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Icelandic Bird Guide by Johann Oli Hilmarsson

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BOOKS

Icelandic bird guide. By Johann Oli Hilmarsson. 2000 [reprinted five times to 2010]. Iounn, Forlagio, Reykjavik, Iceland. 192 pp. price not indicated.

This book opens with a two-page color photograph of about 40 Black-legged Kittiwake nests with one [usually] or two adults incubating, sleeping, preening or fighting, illustrating the crowded nature of the expanding colonies of one of Iceland's commonest birds. A two-page color aerial photo of most of the country follows, and five more pages precede the introduction, with a dedication, title page, list of photo credits and table of contents.

The next ten pages consist of introductory information outlining the history and intention of the book, acknowledgements, "classification" [chosen grouping of species accounts], a one-page glossary, and an eight page explanation of main species accounts, illustrated by symbols, photographs and diagrams and noting chronological, distribution, natural history, and topographical details included in the species accounts, as appropriate. The topography section uses photos of a perched Gyrfalcon and flying Eurasian Oystercatcher and Black-tailed Godwit to illustrate features. English names used in the text are usually those of Europe, but the two loon and Horned Grebe accounts include both European and North American English names.

Species accounts are divided into six groups, arranged more by habitat use than by taxonomic order: seabirds, waders [shorebirds], gulls and relatives, waterbirds [waterfowl, loons and grebes], land birds [raptors, gallinaceous birds, pigeons and swift] and passerines. Each of these summarizes the group in general, noting both features common to the group and notable exceptions. For example, the "wader" summary notes the variability in bill size and shape, general lack of feeding young (with the notable exception of oystercatchers), rarity of visible differences between genders apart from slight differences in color intensity and/or size and the gender role reversal in color and parental roles of phalaropes. Most full-page accounts include a distribution map, but this is omitted from the Red

Phalarope account because of its decline to an endangered breeding species in the Icelandic portion of its range. The larid section ends with a two-page spread of two photos each of different plumages of eight gull species and Arctic Terns. The waterfowl/loon/grebe sections ends with one-paragraph accounts of "two" named goose and four duck species of less frequent occurrence, including both phases of Snow Geese and Cackling Geese [mentioned within the Canada Goose paragraph, apparently written before Cackling were separated from Canada]. This section ends with two more pages of photographs of females of 18 duck species. The fifth group of species accounts consist of non-passerine land birds [one page accounts of two falcon, one eagle, one owl, one ptarmigan and two pigeon species, and one and a half pages covering three more pigeon, two more owl and one swift species]. Relative scarcity of land birds is attributed primarily to the relative scarcity of woodland habitats and small mammals. All four regularly occurring raptors include other birds and/or fish in their diet. The Gyrfalcon is referred to as being "featured on the old Icelandic coat of arms" (p. 106). White-tailed Eagles were almost extirpated in Iceland and are still considered "Endangered," but are gradually increasing after reaching a low of about 20 pairs. I was interested to learn that Eurasian Collared-Doves, which were first seen in Iceland in 1971, expanded their range through much of Europe relatively recently, presumably at least starting before their widespread "invasion" of much of North America. Iceland's relatively few passerines are covered in the final group of species accounts, with Meadow Pipit considered the commonest. Full accounts are given for nine more, with numbers of broods per year noted in several. Fourteen more are covered in one paragraph accounts on four pages, with banding results not mentioned directly in any, but implied in the indications that part of Iceland's breeding population winters in Scotland and that some Snow Buntings wintering in Iceland come from Greenland.

Descriptions of species emphasize the plumage(s) during the season(s) when the species is in Iceland,

in comparison with other local species present during the same season(s), including size in comparison with other species, similarities in seasonal plumage patterns of flocking associates (such as golden-plovers and Dunlin), calls and prominent behavioral, postural and plumage details. For example, The two storm-petrels that breed in Iceland are most easily distinguished there by flight patterns, with Leach's fluttering like a butterfly in contrast to the more even and direct flight of European (pp. 22 and 23), the comparison of Shag and Great Cormorant (pp. 24-25) includes wider spreading of wings to dry by Shags, "ruffl[ing]" of neck feathers by Great Cormorants but not by Shags and Great Cormorants sometimes wintering on fresh water. The description of Razorbills is in comparison with the two murre species (p. 27), and descriptions of several species include seasonal changes in plumages and bill and/or foot and leg color or size, postures and behavior details while swimming, diving, flying and walking, relative use of pelagic waters by two closely related species, density and degree of gregariousness of colonies, flock density, nesting and flocking associates, nest-sites [including nests built by other species], flight speeds, foods and feeding behavior, courtship displays, population trends and molting habitat. Morphs, such as the distinct "bridled" form of Common Murre are also described. Details also include notes on heights from which a species dives, depths to which a species dives, nesting habitats, colony and flock sizes, differences between species in flock cohesiveness and flight agility, comparative likelihood of flushing from nest, fledging periods, changes in status, and significance of Icelandic populations. For example, 60% of the Icelandic breeding population of gannets breeds at one site, which constitutes the largest breeding colony in the world and the account of Atlantic Puffins notes that Iceland hosts the majority of the world's population, while also detailing its widespread breeding distribution elsewhere. Details of plumage, leg and bill color and size [including gender and seasonal differences and differences in proportion of neck length], life history/behavior and status emphasize those exhibited during the season(s) when the species is in Iceland. Declines in the Dovekie breeding population are attributed at

least partly to rising temperatures. Changes in habitat use, such as expansion to inland nesting sites by Northern Fulmars and Eurasian Oystercatchers are also noted. The two-page summary on shorebirds is followed by 14 one-page accounts of shorebirds that occur in Iceland regularly, followed by one paragraph accounts of seven shorebird, two rallid and one heron species of rare or vagrant occurrence. Of these, Northern Lapwing had nested about 15 times, Eurasian Woodcock is suspected of breeding, but no nest has yet been found, Eurasian Coot nests have been found in Iceland, but young are not known to have hatched there and Water Rail formerly bred, but no nest has been discovered since 1963, with wetland drainage and mink predation believed to preclude subsequent nesting. Predator protection obtained by waterfowl and shorebird species by nesting in Black-headed Gull and Arctic Tern colonies in Iceland corresponds with similar observations in larid colonies in Finland, Canada and elsewhere (reviewed by Evans 1970, McNicholl 1982 and elsewhere). Hilmarsson notes that Black-headed Gulls colonized Iceland during the 20th century and is less a seabird than kittiwakes. The larid chapter ends with a page of four short accounts of two less common gull species and two uncommon jaeger species, including both color phases of the jaegers, followed by the two-page gull/tern plumage summary mentioned above. The "waterbirds" section with a two-page photo of a Harlequin Duck pair, followed by a two-page general summary of Iceland's 23 regularly breeding waterfowl (one swan, five goose, 16 duck and one shelduck species), two loon species and one grebe species.

In addition to full species accounts, comments on the extinct Great Auk (last recorded on Eldey Island, Iceland in 1844) are included within the account of Razorbill, Sooty and Great shearwaters are covered within the Manx Shearwater account, occasional breeding by Wood Sandpipers within the Redshank account and Black Tern within the Arctic Tern account. The Herring Gull description features comparisons with Glaucous and Lesser Black-backed Gull, mentioning Herring x Glaucous Gulls since Herring Gulls colonized Iceland in the 1920s, but the hybrids are not described under either species or in the general introduction to larids

and jaegers. Mew Gulls colonized northern Iceland in 1936 and southwestern Iceland in 1955. On the other hand, Great Black-backed Gulls have declined and range-expanding Pink-footed Geese are encroaching on Greylag Goose habitat. The Greater White-fronted Goose population has also increased in recent years after "bottoming out" in 1980. Northern Shovelers, first known to breed in Iceland in 1934, have been expanding their breeding range since. Northern Shovelers, first known to breed in Iceland in 1934, have been expanding their breeding range since and Tufted Duck has become the second most common breeding diving duck since first breeding in the late 19th century, with only the Common Eider more numerous.

The species accounts are followed by a page and one-half essay on using all aspects of a bird's appearance, vocalizations and behavior, especially in comparison with other species, to identify them. The next 26-page section discusses eggs and young of the main species covered in the text, in the same groups, with a general summary of each, including photos of nests and eggs, followed by average life-size photos of the eggs of those main species that nest in Iceland. The text in each includes notes on clutch size, variations in markings, shape and other features of eggs within the group, as well as general notes on parental care of young. A one-page account of birdwatching in Iceland briefly covers techniques, noteworthy locations and regulations. Another one-page essay covers banding, as outlined in the next paragraph. Another page of statistics indicates that about 345 species had been observed there by 1998, when 73 bred regularly and another 26 once or more. One breeding species (Great Auk) has become extinct, while two others (Water Rail and Dovekie) appear to no longer breed there. A table divides the 345 species into 11 status categories, and a comment notes that birdlife is changing constantly (as in most areas). A five-page checklist of the 345 species follows, with a note that about three more are added each year. Most of these are listed in the taxonomic order recognized in Europe, but five (including Black-throated Green Warbler) are listed at the end in a category of escapes or suspected ship-assisted vagrants. The book ends with lists of associations, publications,

photo credits, a multilingual list of bird names, indices of English and Latin names and a back cover synopsis.

The page on "Bird-ringing in Iceland" outlines its history [starting in 1921, organized in 1932, with nearly half a million birds of 115 species banded by the time the book was published, and about 27,000 recovered, 4000 from abroad. Types of data collected, types of bands and other markers used and cooperative efforts among banding agencies of different countries. Icelandic-banded Black-legged Kittiwakes have been observed in Greenland, Newfoundland and Europe —from the Kola Peninsula south to Gibraltar. Banding recoveries or sightings of color-marked individuals are implied in statements that Icelandic gannets have been observed in winter in Greenland and south along the Atlantic coast as far south as Africa, that a number of Icelandic Black Guillemots winter in Greenland, while several from the High Arctic winter in Iceland, that most Icelandic-breeding Thick-billed Murres apparently winter off southwestern Greenland, that most Icelandic [presumably breeding] Dunlins winter in western Africa, whereas Dunlins "from Greenland" pass through Iceland in spring and fall, that large numbers of Ringed Plovers breeding in Greenland migrate through Iceland during spring and fall, that some Icelandic Purple Sandpipers winter in the British Isles, that Ruddy Turnstones breeding in northern Canada and Greenland stage during both spring and autumn migrations in Iceland, that most Icelandic-breeding Common Redshanks also winter in Iceland, but others do so in Great Britain and other parts of western Europe, that some immature Icelandic Great Black-backed Gulls winter in Great Britain and the Faroe islands, and that most non-breeding Pink-footed Geese and most breeding Barnacle Geese from Greenland pass through Iceland. Similarly, the statement that most Icelandic-breeding Gadwall and Eurasian Wigeon "winter in British Isles" (Gadwall mostly in Ireland, wigeon mostly Scotland), with some observed in "North America, Siberia and south to the Mediterranean" must be based on banded birds. The statements that some Icelandic-breeding Long-tailed Ducks winter in southwestern Greenland and others "from more northerly regions" winter in

Iceland and that some of the 100,000-200,000 Common Eider drakes that winter off Iceland are "from E. Greenland," and that "part of the [Icelandic-breeding] population of Red-breasted Merganser-winters in [the] British Isles" must also be based on sightings or recoveries of banded birds. Rust-staining on Whooper Swans adds to the complexity of waterfowl plumages and molts. The complexity of Long-tailed Duck molt is mentioned, but not all plumages are described. Unknown life history details that could be solved by encounters with bands, color markings and/or transmitters include wintering areas of Northern Shelduck, which have been nesting in Iceland since 1990.

I did not notice any outright errors or significant omissions, although coots should be added to the list of birds that become flightless by losing "all their flight feathers at once" under "moulting, moult" in the glossary (p. 9) and the statement that male Gadwall "is quiet" implies that they do not vocalize rather than that their call is quieter than the 'loud quack" (p. 81) of the female. Also the rarity of vocalizations by Short-eared Owls except on breeding grounds does not correspond with my observations at Vancouver, British Columbia's airport, where wintering Short-ears often vocalize when interacting with both Northern Harriers and conspecifics. Hilmarsson's description of the complexity of molt patterns of larids in Iceland suggests that the term "semi-precocial," as generally used in North America, would better describe larid development in Iceland, rather than the "precocial" label that he applies to them. Banders of the gull species that occur in Iceland will also need more detailed coverage of their complex array of plumages to classify their ages adequately. Reference to Greylag Geese wintering "manly in Scotland" presumably was intended to refer to "mainly." Much of the writing is evocative. For example, after very effective descriptions of plumages and behaviors of Harlequin Ducks, Hilmarsson describes their breeding habitat as "fast-flowing fresh-water rivers and lake outlets which abound in Blackfly." The many photos greatly enhance the book and the multi-lingual list (Icelandic, Latin, European and North American

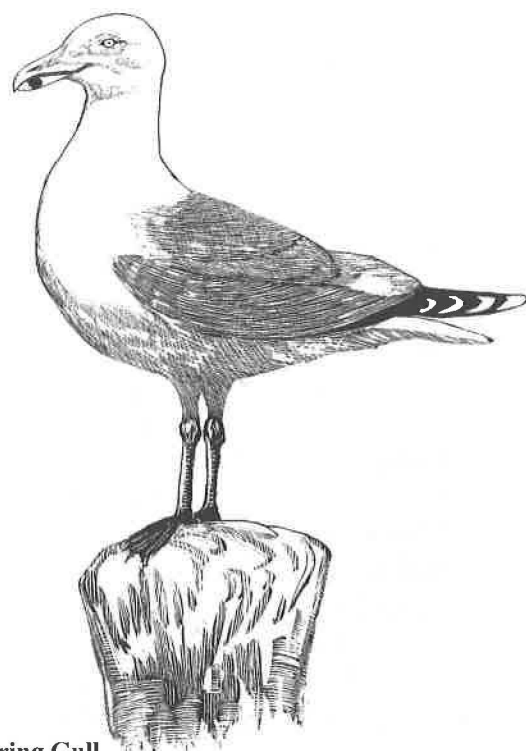
English and nine other European languages) makes it a useful addition to the luggage of travellers to several European contries.

Thanks to my niece, Heather Zueff, for sending me a copy of this book after visiting Iceland in 2013. Reading it for review during a nine-week hospital stay helped endure a difficult period.

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Herring Gull
 by George West