

## **BIRDING TRIP TO SOUTH-WEST ICELAND: 19-21 MARCH 2011**

Iceland offers some impressive winter birding, including several speciality species for the West Palaearctic all within an hour's drive of the capital, Reykjavik. Deciding to give it a go, we headed to south-west Iceland on 18-21 March 2011. The participants were: Lance Degnan, Nick Whitehouse, Martin Limbert, Rob Adams, Richard Drew, Richard Sprakes, Gary Featherstone and Chris Gaughan.



The group had assembled at a Gatwick airport hotel the evening prior to our 10.50 am flight to Keflavik. Two and a half hours later we could see that Iceland's rugged countryside was uncharacteristically covered in some several inches of snow. Not to be daunted, we collected our comfortable 4-wheel drive vehicles and drove a short distance to check out a few of the key headlands and harbours along the Reykjanes peninsula.



Between some serious snow flurries, and sheltering from a biting cold wind, we enjoyed our first views of Harlequin Ducks, one of our

target species, and some 30 stunning individuals showed at very close range. As the tide came in, seven males and three females enjoyed the surf just metres from our parked vehicles, giving memorable views to all.

Along the shore, small rafts of 'northern' Eiders allowed close study, with the brighter yellow bills and characteristic white mantle 'sails' of the males a new feature for us all to digest.



Farther on, a group of 20 Scaup, 12 Red-breasted Mergansers and 12 Long-tailed Ducks added to the duck list and 50 Purple Sandpipers were noted amongst the rock pools. One of the reasons for a trip at this time of year is to experience good numbers of white-winged gulls, and we were not to be disappointed, as some 25 Glaucous and 150 Iceland were counted as they passed close inshore towards their evening roost.



After our first afternoon's birding we retired to a smart hotel in Keflavik for a fine meal and a few drinks.



We began Saturday 19 March by briefly re-visiting a couple of the nearby sites for further views of some 14 Harlequins, before the main event of the day – a visit to the Selfoss/Pingvallen area some 60 kilometres inland.



Here in the Sog river valley we enjoyed stunningly close views of 15 Barrow's Goldeneye (7 adult males, 7 females and a young male), another of our target birds, and a species restricted entirely to Iceland in its West Palaearctic breeding range.

Even here though the birds only spend a few months each winter before returning some 400 kilometres to the Myvaten area in northern Iceland. Nearby were a few Goosanders and Red-breasted Mergansers, feeding on ice free rivers and lakes. Impressive though these were, the group then enjoyed a truly amazing and exciting sight, when an Iceland Gyr Falcon was spotted flying over the road. Just as we thought it might disappear, this magnificent bird landed on a nearby rocky crag allowing a much closer approach and some photographs to be taken. It seemed strangely inquisitive of all the fuss and flew back to investigate, flying low down right over our heads!





The sheer power of this awesome bird, a brown immature, was a pleasure to behold and we all agreed it was a sight that we would never forget.

A single Short-eared Owl and some 60 Ravens were noted in the desolate but rather stunning interior landscape, more reminiscent of Greenland than Iceland, snowbound as it was. Returning via a more scenic south coastal route (and taking in some very tasty lobster soup en route) we again enjoyed good looks at some 300 Iceland Gulls and 35 Glaucous Gulls. The night was spent in a hotel in Reykjavik with an evening meal in a nice downtown Mexican restaurant.

Sunday 20 March dawned at minus eight degrees and with an onshore wind it was chilly to say the least as we commenced our day

birding at the Seltjarnarnes peninsula.



Snow Buntings were in profusion, settling on roof tops between bouts of feeding on whatever grasses they could find. Some dropped in to local gardens and flocks totalling more than 1000 were in the area.

We were unfortunately out of luck with a Ring-billed Gull which generally frequents this area, the freezing conditions having forced it to look elsewhere for alternative feeding. We did however have good views of a male American Wigeon, dabbling close inshore with a small group of its European cousins. We then drove via the five kilometre under-sea toll tunnel to Akranes where there were reports of large rafts of Common Eider offshore. Some 4,000 birds were massed in various groups, and after repeated scanning, our persistence was eventually rewarded, with at least two male King Eiders being discovered. A group of 12 Harlequins, 50 Long-tailed Ducks and 3 Black Guillemots added to the interest. Offshore Fulmars were on the move with a remarkable 4,000 being noted.



Whilst watching the groups of loafing gulls on the rocks, our second Gyr Falcon of the trip appeared, this time a grey/white adult bird which flew in briefly, landed on the rocks alongside some Ravens and then quickly departed. Our second sighting of this magnificent falcon. Gulls included some 100 Iceland and 30 Glaucous, as well as some 1500 Kittiwakes and other commoner species. Large groups of Purple Sandpipers were watched, and when they all came together the flock totalled some 850. Passerines are few and far between in Iceland at this time of year, except it seems for Snow Buntings. Groups were encountered in most places, even sitting on rooftops and our day count totalled some 2,000 birds. The evening was again spent at our Reykjavik hotel and rounded off with a very pleasant meal in a local downtown restaurant.

Monday 21 March was our last day so we had another look at a few harbours around the Reykjanes peninsula, adding Red-throated Divers to our trip list, and taking our last looks at Glaucous and Iceland Gulls.





We then spent some time visiting a local garden feeding station for redpolls. Here we watched at close quarters some 25 birds of the *islandica* race of the north-western group of redpolls, currently considered part of the Common Redpoll group. We keenly noted some plumage and call features, as the redpoll group is subject of ongoing studies that could potentially result in the race being elevated to species level. The gardens also held many Redwings and a couple of Blackbirds. In Reykjavik we tried for a Ring-necked Duck on the town lake, but again were thwarted by the snowy weather, it too having temporarily moved off. Some 86 Whooper Swans were seen there, the numbers no doubt building daily as birds returned from their wintering grounds in Britain and heralding the beginning of the Icelandic spring.



We caught our afternoon flight back to London Heathrow, having seen all our main target species, and the group agreeing that Iceland remains a must-see European destination, all vowing to return one day, perhaps in the late spring when breeding birds fill the skies.





Thanks to all of the group for a very enjoyable trip and to Rob Adams for supplying the photographs.