

Iceland

1-6 October 2015



In fall 2015 I decided to attend the annual meeting of the International Wader Study Group in Ásbrú, Iceland. This was a short, 3-day meeting (a 1-day excursion plus 2 days of talks) and I opted to add some extra birding time both before and after the meeting. I had limited birding time, so I only explored the Reykjanes Peninsula and a bit of the southern coast of Iceland during my short visit.

1 October

I departed from Des Moines on the afternoon of 30 September and flew overnight to Reykjavik after a layover in Minneapolis. I arrived on time at 6:30 a.m. local time and it took about an hour to pick up my bag and get my rental car. The weather was overcast with intermittent rain and strong winds, although it gradually cleared throughout the day. After checking in at the meeting hotel (Keflavik Airport Bed and Breakfast) I drove a short clockwise route on the western portion of the Reykjanes Peninsula. I left Ásbrú and drove southwest towards Hafnir where a quick check of the harbor revealed a few birds including Common Eider and 2 Black Guillemots. I continued south on Highway 425 and from a bluff at the southwestern tip of the peninsula I glimpsed Eldey Island. This is where the last known Great Auk was killed in 1844 and I had long wanted to see this landmark. I then reversed my direction and headed north towards Sandgerði. Along the way I saw few birds that included Pink-footed Goose, Eurasian Oystercatcher, Common Redshank, Ruddy Turnstone, and Meadow Pipit. High tide covered the harbor at Sandgerði although I found Mew (Common) and Iceland gulls quite easily. I quickly continued north to Gardur where I spent a couple of hours scanning the ocean from the lighthouse. The best find was a juvenile gray morph Gyrfalcon perched for a half hour on a post

just south of the lighthouse. The ocean was alive with hundreds of birds passing west in the strong onshore winds. The most numerous species were Northern Gannet (oddly, they were all adults), Northern Fulmar (300+), and Black-legged Kittiwake (140+). Other finds were a small flock of Brant, 9+ Sooty Shearwaters, hundreds of Eurasian Golden-Plovers, Arctic Tern, Common Murre, Razorbill, and Black Guillemot. On my way back to Ásbrú I spotted another Gyrfalcon near the airport. I was back at the hotel my 5:30 p.m. in time for dinner. [overcast then partial clearing, intermittent rain, temperature 42-49°F, winds NW 20-35 mph]

2 October

This was the excursion day and I signed up to see the Golden Circle, a popular route through south Iceland. This was mostly a trip to see scenery, although we did manage a few birds. We began by driving through the extensive lava fields along the southern Reykjanes Peninsula, which were eerily devoid of birds. We stopped in the harbor at Portlákshöfn for some gull watching and found cooperative Iceland and Glaucous gulls among the more common species. Next was the Ölfusá River estuary where we saw a huge raft of 700+ Common Eiders just offshore, 4 distant Harlequin Ducks, and a late flock of Sanderlings. From here we continued driving west to Selfoss, and along the way saw a flock of Rock Pigeons (my only ones of the trip), a Eurasian Kestrel, and several Redwings. We ate a wonderful lunch at the Fridheimer tomato farm where we were entertained by a pair of White Wagtails. Next we took a slow drive through scenic Thingvillar National Park to enjoy the spectacular scenery; the only birds of note were a couple of Merlin. [cloudy to partly cloudy, intermittent rain in early a.m., temperature 37-45°F, winds SW 10-20 mph]

3-4 October

These two days were devoted to attending the scientific talks associated with the meeting. I did not do any birding or travel.

5 October

This was my only full day to myself and Jesse Conklin (another meeting attendee) and I decided to spend the day visiting sites along the southwestern coast and the Reykjanes Peninsula. We began the day by driving east along the south coast, first stopping at a large estuary along Highway 427 just northwest of Strandakirkja. Here we saw many waterfowl including Whooper Swans, Northern Pintail, 2 Common Pochards, Tufted Duck, Greater Scaup, and 6 Harlequin Ducks where the river crossed under the highway. Farther east at the Ölfusá River estuary we saw Red-throated Loon and Long-tailed Duck. The meadows ENE of Stokkseyri held thousands of Eurasian Golden-Plovers and a surprise Little Stint; nearby we found a covey of 13 Rock Ptarmigan. We then turned east on Highway 1 and found 2 Common Mergansers in Selfoss before arriving in Ásbrú by 2 p.m. Our next stop was Gardur where we once again enjoyed many seabirds passing west by the lighthouse, including 15+ Sooty Shearwaters, Long-tailed Duck, Great Skua, and Black Guillemot. In the surrounding fields were many Eurasian Golden-Plovers and a juvenile gray morph Gyrfalcon. Our final stop of the day was the harbor at Sandgerði where the tide was out and we saw Brant, Eurasian Oystercatcher, 3 juvenile Bar-tailed Godwits,

a Eurasian Curlew, and a Dunlin. At 5:30 p.m. we called it a day and returned to the hotel.
[cloudy then partial clearing, temperature 36-48°F, winds NW 10-15 mph]

6 October

My final day in Iceland included a half day of birding before my mid-afternoon departure. On a tip from a local birder I successfully located an apparent subadult White-tailed Eagle just after dawn on the northwest coast. Afterwards I made a dash to Porbjörn/Grindavik (a local migrant trap near the Blue Lagoon) where I relocated a continuing Yellow-browed Warbler. I then made my way west to Gardur and briefly ocean-watched from the lighthouse. The best finds were a molting adult Common Loon and 3 Atlantic Puffins; the shoreline rocks held a White Wagtail and 2 Meadow Pipits. I then drove south to Sandgerði for one last look at the harbor where I saw 3 continuing Bar-tailed Godwits, 3 Eurasian Curlews, and (finally!) a nice flock of 18 Purple Sandpipers. It was now almost 1 p.m. and time to head for the airport. My departure was on time, I had a smooth connection in Minneapolis, and after a long day I arrived home at a little after midnight. [mostly cloudy, intermittent heavy rain before 9 a.m., temperature 39-47°F, winds NE 15-20 mph]

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BIRD LIST (62 species)

Pink-footed Goose

Lesser White-fronted
Goose

Graylag Goose

Brant

Whooper Swan

Eurasian Wigeon

Mallard

Northern Pintail

Green-winged (Eurasian)
Teal

Common Pochard

Tufted Duck

Greater Scaup

Common Eider

Harlequin Duck

Long-tailed Duck

Common Merganser

Red-breasted Merganser

Rock Ptarmigan

Red-throated Loon

Common Loon

Northern Fulmar

Sooty Shearwater

Northern Gannet

Great Cormorant

European Shag

White-tailed Eagle

Eurasian Oystercatcher

Eurasian Golden-Plover

Common Redshank

Eurasian Curlew

Bar-tailed Godwit

Ruddy Turnstone

Sanderling

Dunlin

Purple Sandpiper

Little Stint

Great Skua

Common Murre

Razorbill

Black Guillemot

Atlantic Puffin

Black-legged Kittiwake

Black-headed Gull

Mew (Common) Gull

Herring Gull

Iceland Gull

Lesser Black-backed Gull

Glaucous Gull

Great Black-backed Gull

Arctic Tern

Rock Pigeon

Eurasian Kestrel

Merlin

Gyr Falcon

Common Raven

Winter Wren

Yellow-browed Warbler

Northern Wheatear

Redwing

European Starling

White Wagtail

Meadow Pipit