takes us across the island of Vágur and it's not long before we see the first oystercatchers which will become our constant companions in the days ahead. We soon reach Vestmannaund and travel to the island of Streymoy through the undersea tunnel. The scenery is magnificent — high cliffs, deep valleys and the narrow sounds between the islands. We cross to the island of Eysturoy and near Eiði stop for a very productive spell of birdwatching and botanising. We see our first whimbrels, wheatears and arctic skuas. We also find heath spotted orchid and heath milkwort at the base of some low cliffs.

We continue our drive across the twisting road to Gjógv and see a mountain hare on the way. Our guesthouse in Gjógv is in a wonderful location and after a delicious dinner we explore the nearby coast. We see many puffins offshore and watch a few as they return to land, some carrying fish in their beaks. There are black guillemots here as well and further offshore we note razorbills as they fly past.

#### Tuesday 20 July 2010

*Brisk NE wind, sunny intervals with temperatures reaching 12°C.*

After breakfast we take a walk along the cliffs to the north of the settlement. We see many puffins and black guillemots and it's not long before we note great skuas flying overhead. There are arctic skuas as well and we have the chance to compare the differences between these two species. There's lots of roseroot growing on the cliffs and on the slopes we also see frog orchid. The view across the sound to the island of Kalsoy is amazing. As we descend we hear, then see, the Faroes wren. It's a distinctive sub species of winter wren only found on the Faroe Islands. We have good views of this sometimes difficult to see bird.

We travel to Fuglafjørður and after a brief stop for banking in the settlement travel to the side of the fjord for a very productive spell of botanising. On the wet slopes we discover hairy stonecrop, Irish saxifrage, many more heath spotted orchids, butterwort and a *Hypericum* species which we later decide is slender St John's wort.

After our picnic lunch we make a quick visit to Oyndarfjørður and puzzle over the rocking stones there — the sea appears to 'rock' one large boulder perched on another. There's lots of ragged robin on the grassy slopes and we find our first moonwort in the area as well. Again we take a few moments to take in the amazing coastal scenery of this part of the Faroe Islands.

We drive the short distance to Elduvík and have a lovely walk along the side of the fjord. There are lots of black guillemots offshore, fewer puffins and, of course, the various species of gulls that breed on Faroe including herring, common, lesser black-backed, great black-backed and black-headed gulls. The botany here is good, too and on some low wet cliffs we find alpine snow saxifrage and starry saxifrage. We also discover some purple saxifrage, now long gone over. However, the real prize here is our first record of Faroese lady's mantle which we find growing close to some alpine lady's mantle for comparison. Much of the Faroe Islands has been heavily sheep grazed and on our return we have some very close views of some of the culprits! We also record our first rock pipits here.

We return to Gjógv and on the way make an unsuccessful search for red-necked phalaropes which may be breeding on some of the upland pools in this area.

It's been a great day.

### Wednesday 21 July 2010

*Light NW wind. Overcast at first with sunny intervals later. Temperatures of 12 to 14°C.*

An early start as we need to get to Klaksvík to catch the Kalsoy ferry. The journey across the island of Eysturoy is lovely and it's not long before we have reached Borðoy island. There's time for a quick stroll around the harbour area of Klaksvík before we catch the ferry to the island of Kalsoy.

As we leave the ferry we see large numbers of gulls, fulmars and terns feeding on something in the water. Through the telescope we see that it's a whale's carcass. Kalsoy is a long, thin island and we travel along its only road to reach Trøllanes — a charming settlement at its northern end. We walk down the steep path to the coast and have some splendid close-up views of black guillemots and puffins. We find scurvy grass on the cliffs and see many great skuas patrolling the area.

We walk across the island to reach the western cliffs where we stop for our picnic lunch. We see several arctic skuas on the way. They are breeding on the grassy mountain slopes and we have some wonderful views of this species in both the dark and light plumage variations. The view from the cliffs is amazing. Through binoculars we see clearly the settlement of Gjógv and our guesthouse. Cloud covers the mountain tops on Eysturoy lending a dramatic if somewhat sombre feel to the view.

We make a quick visit to Mikladalur before it's time to catch the return boat. Just as we depart we see a small group of harbour porpoises and, of course, many more black guillemots and arctic terns.

After a coffee break at Klaksvík we travel across the causeway to the island of Viðoy. Near Viðareiði we stroll near the coast and see the islands of Fugloy and Svínøym further away. We take a short botanical stroll in the area and discover some bog asphodel here.

There's time for a quick visit to the island of Kunoy before we head for home. Kunoy's settlement is on its western side and to get there we need to drive through the tunnel which is almost as wide as the island! From Kunoy we look across to Kalsoy and are able to identify the places we had visited earlier in the day.

As we return to Gjógv we are treated to some very good views of the rock doves that breed in the Faroe Islands and two specks in the sea at Skálafjørður resolve themselves into great northern divers. It's been another wonderful day.

### Thursday 22 July 2010

*Overcast at first but becoming bright and sunny with hardly a breath of wind later. Temperatures reach 16°C.*

We leave the friendly guesthouse at Gjógý and travel to Tórshavn, the capital of the Faroe Islands, to catch our ferry to the island of Suðuroy. The ship is large and well equipped and we enjoy a very comfortable period of sea-watching on our journey. We see the islands of Nólsoy, Sandoy, Skúvoy, Stóra Dímun and Litla Dímun as we sail. The island landscapes are simply spectacular and provide us with a wonderful backdrop to some good birdwatching on the way. There are lots of puffins and we note common guillemot, razorbill and black guillemot as well. We are accompanied by arctic terns, gulls and gannets and it's not long before we see some manx shearwaters further away.

After arrival on Suðuroy we make a quick admin stop in the main settlement of Tvøroyri before travelling a little further along the coast to examine some excellent exposures of columnar basalt.

After lunch we explore the southern half of Suðuroy. The weather is wonderful — warm, sunny and calm. We walk along the cliff tops near Beinisdvørð and are almost overwhelmed by the incredible scenery. We see the breeding seabirds of the Faroe Islands and remark on how strange it is to be looking down on the guillemot colonies far below us. Offshore we see lots of gannets and puffins. On the cliffs we discover sea mayweed, roseroot and lots of scurvy grass. We also see a *Lotus* species which we decide is bird's foot trefoil. Some members of the group opt to walk along the cliff tops to the even higher ground above whilst others choose the easier option of making the journey in our vehicle. We see a meadow pipit feeding young on the way.

We reach Akraberg, the most southerly point of Suðuroy and the Faroe Islands and have a very pleasant hour or so to relax and potter along the cliffs here. We have great views of arctic skua and whimbrel and it is very pleasant to sit in the sunshine near the lighthouse and look out to sea. Even here, in these exposed waters, we find eider ducks and, of course, there are oystercatchers all around.

We return to our hotel in sunshine and after dinner call the log and write up our notes of what has been an excellent day.

### Friday 23 July 2010

*Another bright and sunny day with a light breeze from the west. Temperatures reach 16°C.*

We drive to the west coast of Suðuroy. As we travel we have some very close-up views of whimbrel. Another bird appears nearby and we see it is a golden plover, the first we have recorded on the Faroe Islands. We get good views. The settlement of Fámjin is delightful and we spend a very pleasant half hour or so exploring the area. On the beach near the harbour we discover some sea sandwort and look, unsuccessfully as it turns out, for oysterplant.

We visit the mountains at Rangabotnar and see some evidence of the old coal mine workings in this area. The scenery here is spectacular and a productive spell of botanising produces starry, alpine snow and Irish saxifrage as well as some dwarf willow.

We walk to the western cliffs for our picnic lunch. Along the coast we see the various coastal landforms created by marine erosion. We are particularly impressed by several of the sea stacks that we see. There are lots of gannets feeding offshore and we watch as they dive into the sea far below us.

At Hvalba we see four redshanks feeding near the sandy bay.

We then travel to Sandvík and take a walk to the coastline near Ásmundarstakkur. We see golden plover and arctic skua on the way and also record a lot of bog asphodel. In the rocks near a stream we see the Faroes wren, briefly, before it flies away downstream. The cliffs here are spectacular — we see guillemots on ledges far below us, there are kittiwakes, too, lots of fulmars and a few puffins on the grass covered tops of the stack. Offshore we see many more gannets and further away we can see the island of Mykines, the most westerly of the Faroe Islands, on the horizon. It's a truly remarkable place.

We return to explore the beach at Hvalba and note sea rocket growing on the dunes there. A nearby lake produces teal and tufted duck and near an old slipway we also record northern rock cress growing on the cliffs.

We drive the short distance to Øravík and enjoy a delicious supper of fresh haddock that the hotel's owner has caught earlier in the day.

### Saturday 24 July 2010

*Heavy rain and strong SW wind at first. Dry and calmer but overcast later. Light showers in the evening. Temperatures reach 14°C.*

We wake to heavy rain and strong winds. We catch our return ferry to Tórshavn in some awful conditions but about an hour after we leave things improve; the rain stops and the wind reduces. We can start birdwatching again. We see the familiar species and have some distant views of manx shearwaters. A large shearwater is spotted some distance astern of us. We don't get a good view but it's probably a great shearwater, a bird that's not very often seen in the Faroe Islands.

By the time we reach Tórshavn the day has improved tremendously and we even have sunshine as we drive the short distance to the historic site of Kirkjubøur. It was here that the vikings built a cathedral and we explore the ruins and museum. Offshore we see three red-throated divers — a pair and their chick — amongst the many eiders in the area. Walking around the area we also have another sighting of the Faroes wren. There are lots of lichens here, too. A brown rat is also noted.

We return to Tórshavn and have a little time to explore the city before we take the evening ferry crossing to Nólsoy.

Our evening trip to Nólsoy is to visit the largest breeding colony of storm petrels in the world and after a simple but delicious dinner in the little café there we meet up with Jens-Kjeld, our guide for the walk out to the colony itself. Conditions are good for storm petrel watching — overcast with a threatening drizzle, as they prefer coming ashore in these conditions to avoid predators. As we walk we hear several petrels calling, a really strange sound. We stop at a suitable site amidst some big boulders and it's not long before we glimpse our first birds zooming close by. Jens-Kjeld is very knowledgeable about these birds and has ringed many thousands. He sets up a mist net and we soon catch several birds. They are ringed and released. We marvel at how small they are and they seem very delicate for such a rigorous life at sea.

We return to the village and travel across the sound to Tórshavn in the early hours to be greeted by fireworks and parties on the harbourside! Another wonderful day.

### Sunday 25 July 2010

*Misty at first but clearing to a lovely sunny afternoon. Temperatures reach 16°C.*

We have a late breakfast and leave Tórshavn in a thick mist. We travel to Norðradalur and as we descend towards sea level the mist clears and we are able to see the islands of Hestur and Koltur. We walk along the track and find many heath spotted orchids growing on the old peat cuttings. There's bog asphodel, too.

The weather clears as we drive to Vestmanna and by the time we've had our lunch it's turned into a beautiful day. We take a boat trip to the Vestmanna cliffs. The voyage takes us out of the Vestmannasund, past the old settlement of Slættarnestangi and under the enormous cliffs of western Streymoy. The cliffs are awe-inspiring. They rise hundreds of metres out of the sea and erosion has created many deep gullies and stacks. With care our skipper takes us into some of the inlets and we can gaze up to the cliffs soaring above us. There are kittiwakes and common guillemots on the cliffs but by far the most numerous birds are fulmars. It's an amazing place. As we return we see an Atlantic grey seal and three turnstones.

The saga museum at Vestmanna is an interesting place to visit and we enjoy the chance to stroll around the exhibits.

The viking theme continues as we visit Kvívík and see the outline of a viking age farm that was discovered there. Offshore are many arctic terns and we admire these very graceful fliers.

As we return to Tórshavn the mist again descends and it's to the sound of foghorns blaring that we walk into town for dinner.

### Monday 26 July 2010

*Misty at first but clearing later. Temperature around 13°C.*

We leave Tórshavn and cross to the neighbouring island of Vágar by the undersea tunnel. It's a short drive to the airport and, of course, on the way we see many of the oyster-catchers that have become so familiar to us during this last week. Formalities are soon completed and it's not long before we're aboard the aircraft for our return flight.

Thank you so much for visiting the Faroe Islands and I hope very much to meet up with you on another Travelling Naturalist trip again soon.

Andy Jones

July 2010

### Species Lists

The following lists comprise the species of birds and plants we recorded between 19 and 26 July 2010. Please let me know of any errors or omissions

#### Birds

English name	Scientific name
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Common Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>
Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>
Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>
Great Shearwater	<i>Puffinus gravis</i> (probable on 24 July)
Storm Petrel	<i>Hydrobates pelagicus</i>
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>

European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>
European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>
Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>
Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>
Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>
Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>
Lesser black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>
Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>
Great black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>
Black-legged kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>
Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>
Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>
Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>
Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>
Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>
Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>
Winter Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes borealis</i>
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>
Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>
European Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>

## Mammals

English name	Scientific name
Atlantic Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>
Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>
Brown rat	<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>
Blue hare	<i>Lepus timidus</i>

## Plants

English Name	Scientific Name
Fir Clubmoss	<i>Huperzia selago</i>
Common Moonwort	<i>Botrychium lunaria</i>
Common Male-fern	<i>Dryopteris filix-mas</i>
Dwarf Willow	<i>Salix herbacea</i>
Common Nettle	<i>Urtica dioica</i>
Alpine Bistort	<i>Polygonum viviparum</i>
Mountain Sorrel	<i>Oxyria digyna</i>
Sheep's Sorrel	<i>Rumex acetosella</i>
Common Sorrel	<i>Rumex acetosa</i>
Northern Dock	<i>Rumex longifolius</i>
Babington's Orache	<i>Atriplex glabriuscula</i>
Sea Sandwort	<i>Honckenya peploides</i>
Arctic Mouse-ear	<i>Cerastium arcticum</i>
Heath Bedstraw	<i>Galium saxatile</i>
Willowherb	<i>Epilobium spp</i>
Moss Champion	<i>Silene acaulis</i>
Ragged Robin	<i>Lychnis flos-cuculi</i>
Red Champion	<i>Silene dioica</i>
Lesser Spearwort	<i>Ranunculus flammula</i>
Marsh Marigold	<i>Caltha palustris</i>
Creeping Buttercup	<i>Ranunculus repens</i>
Meadow Buttercup	<i>Ranunculus acris</i>
Northern Rock-cress	<i>Cardaminopsis petraea</i>
Common Scurvygrass	<i>Cochlearia officinalis</i>
Lady Smock	<i>Cardamine pratensis</i>
Roseroot	<i>Rhodiola rosea</i>

Irish Saxifrage	<i>Saxifraga rosacea</i>
Purple Saxifrage	<i>Saxifraga oppositifolia</i>
Starry Saxifrage	<i>Saxifraga stellaris</i>
Alpine Snow Saxifrage	<i>Saxifraga nivalis</i>
Alpine Lady's-mantle	<i>Alchemilla alpina</i>
Faroese Lady's-mantle	<i>Alchemilla faeroensis</i>
Sibbaldia	<i>Sibbaldia procumbens</i>
Tormentil	<i>Potentilla erecta</i>
St John's Wort	<i>Hypericum pulchrum</i>
Alpine Cinquefoil	<i>Potentilla crantzii</i>
Silverweed	<i>Potentilla anserina</i>
Birdsfoot Trefoil	<i>Lotus corniculatus</i>
Tufted Vetch	<i>Vicia cracca</i>
White clover	<i>Trifolium repens</i>
Wood Sorrel	<i>Oxalis acetosella</i>
Wood Cranesbill	<i>Geranium sylvaticum</i>
Heath Milkwort	<i>Polygala serpyllifolia</i>
Heather	<i>Calluna vulgaris</i>
Thrift	<i>Armeria maritima</i>
Pondweed	<i>Potamogeton spp</i>
Water Forget-me-not	<i>Myosotis scorpioides</i>
Wild Thyme	<i>Thymus praecox</i>
Selfheal	<i>Prunella vulgaris</i>
Eyebright	<i>Euphrasia spp</i>
Heath Speedwell	<i>Veronica officinalis</i>
Northern Sea Rocket	<i>Calkile arctica</i>
Yellow-rattle	<i>Rhinanthus minor</i>
Colt's Foot	<i>Tussilago farfara</i>
Shepherd's Purse	<i>Capsella bursa-pastoris</i>
Hairy Stonecrop	<i>Sedum villosum</i>
Common butterwort	<i>Pinguicula vulgaris</i>
Sea Plantain	<i>Plantago maritima</i>
Daisy	<i>Bellis perennis</i>
Yarrow	<i>Achillea millefolium</i>
Sea Mayweed	<i>Matricaria maritima</i>

Groundsel	<i>Senecio vulgaris</i>
Pineappleweed	<i>Chamomilla suaveolens</i>
Creeping Thistle	<i>Cirsium arvense</i>
Monkeyflower	<i>Mimulus guttatus</i>
Scot's Lovage	<i>Ligusticum scoticum</i>
Garden Angelica	<i>Angelica archangelica</i>
Wild Angelica	<i>Angelica sylvestris</i>
Dandelion	<i>Taraxacum spp</i>
Hawkweed	<i>Hieracium spp</i>
Bog Asphodel	<i>Narthecium ossifragum</i>
Yellow Iris	<i>Iris pseudacorus</i>
Common Cottongrass	<i>Eriophorum angustifolium</i>
Frog Orchid	<i>Coeloglossum viride</i>
Heath Spotted Orchid	<i>Dactylorhiza maculata</i>
Fescue	<i>Festuca spp</i>
Sedge	<i>Carex spp</i>
Grass	<i>Phleum spp</i>
Grass	<i>Agrostis spp</i>
Rush	<i>Juncus spp</i>