

A NATURALIST'S TOUR TO ICELAND - Part II

By Albert Schnitzler

Illustrated with Photographs by the Author

Following is a list of the birds we saw, arranged per the Fifth Edition A.O.U. check-list, showing the scientific and common names as shown here. For the very few birds not shown in this North American compilation, I used the names shown in Gudmundsson's list and in Peterson's "European Guide to Birds".

SCIENTIFIC NAMEEUROPEAN (AMERICAN) COMMON NAME

1. <i>Gavia immer</i>	Great Northern Diver (Common Loon)
2. <i>Gavia stellata</i>	Red-throated Diver (Red-throated Loon)
3. <i>Podiceps auritus</i>	Slavonian Grebe (Horned Grebe)
4. <i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	Fulmar
5. <i>Puffinus puffinus</i>	Manx Shearwater
6. <i>Morus bassanus</i>	Gannet
7. <i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	Cormorant (Great Cormorant)
8. <i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	Shag
9. <i>Olor cygnus</i>	Whooper Swan
10. <i>Anser anser</i>	Grey Lag Goose
11. <i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>	Pink-footed Goose
12. <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	Mallard
13. <i>Anas strepera</i>	Gadwall
14. <i>Anas acuta</i>	Pintail
15. <i>Anas crecca</i>	Teal (Common Teal)
16. <i>Mareca penelope</i>	Widgeon (European Widgeon)
17. <i>Mareca americana</i>	American Widgeon
18. <i>Spatula clypeata</i>	Shoveler
19. <i>Aythya ferina</i>	Pochard (Common Pochard)
20. <i>Aythya marila</i>	Scaup (Greater Scaup)
21. <i>Aythya fuligula</i>	Tufted Duck
22. <i>Bucephala islandica</i>	Barrow's Goldeneye
23. <i>Clangula hyemalis</i>	Long-tailed Duck (Oldsquaw)
24. <i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>	Harlequin Duck
25. <i>Somateria mollissima</i>	Eider (Common Eider)
26. <i>Oidemia nigra</i>	Common Scoter
27. <i>Mergus merganser</i>	Goosander (Common Merganser)
28. <i>Mergus serrator</i>	Red-breasted Merganser
29. <i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>	White-tailed Eagle (Gray Sea Eagle)
30. <i>Falco rusticolus</i>	Gyr Falcon
31. <i>Falco columbarius</i>	Merlin (Pigeon Hawk)
32. <i>Lagopus mutus</i>	Ptarmigan (Rock Ptarmigan)
33. <i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	Oystercatcher (European Oystercatcher)
34. <i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	Lapwing
35. <i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	Ringed Plover
36. <i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	Golden Plover (Eurasian Golden Plover)
37. <i>Arenaria interpres</i>	Turnstone (Ruddy Turnstone)

38. Capella gallinago	Snipe (Common Snipe)
39. Numenius phaeopus	Whimbrel
40. Totanus totanus	Redshank
41. Calidris canutus	Knot
42. Erolia maritima	Purple Sandpiper
43. Erolia alpina	Dunlin
44. Limosa limosa	Black-tailed Godwit
45. Crocethia alba	Sanderling
46. Phalaropus fulicarius	Grey Phalarope (Red Phalarope)
47. Lobipes lobatus	Red-necked Phalarope (Northern Phalarope)
48. Stercorarius parasiticus	Arctic Skua (Parasitic Jaeger)
49. Stercorarius longicaudus	Long Tailed Skua (Long Tailed Jaeger)
50. Catharacta skua	Great Skua (Skua)
51. Larus hyperboreus	Glaucous Gull
52. Larus marinus	Great Black-backed Gull
53. Larus fuscus	Lesser Black-backed Gull
54. Larus argentatus	Herring Gull
55. Larus canus	Common Gull (Mew Gull)
56. Larus ridibundus	Black-headed Gull
57. Rissa tridactyla	Kittiwake (Black-legged Kittiwake)
58. Sterna paradisaea	Arctic Tern
59. Alca torda	Razorbill
60. Uria aalge	Common Guillemot (Common Murre)
61. Uria lomvia	Brunnich's Guillemot (Thick-billed Murre)
62. Plautus alle	Little Auk (Dovekie)
63. Cepphus grylle	Black Guillemot
64. Fratercula arctica	Puffin (Common Puffin)
65. Asia flammeus	Short-eared Owl
66. Hirundo rustica	Swallow (Barn Swallow)
67. Troglodytes troglodytes	Wren (Winter Wren)
68. Trudus musicus	Red-wing
69. Turdus pilaris	Fieldfare
70. Oenanthe oenanthe	Wheatear
71. Motacilla alba	White Wagtail
72. Sturnus vulgaris	Starling
73. Passer domesticus	House Sparrow
74. Acanthis flammea	Redpoll (Common Redpoll)
75. Plectrophenax nivalis	Snow Bunting

I have listed these various names with a sense of compulsion even though I am afraid of appearing pendent; for the American in Iceland is likely to find that most of his tour companions and his tour guide will be Europeans who use the European names, and even the scientific names often appear to be unstable. For example, Peterson's "Eastern Guide" shows the Ringed or Semi-palmated Plover as *Charadrius hiaticula semi-palmatus*, but the Fifth A.O.U. check list includes both the Ringed Plover, *Charadrius hiaticular*, and the Semipalmated Plover, *Charadrius semi-palmatus*. Or, Gudmunsson's list may show a bird under its old scientific

name instead of the present preferred name in the A.O.U. list: for example *Procellaria* rather than *Puffinus* for the Manx Shearwater. Or again, the American amateur who has rationalized and finally accepted the Common Merganser as being the American Merganser is hard put to it to accept the Common Teal as being the European Teal. Perhaps the most difficult blow is to discover that he has never seen a Shag despite the fact that in New England he has learned to call Cormorants by that name. These are just a few examples to prove that my intention is to be helpful rather than merely pretentious.

In any event a mere list of the birds cannot convey the continual sense of excitement and exhilaration that pervaded our group: there was so much to see and hear and smell and touch, to photograph, to comment on, to look up in a book, to see what the others pointed out, or to call attention to what they missed! The notes which my wife took spill over a large school notebook of 200 pages; yet she considers them inadequate. Even though most species of birds that we saw recurred in different areas and at different times, they never lost their novelty; nor did the terrain, often grim, ever appear ugly or monotonous.

Loons, grebes, ducks, and swans appeared on almost every one of the countless lakes that our route traversed, especially when the road passed somewhat inland away from immediate sight of a fjord. Once I was able, through the bus window, to take a picture of a red-throated loon on its nest. The horned grebe, which at home we generally see only in its sedate winter dress, was startlingly brilliant.

One is rarely out of sight of a cliff in Iceland. Yet every cliff, except in the northeast desert, even those which are several miles from salt water, has its population of fulmars and kittiwakes. Where the cliffs stand at the edge of the sea so that one is able to approach from the land side and look down the sheer drop, there will be a swirling mass of fulmars, kittiwakes, murre, guillemots and puffins. Here one will usually find at least one great skua coursing about purposefully, the bulkiness of its body and power of its wing strokes unmistakable.

Fulmars are said to be a staple in the diet of the great skua, but one of our party, scanning the sea shore through his telescope from a great cliff, saw a white-tailed eagle overtake and carry off a bird which our observer thought to be a fulmar.

In connection with predators, both the parasitic jaeger and the arctic tern nest in almost every situation where wide, flat lava flows border the sea. I suspect that the eggs and young of the terns constitute an important part of the diet of the jaegers.

Wherever there is an expanse of marshy grass, there will be nests of redshanks, golden plovers, oystercatchers, and whimbrels. As one walks about, there is a continual chorus of complaint from these waders.

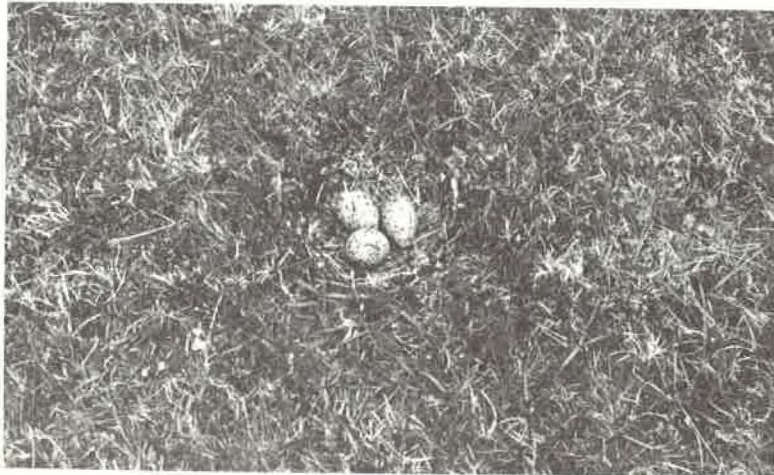


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2.



3.



4.

6.



1. Red (European Gray) Phalarope
in Eve's hand, female trying
to reach chick

2. Normal Red Phalarope nest
with four eggs

3. Orchid

4. Oystercatcher nest

5. Baby Arctic Skua (Parasitic
Jaeger)

6. Geyser

7. Baby Oystercatcher in Eve's
hand

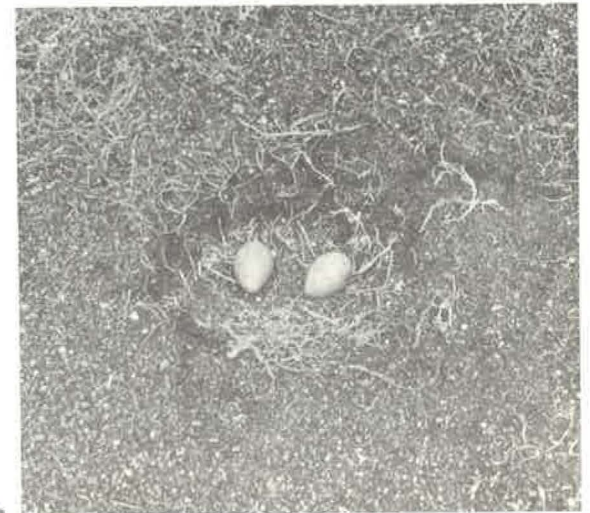
8. Great Skua nest



7.



8.



The broken-wing-act is very frequently performed by the plovers and oystercatchers. Yet, we were continually amazed at the difficulty we had in locating the young, very often when we knew we were so close that we were afraid of treading on them. The redshanks were particularly vociferous, especially in the wettest places, but we never did have one perform the broken-wing-act even when we found a brood of four downy chicks hiding under a hillock of grass.

The young of these waders are also probably taken by the parasitic jaegers, for wherever the shore birds were common, there would be jaegers patrolling back and forth. Once we found a fledgling oystercatcher hiding under a fold of sod while its parents frantically tried to distract us. Only a few rods away, entirely exposed on a dark rock with which it blended perfectly, squatted the velvety sooty chick of a parasitic jaeger. Its angry parent dive-bombed us out of the area.

On the wide gravel flats near Vik we hunted out and photographed the eggs and nest of a pair of great skuas. As we approached, the big birds would rise and fly at rushing speed directly at our heads. They seemed most formidable. I think they could really kill you if they did not, at the last moment, zoom upward, their passage creating a basso vr-o-o-m as they skim by. I have only one blurred picture of this action: even the most iron-nerved photographer must duck and raise his arms defensively.

In contrast to the head-on attack of the great skua, the parasitic jaegers would wait until our backs were turned and then would attack from the side or rear, making a soprano swish as they flashed by. We were told that they have been known to lacerate intruders badly. Near Keflavik we saw a pair of parasitic jaegers chase off a yelping dog.

Speaking of dogs, every farm seems to have at least a couple. Usually they are big. Judging by the actions of the dog that was chased off by the jaegers, it must be that farm dogs take a toll of birds, since Iceland's birds are almost exclusively ground nesters.

In Reykjavik near our hotel at the edge of town, were some marshy fields and a small pond. The near side of the pond was protected by a wire fence, probably more to keep in straying ponies than to keep out people. Privacy, nevertheless, was achieved. Perhaps for this reason, on this little pond we found scaup, teal, widgeon, pochard, tufted ducks, pintails, shovelers, and mallards.

Icelanders are particularly proud of their gyrfalcons. In medieval days only an emperor was entitled to use them in falconry. A single bird might bring a price of three shiploads of cargo. As a consequence they have been almost extirpated, even since Viking days. Our group was lucky enough to find nests twice, both times high on a precipitous cliff.

One of our party, an artist who had a commission to paint a gyrfalcon, spent the whole night at one of the nests to study and sketch the species. He saw one of the parents bring in a duckling to the eyases.

About half mile away from one of the gyrfalcon nests, a pair of merlins had built their eyrie. The merlins seemed puny, and their flight light, compared to the chunky gyrfalcons. Nevertheless, we had a chance to observe the speed of the great falcons once when, high overhead, we noticed a group of laboring black-headed gulls pursuing a gyrfalcon which flew along with steady, slow-moving wing beats. Suddenly, the gyrfalcon put on a burst of speed. Within seconds, he outdistanced the gulls, and continued on his course in a leisurely manner.

We had been told that many of our service men, stationed at Keflavik where the U.S. has an air force base, consider this a most drab billet. They call it "The Rock". I do confess that this portion of Iceland is covered by a particularly bleak expanse of lava. Yet, in this locality we found some of our best sea bird cliffs. From one of these we strained our eyes to see Eldey, the island whence came the last certain record of a living great auk, one taken June 3, 1844.

Near Gardskagi, above Keflavik, was the only area where we found red phalaropes, knots, ringed plovers, and sanderlings. Here, too, lives Hakon Vilhjalmsson, Iceland's only, so far as we know, amateur bird bander. We had a delightful chat with him while his two pretty, little, chubby daughters clung to his hand, and a pet sheep came along to be fed a tid-bit and to be scratched.

Northern phalaropes are to be found nesting at almost every spot where we stopped in Iceland. They are trim birds, with very thin bills. There is obvious justification for their European designation of "red-necked" phalarope. They are found at Gardskagi too, but Vilhjalmsson pointed out a nest of red phalaropes. Usually the nest of this bird will contain four eggs, sometimes pale-blotched, sometimes dark-blotched, but always of the same tint, Vilhjalmsson said. This nest, however, contained six eggs, four dark, two pale. Vilhjalmsson thought that there must have been two females sharing this nest. He was trying to come as often as his arduous farm labors would permit to observe the nest. Reluctantly he left. Icelanders have to work hard during their short summer.

As we strolled about, a pair of red phalarope adults ran about us, crying and trying to induce us to pursue them. The red phalarope has a longer, heavier, bill than the northern, quite an obvious and excellent field mark. After a careful search we found three little chicks hiding. My wife crawled under a fence to them, and they snuggled under her hand. One of the parents, the female probably as it was the brighter colored of the two adults, came even closer, and eventually permitted my wife to stroke it while the bird tried to brood the young ones which were still imprisoned under my wife's hand.

The harlequin duck is generally found in fast moving water such as is likely to occur in the pool at the base of a water-fall. Whenever our bus stopped at a likely fall, the photographers would stampede out. The harlequins were quite wary, however, and they would promptly fly off, generally ending about a quarter mile downstream.

Some days one could hear continuously the humming sound of the snipes. Often as many as four could be seen simultaneously performing their power dive, at the base of which they would rise abruptly in a tight "U", tails spread wide, thus creating their pleasant note.

We were told that there had been a considerable invasion of lapwings the winter of 1962-63. This bird is as typical of the farm country of England as the killdeer is here. We saw only one, not far from the road, between Asbyrgi and Husavik, on the northern-most leg of our journey. Its plaintive cry, so familiar in England, attracted our attention. At last we could make out the bird, and had a chance to study it in our telescopes. It appeared to be nesting or at least searching for a mate. If it did nest, this would be a first for Iceland.

The most considerable forest we saw was at the government reserve at Asbyrgi, in a series of box canyons which, according to local folklore, were formed when Thor's horse put down his hoof. Here we found the winter wren, a much drabber bird than our sub-species: dun colored rather than brown, and with a weak, spiritless call that does not compare with the merry tinkle of our bird.

Redpolls occurred wherever there was a bit of woods. One of the best spots was among the patch of woods at the botanical gardens at Akureyri. The cemetery at Rekjavik has a few trees. Here some of our people succeeded in taking pictures of a redpoll nest.

Our tour had made a series of loops from Reykjavik down to Vik at the southern tip of Iceland and up to Myvatn and eventually Akureyri far to the north, but always hugged the coast, no matter how tortuous the path, since the mountains and ice caps prevent travel in the interior. To see this remnant of the Ice Age, we flew from Akureyri to Reykjavik, across the backbone of the island. The great ice fields spread out below us as far as the eye could see, sparkling in the sun. The crevasses were smoothed out by vast distance, but jagged mountain peaks pierced the white expanse with their black pinnacles. This scene epitomized the power, the majesty, and the beauty of the island.

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