

The Travelling Naturalist

The Faroe Islands July 2011

Trip Report

Tour Leader

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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 18 July 2011

Overcast with a fresh north east wind and light rain showers. Temperatures reach 12°C.

We assemble at Vágar Airport and quickly get under way. We visit the remote settlement at Gásadalur and do some seawatching from the cliff edge. We see our first gannets and note the oystercatchers who will be 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 take a small detour and visit Tjørnuvík and admire the ragged robin which grows in profusion here. At Eiði there are whimbrels, wheatears and arctic skuas.

We continue our drive across the twisting road to Gjógv on the island of Eysturoy. Our guesthouse in Gjógv is in a wonderful location and after a delicious dinner we explore the nearby coast. It's raining so we take shelter in the local church and learn a little about the history of this wonderful area.

Tuesday 19 July 2011

Brisk NE wind, showers at first but brighter intervals later with temperatures reaching 12°C.

After breakfast we take a walk along the coast near the settlement. We see our first 'Faroe's' wren; it's a distinctive sub species of winter wren only found on the Faroe Islands, and have some lovely views as it flits from bush to bush in one of the gardens. We see many puffins and black guillemots offshore 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 are eider ducks and arctic terns very close to shore and we also examine the geology of the area and see a very well developed dike cutting across the basalt bedrock. There's lots of roseroot growing on the cliffs. The view across the sound to the island of Kalsoy is amazing.

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 Irish saxifrage and starry saxifrage. 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 rock pipits here.

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 travel to Saksun and take a lovely walk into the steep valley and follow the base of the high cliffs along the coast. It's a very dramatic area and on the pools we see a female red-breasted merganser with several ducklings. There's raven and great skua in the area and we have some exceptionally close-up views of the latter. In the small settlement we hear another wren and admire the local architecture of turf-roofed buildings.

We return to Gjógv and stop at several viewpoints to look across the spectacular coastal scenery of the northern shores of Eysturoy.

It's been a great day.

Wednesday 20 July 2011

Light NW wind. Overcast and light drizzle at first with sunny intervals later. Temperatures of 10 to 12°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 Boröy island. There's time for a quick stroll around the harbour area of Klaksvík before we catch the ferry to the island of Kalsoy.

We first do a little birdwatching on the southern coast of Kalsoy. There are lots of black guillemots here and we see many arctic terns feeding in the sound.

Kalsoy is a long, thin island and we travel along its only road to reach Mikladalur. We walk across the island to reach the western cliffs. 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. The area is good for plants, too and we see bog asphodel, heath spotted orchid, hairy stonecrop and self-heal as we walk.

At Trøllanes — a charming settlement at Kalsoy's northern end — we break for lunch. We walk down the steep path to the coast and have some splendid close-up views of black guillemots and many hundreds of puffins. We find scurvy grass on the cliffs.

We make a quick visit to the village of Mikladalur before it's time to catch the return boat. 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 Svínøi further away.

There's time for a very quick visit to the island of Kunoy, by our reckoning that's the seventh island we've been on, before it's time head for home.

As we return to Gjógv we are treated to some very good views of the rock doves that breed in the Faroe Islands.

There's a concert in the guesthouse this evening, preceded by a delicious buffet. We also learn about the Faroese chain dance and its importance to the cultural heritage of the islands.

Thursday 21 July 2011

Overcast at first but becoming bright and sunny with hardly a breath of wind later. Temperatures reach 15°C.

We leave the friendly guesthouse at Gjógv 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, Skúgvoy, Stóra Dímun and Lítla 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. There's excitement as we drive when we see a barn swallow, a rather rare visitor to the Faroes. We also record field gentian here.

After lunch we explore the southern half of Suðuroy. The weather is wonderful — warm, sunny and calm. We walk along the cliff tops near Beinivør 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. 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 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 also see another rare vagrant to the Faroes, a common swift.

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 22 July 2011

A bright and sunny day with a light breeze from the north east. Temperatures reach 16°C.

We drive to the west coast of Suðuroy. As we travel we have some very close-up views of whimbrel. The settlement of Fámjin is delightful and we spend a very pleasant hour or so exploring the area. We see a great northern diver in the harbour and several ruddy turnstone on the rocky shore.

We walk to the western cliffs and all 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. Local farmers are herding sheep and we comment on the difficult task they have in rounding up the flocks which are grazing on the very steep grass slopes.

After our picnic we make a brief stop in the valley near Hvalba to examine the old coal workings here. We learn a little about the geological history of the Faroes and the conditions that existed when the coal was laid down.

At Hvalba we walk along the sandy beach and have a pleasant spell of botanising in the sand dunes.

We then travel to Sandvík and take a walk to the coastline near Ásmundarstakur. We see golden plover and arctic skua on the way and also record a lot of bog asphodel. The cliffs here are spectacular — we see guillemots on ledges far below us, there are kittiwakes, too, lots of fulmars and many thousands of puffins on the grass covered tops of the stacks. 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 visit the mountains at Rangabotnur and see some more evidence of the old coal mine workings in this area. The scenery here is spectacular and a productive spell of botanising produces starry and Irish saxifrage as well as some dwarf willow. A wren flies out of the old mine workings and passes within inches of us for a brief but very close view!

We drive the short distance to Øravík and enjoy a delicious dinner.

Saturday 23 July 2011

A glorious day, light NE wind with hardly a cloud in the sky. Temperatures reach 14°C.

We catch our return ferry to Tórshavn in glorious weather and our birdwatching begins as soon as we leave harbour. We see the familiar species and have some distant views of manx shearwaters. The southern islands look at their best in this bright weather and we have some wonderful opportunities for photography.

At Tórshavn there's the chance to take a short stroll around the city before 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 red-throated diver amongst the many eiders in the area. We picnic overlooking the sound between Streymoy and Sandoy and watch arctic skuas chase arctic terns. We also note a big bull Atlantic grey seal offshore. At the church a wedding is taking place and we admire the bride and groom wearing their national costume.

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 we meet up with Jens-Kjeld, our guide for the walk out to the colony itself. Conditions are not perfect for storm petrel watching —bright nights makes it easier for the gulls to prey on them — but as we walk out to the colony we have high hopes. It's a lovely sunset and we settle down to wait. It's not long before we hear the first petrels calling and a little while later 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. What a wonderful day.

Sunday 24 July 2011

Another glorious day. Temperatures reach 16°C.

We have a late breakfast and travel to Nor_radalur along the old mountain road from Tórshavn. Some group members see what they think is a red knot on the shore but it flies away so we cannot be sure. As we descend towards sea level we see the islands of Hestur and Koltur. We have a very productive spell of botanising and find our first heather of the trip. We admire the masses of cotton grass as well.

We continue our journey to Vestmanna and have lunch before we take a boat trip to the Vestmanna cliffs. The voyage takes us out of the Vestmannasund, past the old settlement of Slættanestangi 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, puffins on the sea but by far the most numerous birds are fulmars. It's an amazing place. A large skua is spotted flying past. We think it may be a pomarine skua but it is too far away to be certain.

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.

We have dinner in Tórshavn and discuss the trip. We have all been very impressed with the islands and the changing seascapes that surround them.

Monday 26 July 2011

Another bright day though chilly at first. Temperature around 6 to 12°C.

We leave Tórshavn and cross to the neighbouring island of Vágur by the undersea tunnel. It's a short drive to the airport and, of course, on the way we see many of the oystercatchers 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 2011

Species Lists

The following lists comprise the species of birds and plants we recorded between 18 and 25 July 2011. 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>
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</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>
Storm Petrel	<i>Hydrobates pelagicus</i>
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</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>
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>
Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>
Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>
Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>
White Wagtail	<i>Montacilla alba</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>

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 spp	<i>Epilobium spp</i>
Moss Campion	<i>Silene acaulis</i>
Ragged Robin	<i>Lychnis flos-cuculi</i>
Red Campion	<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>
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>
Tormentil	<i>Potentilla erecta</i>
Alpine Cinquefoil	<i>Potentilla crantzii</i>
Silverweed	<i>Potentilla anserina</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>
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>
Common Cottongrass	<i>Eriophorum angustifolium</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>