

Winter Birding In Iceland

Contributed by Jos

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A dramatic land, even more so in winter with snowy mountain backdrops and sometimes wild seas of the North Atlantic. When thinking about a mid-winter break however, I am not quite sure why Iceland popped into my head, it is not the obvious destination for the middle of February! But how magical it could be - flocks of Harlequins sharing waters with Orca, thousands of Iceland Gulls and potentially the Northern Lights too. I was hooked & off for a short winter trip to Iceland!

As it turned out, travelling 23-16 February 2017, Iceland was positively tropical! Departing Vilnius, it was minus 8 C, arriving in Reykjavik, it was plus 7C! And mild it remained the whole trip, temperatures not even falling to zero at night. As for the wind, despite a major storm hitting just a few days earlier with reported gusts of up to 180 km/hr, there was basically not a breathe of wind for the duration of the trip, the resultant seas calm on the south coast and like a millpond off the Snæfellsnes Peninsula. Perhaps related to the weather conditions though, herring shoals were not moving into the sheltered waters of Kolgrafafjörður this winter, thus not attracting Orca ...these were effectively off the menu before I even arrived. That said, occasional pods were being encountered in deeper waters offshore and had I arranged a boat-based excursion, I could have seen them. 13 February. Reykjanes Peninsula 10.45 a.m., overcast skies, touch down at Keflavik Airport, 30 km south-west of Reykjavik. Zipped through the non-existent customs and immigration, collected a car and precisely seven minutes later was at my first birding stop, Keflavik Harbour. Tight flock of some 40-50 Iceland Gulls feeding just offshore, not quite sure what was attracting them to this exact spot, but as we watched they were soon dragging in more gulls, Glaucous Gulls amongst them, plus a steady procession of Common Eiders swimming in too. Great Northern Diver just beyond, a few Red-breasted Mergansers dotted about. Ten minutes on, in came the star & present in this bay for the best part of two years, the bird in question was a very smart drake White-winged Scoter. Probably the best bird I have ever seen within ten minutes of an international arrivals hall! Over on the harbour walls, a nice line-up of Glaucous and Iceland Gulls posed for photographs.

Ten kilometres around the coast, target two was another Nearctic attraction & a female Bufflehead that had been found three months earlier, the fifth record for Iceland. This couldn't have been easier to find ...favouring a pool near Sandgerði, the said pool had a grand total of two birds on it! Bird number one was Red-breasted Merganser, bird number two the female Bufflehead. Bit if a harsh landscape here, not a shrub higher than a few centimetres in sight ...watched the Bufflehead for a while, then scanned around for Ptarmigan. Looked back and the Bufflehead was in flight! Round the pool it circled, then off to the south, vanishing quite far into the distance. It did not return ...lucky I didn't arrive fifteen minutes later!

Would have continued along that stretch of coast, but car problems forced an early return to the airport! Darn drat, thought I, but full credit to Budget Car Rent, they swapped the car and had us on our way within ten minutes. Better still, a white blob on a rock right at the airport's entrance turned out to be our first Ptarmigan of the journey ...very pleasing for the little one as that was the main bird she wanted to see on this trip!

Rather concerned that my itinerary for the day might get truncated by the short day length, we then opted for a drive along the southern coast of the Reykjanes Peninsula, stopping at assorted coastal localities as far along as Þorlákshöfn. Failed to find a Surf Scoter on route or King Eider at Þorlákshöfn, but still an excellent general mix, tops being the classic Harlequins bobbing in the surf, a fine flock of 12 being seen at Hraunsvik. Also 12 Red-throated Divers at Þorlákshöfn, quite a few Long-tailed Ducks and endless Iceland and Glaucous Gulls just about everywhere!

Would have lingered longer, but I also planned to visit the Sog River this day before driving north. Only 30 km from Þorlákshöfn, the Sog was easy to find, its key bird perhaps not quite so. In an average winter, many parts of this river are frozen, pushing the speciality Barrow's Goldeneye into relatively concentrated areas. This winter, however, all is ice-free and the birds are far more dispersed. Probably not a big effort required in reality, but with uncertainty on my part when exactly it would get dark, I thought it prudent to nip up to the northern stretches as quickly as possible and check out several spots. Notched up a Little Grebe on route, a bird that had been found a few days earlier and was remarkably only the third ever for Iceland. Just a bit further, at the northern end of Úlfjótuvatn, there the desired Barrow's Goldeneyes sat, a super male in association with two females. Classic Icelandic birds indeed!

And with that I turned north, crossing the mountains near I to rejoin the coast north of Reykjavik. Amazing lack of birds inland & saw a grand total of two birds, both Common Ravens. Back on the coast, added a Merlin just before dark somewhere near Akranes, then pushed on to the Snæfellsnes Peninsula. Arrived at maybe 9 pm, did a couple of hours spotlighting for Arctic Fox in the lava fields at the eastern tip of the peninsula. Saw a couple of Wood Mice, but didn't see any Arctic Fox, and it started raining from 11 pm. Camped near the Snæfellsnes lighthouse, no Northern Lights. 14 February. Snæfellsnes.

Winter mornings in Iceland are dark! Had I been able to see the sun, it apparently rose at only 9.30 a.m.. As it was, with heavy skies and light rain continuing, it effectively didn't get light until nearer 10 a.m.

Weather didn't actually have any negative impact and we spent the whole day checking sites along the northern side of the Snæfellsnes Peninsula & birds just about everywhere, but the best sites were the harbours at Rif, Olafsvik and Grundarfjörður, a small stream entering the sea a couple of kilometres east of Olafsvik and intertidal areas near Grundarfjörður and in Kolgrafafjörður. Moderately limited number of species present, but top notch in terms of quality and sheer numbers: harbours packed with and Glaucous and Iceland Gulls (many hundreds of the latter), regular Harlequin Ducks along the entire stretch, numerous Common Eiders, lesser numbers of Long-tailed Ducks, flocks of Purple

Sandpipers, a few Black Guillemots, masses and masses of Northern Fulmars, all most enjoyable.

At Grundarfjörður, amongst 120 or so Common Eiders, I also found a hybrid drake King Eider – a smart bird, this was basically a usual King Eider in appearance with full sails on back, plus near normal head and chest colour, but its back was an ash grey instead of black and it had much reduced bill protuberance. Over at Kolgráfjörður, I dreamed of the Orca of past seasons, how they would pass under the road bridge in pursuit of herring in the upper bay. No such spectacle this season – the herring shoals had not entered the bay this season, I am not sure whether related to the mild conditions or possibly to mass die offs of herring in this fjord in recent years (50,000 tonnes of herring died in the bay in 2013 and 2015, thought to be related to oxygen deprivation during unusually calm waters). Whatever the reason, a Grey Seal was the only sea mammal that I noted from the bridge and even birds were fairly low in number. Out on the deeper waters of the bay however, a boat trip did find Orca on this day.

Sun from mid-afternoon, White-tailed Eagle soaring, stunning landscapes. Walked on the beach near Olafsvík, found a Orca ...no big leaps for joy, it was a long dead individual, the skull quite visible! A quick stop at a small wetland near Rif (Whooper Swans and an assortment of ducks), then onto the Snæfellsnes lighthouse area to end the day – rugged lava fields stretching for kilometres, cracks and fissures fracturing the landscape. On the black backdrop, two stunningly white Ptarmigan stuck out like sore thumbs, one islandicus Wren far more discreet – hopping about in the gullies in the lava, this is a most distinctive race, appeared somewhat larger and more upright to me, certainly darker. Cloud rolled in from sunset, no Northern Lights again! Several hours of spotlighting also failed in their intended target – no Arctic Fox. I did spotlight however first a single Ptarmigan, then a flock of three, then two single Snow Buntings! 15 February. Peninsula.

With both the Northern Lights and Arctic Fox still eluding us, we opted for another day on the Snæfellsnes Peninsula.

Pre-dawn spotlighting revealed nothing, then it was very much a re-run of the day before, but with better weather. Started off at the Snæfellsnes lighthouse again, which proved much birdier than the evening before – whilst Fulmars and Gannets had been present in the evening, I had seen only a single Razorbill and no Guillemots whatsoever. Now however, congregating in rafts just off the cliffs, there were Guillemots galore! Rough counts put the numbers at an absolute minimum of 900, scans through also picking several Razorbills and a dotting of Black Guillemots. Predictably perhaps, it was still too early for Brunnich's Guillemot, not a single could I find. Also good numbers of Kittiwakes and Red-throated Divers.

Decided to try and find Kumlien's Gulls on this day, the obvious spot being where I had seen masses of gulls gathering at small stream entering the sea just east of Olafsvík. Could park the car here at the top of a low cliff and watch the mass of gulls feeding on the sea at the outflow, plus others bathing in the stream itself and even more roosting on the cliff top either side. A superb site, I would estimate there were easily over 1000 Iceland Gulls at this single spot, plus hundreds of Glaucous Gulls and similar numbers of Great Black-backed Gulls too. Quite a spectacle to watch them all, the Iceland Gulls in particular, most of which were flocking around the stream and outflow. Concentrating on closer birds, it did not take long before I found what I was seeking – first several 'Nelson Gulls', hybrids between Glaucous Gulls and Herring Gulls, then the bird I wanted, at least two Kumlien's Gulls. Also saw here my only Common Gull of the trip.

Hybrid King Eider still in Grundarfjörður harbour, plus numerous Northern Fulmars, also 70 or so Oystercatchers split between Grundarfjörður and Kolgráfjörður, seven Common Redshanks also at Kolgráfjörður, one Common Snipe at Rif, these latter two species somewhat unseasonal I believe. Plenty of other birds, but species much as day before.

Remained fairly sunny till evening, then cloud began to creep in again. Drat, hopes of the Northern Lights seemed to be fading! A few hours spotlighting failed yet again to produce Arctic Fox, one Snow Bunting the only reward this night. At close to midnight, with a light northerly breeze now stacking clouds, I thought I would take a bit of a gamble and see if the weather might be better on the other side of the mountains, i.e. the southern side of the Snæfellsnes Peninsula. Worked a treat, a perfect starry night and there, in a broad arc across the northern sky, floating greens gently rising and falling, glowing shapes intensifying then fading, streaks pushing landward … the Northern Lights! Not perhaps the most classic of displays, the greens not deep, but quite fixating it was, we sat there in the quiet of the most gazing. Drove halfway back to Reykjavík, stopped somewhere near the coast. 16 February. Reykjanes Peninsula.

Final day in Iceland. Tried to find King Eider and Surf Scoter on the south coast. Failed on both, on hindsight should have spent longer at Þorlákshöfn, where numerous offshore Common Eiders may well have hidden a female King Eider or two (they had been seen at this locality some days earlier).

Plenty of nice birds though, including several Great Northern Divers, at least 25 Harlequin Ducks and my only Blackbird of the trip. Common Seals too, six hauled out in an intertidal area, two also in the water. Stopped at various points during the day, then ended up at a small town pool in Keflavík – Whooper Swans and Wigeon coming to bread, small flock of Starlings flying around. A bit of luxury for the last night, we checked into a nearby hotel. It began to rain. And so ended this mini winter trip to Iceland, next morning we needed to be at the airport at 9.30 a.m., i.e. before it would be light. All in all, despite no Arctic Fox, it had been grand trip – an enjoyable four days in great landscapes, topped by an impressive show of the Northern Lights. Systematic List With just less than fifty species seen on this short trip, the list below outlines all the sightings with added notes on locations and approximate numbers. 1. Whooper Swan. Seen on several wetlands along the coastlines. In total, about 45 around the Reykjanes Peninsula and

about ten on the Snæfellsnes Peninsula. Easiest place to see at close range is the small pool near Keflavik Harbour where they come to food, along with Wigeon.

2. Greylag Goose. Twelve seen, ten on the Reykjanes Peninsula (at Hlíðarvatn), two on the Snæfellsnes Peninsula (on the wetland near Rif).

3. Mallard. Moderately common on pools on both the Reykjanes Peninsula and the Snæfellsnes Peninsula. In total, about 210 logged during the trip.

4. Wigeon. Recorded at fewer localities than Mallard, but still widespread – in total, about 90 on the Reykjanes Peninsula and 35 on the Snæfellsnes Peninsula (on large pools at Rif).

5. Teal. Seen at three localities, six at Hlíðarvatn, two on the Sog River and four at Rif.

6. Scaup. A flock of about 30 seen on Hlíðarvatn.

7. Tufted Duck. About 45 at Hlíðarvatn.

8. Common Eider. Common to abundant along most coastline points visited, often flocks of a hundred or so also in harbours, especially on the Snæfellsnes Peninsula.

9. King Eider. Associating with Common Eiders, a male hybrid King Eider-Common Eider in Grundarfjörður harbour. Essentially King Eider in appearance with full sails on back, plus near normal head and chest colouration, etc, but back colour an ash grey instead of black and a very much reduced bill protuberance.

10. White-winged Scoter. A splendid drake at close quarters in Keflavik Harbour, loosely associating with Common Eider. This bird had been in the area for about two years.

11. Long-tailed Duck. Moderately common with small flocks (of generally ten to twenty birds) at regular intervals across both the Reykjanes Peninsula and Snæfellsnes Peninsula.

12. Harlequin Duck. With about 120 birds seen in total, this was one of the highlights of this trip to Iceland. Localities on the southern side of the Reykjanes Peninsula included Víkur, Þorlákshöfn and Hraunsvík, while they were even more widespread on the Snæfellsnes Peninsula and small flocks (of five to twelve) were seen at many areas of rocky coastline.

13. Barrow's Goldeneye. With the mild weather, none of the Sog River is frozen and thus birds were more widely dispersed than usual (and thus harder to find). After checking several sites, I eventually located a fine male in escort with two females at the northern end of Úlfjótuvatn.

14. Bufflehead. Female on a small pool just south of Sandgerði. Found several months earlier, this represented only the 5th record for Iceland.

15. Goosander. Three seen on the Sog river, one near Þorlákshöfn.

16. Red-breasted Merganser. Fairly common along all coasts, up to about 45 seen each day. Generally occurring in pairs or small flocks on the sea, several were also seen on the Sog River and other inland waters.

17. Rock Ptarmigan. Nine seen – one at Keflavik Airport, the rest in the lava fields at the end of the Snæfellsnes Peninsula (including a single and flock of three spotlight at night).

18. Red-throated Diver. A total of 56 logged, the best numbers being 12 at Þorlákshöfn and ten at Snæfellsnes lighthouse.

19. Great Northern Diver. Only seen on the Reykjanes Peninsula: one in Keflavik Harbour, three at Hraunsvík and one at Víkur.

20. Little Grebe. Third record for Iceland and found only a few days before my trip, one seen on the Sog River.

21. Northern Fulmar. Small numbers only off the Reykjanes Peninsula, but many thousands along the Snæfellsnes Peninsula, many already congregating on breeding cliffs and other massing at feeding sites.

22. Gannet. Small numbers – approximately 50 seen in total, about half off the tip of the Snæfellsnes Peninsula, the others off the south of the Reykjanes Peninsula.

23. Cormorant. Common along all coastlines.

24. European Shag. Less frequent than Cormorant, but still moderately common, especially at Þorlákshöfn, Hraunsvík and the western end of the Snæfellsnes Peninsula.
25. White-tailed Eagle. Only one seen, a bird soaring near Grundarfjörður.
26. Merlin. One seen, a single roosting on a roadside post at dusk near Akranes.
27. Oystercatcher. Common in intertidal areas near Grundarfjörður and in Kolgrafafjörður. In total, about 115 logged at these two sites.
28. Purple Sandpiper. Common on rocky coasts on the north coast of the Snæfellsnes Peninsula, up to 80 seen each day.
29. Turnstone. Only two seen, associating with Purple Sandpipers in Grundarfjörður Harbour.
30. Common Redshank. Unseasonal record – seven in Kolgrafafjörður.
31. Common Snipe. Unseasonal record – a single in the wetland near Rif.
32. Black-headed Gull. Only recorded twice – three near Olafsvík, one on the wetland at Rif.
33. Common Gull. One record only, a single near Olafsvík.
34. Kittiwake. Only noted on the cliffs at the tip of the Snæfellsnes Peninsula, where at least 50 were congregating on the sea.
35. Herring Gull. Moderately common on the Reykjanes Peninsula, but very small number noted on the Reykjanes Peninsula.
36. Great Black-backed Gull. Common to abundant on all coasts and in harbours.
37. Glaucous Gull. Abundant, hundreds seen each day. Often massing in harbours, but also seen just about everywhere else along the coast, both along the Reykjanes Peninsula and Snæfellsnes Peninsula. Best location was probably the small river just west of Olafsvík, where many hundreds were present alongside thousands of other gulls. Several of the so-called 'Nelson Gulls', i.e. hybrids between Glaucous Gull and Herring Gull, were noted west of Olafsvík. This hybrid was not really looked for elsewhere, probably widely overlooked.
38. Iceland Gull. Vying with Great Black-backed Gull for contender as the most abundant bird in Iceland! Extremely common at several sites, especially on the Snæfellsnes Peninsula, with single locality counts running into the hundreds on many occasions and, in the case of the small river running into the sea west of Olafsvík, probably in excess of 1000 birds present.
39. Kumlien's Gull. Not systematically searched for, but three found with ease in the mass flock of Iceland Gulls west of Olafsvík.
40. Black Guillemot. Present in small numbers along the Snæfellsnes Peninsula, with eight off the Snæfellsnes lighthouse and about 15 at scattered locations elsewhere along this coastline. On the Reykjanes Peninsula, two also seen at Þorlákshöfn and four at Hraunsvík.
41. Common Guillemot. None seen at the Snæfellsnes lighthouse on the evening of the 14th, but at least 900 present early next morning, with many tight flocks congregating at the base of the cliffs. One dead individual also found in Keflavík Harbour.
42. Razorbill. Only seen at Snæfellsnes lighthouse, where a total of six were seen.
43. Wren. One individual of this distinctive islandic race seen, hopping around the rugged rocks of the lava fields at the end of the Snæfellsnes Peninsula.
44. Feral Pigeon. Several in Reykjavík and Keflavík.
45. Common Raven. The only passerine seen with any regularity, up to 25 a day and seen at most localities visited.
46. Blackbird. One seen, an individual in gardens in Þorlákshöfn.
47. European Starling. Exclusively recorded in urban areas, flocks of up to 25 were seen in a couple of the settlements on the Snæfellsnes Peninsula, while flocks of up to 40 were encountered in Þorlákshöfn, Grindavík and Keflavík.

48. Snow Bunting. Possibly due to the total lack of snow and resultant dispersal of birds, only four single birds were seen, all in the lava fields at the western tip of the Snæfellsnes Peninsula. Of these, only one was during daylight, the others found by spotlight at night.