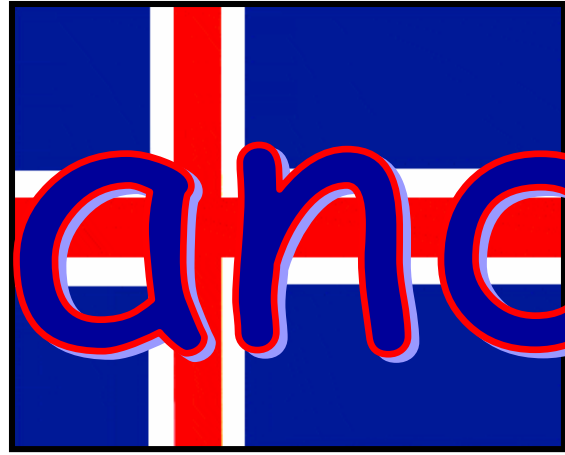


# Iceland



9th - 12th June 2005

## **Background**

Paul Stewart originally mentioned the possibility of a cheap trip to Iceland many months ago, using a combination of our old favourite 'EasyJet' and a budget carrier, Iceland Express who fly out of Stansted.

Enthusiasm grew then waned, eventually Paul decided it was time to book up, the flights costs from Stansted had already increased. By the time word got around eight had signed up for the trip, some of the group were veterans of recent trips to southern Spain and the Czech Republic, others had travelled together before but not as part of this group, soon we were nine as John Rutter joined in. It typical style Paul 'Cass' Cassells joined the trip at the last minute, we now numbered ten.

Paul Stewart – trip organizer  
Paul Cassells (Cass)  
Tony 'father Ted' Crilley  
Peter Francis  
Andy McLevy (ADMc)  
Iain Robson  
Les Robson  
John Rutter  
Stewart Sexton  
Tony Stewart

Some of the group had fears about travelling with the 'Cresswell Mafia' (Stewart, John and ADMc) who had a fearsome reputation for dissing the records of others in meetings of the Cresswell Pond Hide Rarities Committee, but their fears were unfounded.

## **Thursday 9<sup>th</sup> June 2005**

The group assembled at Newcastle Airport at 15.00 to check in for our 16.35 Easyjet flight to Stansted, the flight left on time (with the legendary Sir Bobby Robson onboard) and we duly passed through Stansted and onto our 20.40 Iceland Express flight to Keflavik. After a smooth flight we arrived in Keflavik, a small town not far from the capital, Reykjavik. After clearing customs and baggage return we collected our vehicle, which on initial inspection appeared to be 'just the jurb' (in Ashington), a four-wheel-drive beast of a Ford mini-bus. The immediate enthusiasm for the vehicle soon turned sour as we embarked on our 6 ½ drive to Akureyri as Tony had to try to keep the thing pointing in a straight line and on the road.

First birds to be seen as we drove through the daylight (it was 1.30 am!) were redwing, arctic tern, golden plover, black-headed, great black-backed, common and glaucous gulls. Passing through the suburbs, the first of four arctic foxes of the journey crossed our path, these were all in different stages of moult, from dark through mottled to virtually white. Other birds logged on the drive included; redshank, snipe, oystercatcher, red-necked phalarope, mallard and tufted duck. At about the halfway stage (no one was quit sure of the exact place due to exhaustion, somewhere near Vermahlid we think) we came across our first target species, Harlequin Duck, when four were spotted in a fast flowing roadside stream. The birds gave superb views but we didn't hang around too long, we knew there would be more and everyone was very tired. We arrived at Akureyri at about 6.30 am and checked into our hostel accommodation. We were all absolutely knackered when we arrived even though we all managed to grab some sleep on the journey..... even the driver ( seriously well done to Tony for driving the whole way).

### **Friday 10<sup>th</sup> June 2005**

After a few hours sleep we reassembled in the foyer, downed a quick breakfast and headed out via the supermarket towards Lake Myvatyn. Our first stop of the day was where the road crossed the end of the Eyja Fjord close to Akureyri, the fjord shallowed here and was popular with arctic terns as well as gulls and waders (redshank, oystercatcher, dunlin, black-tailed godwit, red-necked phalarope). A pale-phase arctic skua and a red-throated diver were present as were many eider duck. Next stop was Jos Vatn a small roadside lake. 2 great northern divers were the centre of our attention, giving cracking views for the digiscopers among us. Meadow pipits, redwing and a whimbrel were also seen here.



*Great Northern Diver (Stewart Sexton)*



**The Beast' at lake Jos Vatn (Iain Robson)**

Next stop was the Godafoss. According to the Saga of Christianity the formerly pagan chieftain Thorgeir threw the wooden images of the pagan gods into the waterfall after Christianity had been accepted in the Parliamentary Plains in the year 1000. The name of the waterfall, The Waterfall of the Gods, is derived from this event.



***Godafoss (Iain Robson)***

An un-named pool near Godafoss produced our second target species – barrow's goldeneye where a pair were present giving excellent views. Also on this cracking little pool were over 10 red-necked phalarope, 5 whooper swan, dunlin, redshank, arctic tern, 4 whimbrel, 2 black-tailed godwit and a raven flew overhead.

Heading for lake Myvatn we stopped at the Laxa river, a legendary site for harlequin duck. Bang on cue several birds made their way down the fast flowing river, unfortunately we could not hang around long as a swarm of annoying black flies had descended on us.

We continued towards lake Myvatn, as soon as we stepped from the bus we were plagued by yet more annoying black flies, only this time,

millions of them, they did not seem to bite, but it was physically impossible to watch birds. ADMc and I moved away from the group and our isolation seemed to free us from the flies for a while, while I ate lunch by the shore, 2 red-necked phalaropes swam passed my toes! Myvatn translates as 'midge lake' after the hordes of gnats that live there – it certainly didn't disappoint. We decided to retreat from the lake, beaten by the flies, towards Husavik, a fishing port to the north.

We crossed a bizarre desert on the way to Husavik called Holasandur, this had been fertile birch woodland in the 1700's until unsuitable land use weakened the vegetation causing desertification. A truly strange place and bird-free zone



**Holasandur Desert (Iain Robson)**

We stopped at a small pool at Sandur on the outskirts of Husavik, A pair of nesting great-northern diver were on an island, along with wigeon with young and 3 little gull (1 adult and 2 immature). There were also huge black-headed gull and arctic tern colonies. We moved on to Husavik town, which is dominated by its fishing harbour and fish processing plants, although the town behind was a traditional Icelandic settlement. An outflow from a fish plant had attracted an incredible

number of fulmar, we estimated that there was at least 500 feeding on bits of fish coming from the pipe. Also around the harbour were a bonxie, 3 glaucous gull, and over 20 eider.



**Hundreds of fulmar at the fish plant, Husavik. (Iain Robson)**

We began our return to Akureyri, stopping briefly at a small pond (smaarl purnd in Ashington) at the junction of the 85 and 845 roads near Hafraleakur. Despite being only 10m across, the pond had a pair of barrows goldeneye. 2 pair of tufted duck, 2 pair of long-tailed duck, 2 pair of greylag, a pair of gadwall and 8 red-necked phalarope.



**Long-tailed Duck at Hafraleakur (Paul Stewart)**

Lethargy had once more set in so we returned to Akureyri where more harlequin ducks were spotted only a couple of hundred metres from the digs on a fast flowing stream.

The decision (largely because of the need to sell all of one's possessions to afford dinner in Iceland, never mind booze) was made to obtain some take-away pizzas from the domino joint next-door to the digs and sup our duty free booze in the hostel. Rutter and Sexton had gone on the hunt for lager, quickly realising that the strongest alcohol available over the counter was only 2.5 %. Anything stronger had to be bought from a government run bottle shop, which, if we could find it, wouldn't be open anyway. A reasonably early night was required, as an early start was needed to return to Husavik to meet our guide for the following day.

### **Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> June 2005**

After a quick breakfast, we headed off in the beast back to Husavik to meet our guide for the day, Gauker. Paul had emailed Gauker some time before our trip and he had volunteered to show us around the northern part of Iceland and hopefully get us gyrfalcon and brunnich's



guillemot. Gauker holds the 'big day' record for Iceland – 76 species! We met Guaker at the same pools near Husavik as we had been to the previous day, 2 iceland gulls and 2 glaucous gulls joined yesterdays gang. First stop was the Tjornes Cliffs, which is a breeding spot for Puffin (gyr food). There were many thousands of puffin as well as four bonxie, the ubiquitous glauc and many fulmar. We pushed on, stopping briefly at the Lon Estuary by the bridge, there were a few waders here including purple sandpiper, sanderling and ringed plover. Up to 10 dolphins were spotted offshore, identification was not proved – white-beaked or risso's?? Only a couple of miles further we stopped at a small lake, Vikingavatn, were we saw 10 slavonian grebes, our first snow bunting of the trip and the usual waders, arctic terns and gulls as well as 15 scaup and raven.



**Whimbrel (Stewart Sexton)**

A bit further along the road we stopped at an amazing place called Asbyrgi, a true natural wonder, it is a 3½ km long canyon with up to 100 m high walls. The canyon is partly wooded, mainly with birch, willow, larch and fur. It was created by two catastrophic flood waves from the icecap Vatnajokull far in the south, the first one about 8-10 thousand and the second about 3000 years ago.

According to the mythology Wooden, the chief pagan god, was once riding his eight legged horse around the world and it put down one of its legs and created this hoof like expression in the landscape. A road lies almost all the way to its bottom. Fulmars inhabit the cliffs in great numbers, we also had a pair of merlin flying around and some interesting passerines in the woodland including wren of the *islandicus* race which is considerably larger than the nominate and the Icelandic race of mealy redpoll, *Carduelis flammea 'islandica'* which is bigger and darker than the nominate, six white wagtails were also present.

Next stop was by the coast at Valthjosstaoir, were, to the relief of 'raptor man' Peter, we found our first gyr falcon – the bird was seen at close quarters, it was pale, but not pale morph, just a pale-dark morph bird, a second darker bird was also seen heading in the other direction, just like buses ..... Only one target species left – the pressure was on Gauker. This stop also yielded 6 harlequin ducks, 12 red-throated divers, bonxie, arctic skua, wheatear and (another) huge arctic tern colony. This area of Iceland is like one massive Inner Farne. A small pond nearby held 7 red-throated divers, 10 wigeon and 20 scaup and a large tern and gull colony.

We drove on to the Melrakkasletta peninsular where many glaucous gulls, snow bunting and ptarmigan were spotted along the way. The weather conditions had turned for the worse, strong winds lashing cold drizzle our way did not make for pleasant birding, we decided to try the guilliemot colonies later to see if the weather would improve.



**Ptarmigan (Stewart Sexton)**

We moved further along the coast to Blikalon, where Gauker had previously seen a female stellar's eider, a bit of scanning through a small flock of eider soon produced the stellar's, an unexpected lifer for many of the group. Then to the most northerly tip of mainland Iceland, literally a stone's throw from the Arctic circle, Hraunhafnartangi. One of the first birds to be seen through the rain was grey plover in summer plumage, this bird got Gauker quite excited, they are seemingly quite rare in these parts, would we see an Icelandic twitch? Another gyrfalcon was spotted here flying low over a small pond, this was a very dark bird. Other waders here included turnstone, sanderling, dunlin (200+), oystercatcher, knot and red-necked phalarope. Snow bunting, ptarmigan, mallard, arctic skua and 4 glaucous gulls were also there with 1000's of arctic tern and black-headed gulls. A dead Brunnich's guillemot was found on the shore, would we need to revive it for a tick?



**The dead Brunnich's Guillemot (Stewart Sexton)**

We moved on to the *town* of Raufarhofn, a very strange place indeed, but the garage was open so we stocked up on ket and headed back to get fully-brunniched up. A long drive along a very narrow track brought us to Nupskatla, from here we would head along a bund of huge stones which kept in a saline lake to a point, Raudinupur, where we hoped brunnichs guillemots would be on the offshore stacks. On arriving at the point, the advanced party flushed up a magnificent gyr falcon which sped of carrying a prey item, Investigating the pile of feathers, we could tell that it was an auk which had met it's maker, probably from the adjacent colony to which we soon turned our scopes. A brunnich's was quickly located, then another and another....Bingo! The fourth target species was in the bag. We counted at least 30 through the drizzle clinging onto the offshore stack with common guillemots, puffin, razorbill, kittiwake and fulmar.

The happy, but cold and wet, gang descended back to the beast parked at the farm very satisfied with the days birding. We dropped Gauker back at Husavik, thanking him very much indeed for getting us the birds. He seemed to enjoy himself but maybe had to change his underpants as a result of the narrow roads, un-drivable van and well-dodgy driver.

Driving back to the digs Cass had another Gyr out of the window but he decided to suppress it! On return to Akureyri the harlequins were still on the river in the town, SS made a pledge to head off first thing in the morning to get some pics. Back to Domino's and more duty-free we retired to bed, knackered but happy.

**Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> June 2005**



**Harlequin Ducks in Akureyri town centre (Stewart Sexton)**

A 6 am start for a very long drive back to Keflavik to catch our 15.50 flight. The drive to Keflavik yielded many more whoopers and greylags, tern and gull colonies as well as harlequin ducks, divers and ravens. We stopped *en route* near Borgarnes to view an island where Gauker had informed us there was a regular white-tailed eagle, with a scope trained on the island we all got distant views of the bird. Making good time we arrived at Keflavik at 12.30, giving us an hour or so to explore the Gardhur area. Gauker had told us of a long-staying drake American black duck at some ponds in the village. The ponds were soon located and the black duck found, talk of a hybrid was soon squashed (by those that still needed black duck) and it was agreed that the bird was the

real thing and was duly ticked. From the pond we could see 100's of manx shearwater just offshore, starling was also present which are scarce on Iceland. We went out to the lighthouse where seabirds included more manxies, the regular gulls, eider, puffin, arctic skua and red-breasted merganser.



### **Ponds at Gardhur (Google Earth)**

The beast was returned to the depot, we checked in and the last of the Icelandic currency was spent on some celebratory beers, as we had only bought pizzas and some ket in the last three days, we could celebrate in style. Everything on the return journey went smoothly, landing at Stansted on time to catch our 2135 Easyjet flight to Newcastle.

We had cleared up on our target species, got two added bonuses in stellars eider and black duck and had thoroughly good time seeing some spectacular birds in a truly spectacular country. The going had been tough at times with little sleep and lots of driving. A similar trip is advertised in the birding press for £1250, we had done the whole trip for less than £350 each.

Thanks to Paul Stewart for organising the trip, Tony Stewart for sharing the driving and Gauker for getting us the birds.



**Left to right.** Paul 'Cass' Cassells, Stewart Sexton, Andy (ADMc) McLevy, Paul Stewart, Peter Francis, Iain Robson, Tony 'Father Ted' Crilley, John Rutter, Les Robson, Tony Stewart (Photo: Tony Stewart)

### Details

Flights:

Outbound

1635 Newcastle – Stansted with Easyjet (EZY286)

2040 Stansted - Keflavik with Iceland Express (AEU156)

Return

1550 Keflavik – Stansted with Iceland Express (AEU155)

2135 Stansted – Newcastle with Easyjet (EZY295)

Flights costs total £161.10 per person

Easyjet <http://www.easyjet.com/>

Iceland Express <http://www.icelandexpress.com/>

Accommodation:

Stórholt Youth Hostel, Akureyri. Email [storholt@nett.is](mailto:storholt@nett.is)

Telephone ( 354 ) 462 3657 / 894 4299

Cost £50 per person without bedding. The Hostel was very comfortable, sharing rooms of two, three and four. There was a comfortable common room and well stocked kitchen.

Vehicle:

Ford 4X4 minibus from Hertz [www.hertz.com](http://www.hertz.com). The vehicle served its purpose but was very difficult to drive on the uneven and narrow roads, it felt very unstable at speeds of over 55mph.

Guide:

Paul contacted Gauker Hjartarson via the Icelandic Bird recorder.

Gauker was excellent value at 10 krona per person.

Cover prepare by Tony Stewart. Report prepared by Iain Robson.

[iain\\_robson@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:iain_robson@tiscali.co.uk)

### Classified List

#### **Whooper Swan** *Cygnus olor*

Seen on all days, generally in nesting pairs on any roadside water.

#### **Greylag Goose** *Anser anser*

Seen on all days, often in pairs but also in larger groups on all water bodies.

#### **Eurasian Wigeon** *Anas Penelope*



Seen on all days with 8 at Vikingavatn and 6 at Holl on the 11<sup>th</sup>.

**Eurasian Teal** *Anas crecca*

Eight were at a pool near Godafoss and were present at Lon on the 10<sup>th</sup>.

**Mallard** *Anas platyrhynchos*

Noted as present at many sites on all days.

**American Black Duck** *Anas rubripes*

One drake at Gardhur ponds near Keflavik on the 12<sup>th</sup>

**Northern Pintail** *Anas acuta*

12 were recorded at Hrafnhafnartangi on the 11<sup>th</sup>.

**Northern Shoveler** *Anas clypeata*

Two were at Vikingavatn on the 11<sup>th</sup>.

**Tufted Duck** *Aythya fuligula*

Noted as numerous at Vikingavatn on the 11<sup>th</sup> and seen in varying numbers at most other waterbodies.

**Greater Scaup** *Aythya marila*

15 were noted at Vikingavatn on the 11<sup>th</sup>.

**Common Eider** *Somateria mollissima*

Noted as numerous at Hrafnhafnartangi on the 11<sup>th</sup> and as present at most coastal locations throughout, 20 were at Husavik harbour on the 10<sup>th</sup>.

**Steller's Eider** *Polysticta stelleri*

One female was at Hrafnhafnartangi on the 11<sup>th</sup> with Common Eiders.

**Long-tailed Duck** *Clangula hyemalis*

Noted at several pools including four at Hafnalaskur on the 10<sup>th</sup>.

**Barrow's Goldeneye** *Bucephala islandica*

Four (two pair) were at Hafralaskur and two at a pond near Godafoss on the 10<sup>th</sup>.

**Red-breasted Merganser** *Mergus serrator*

Noted as present at Holl on the 11<sup>th</sup> and at Gardhur Lighthouse on the 12<sup>th</sup>.

**Rock Ptarmigan** *Lagopus muta*

Common on the Melrakkasletta peninsular on the 11<sup>th</sup> and between Akuryri and Husavik on the 12<sup>th</sup>.

**Red-throated Diver** *Gavia stellata*

Twelve were at Valthjofsstavir on the 11<sup>th</sup> and present at Eyja Fjord, Akuyeri on the 10<sup>th</sup>.

**Great Northern Diver** *Gavia immer*

A nesting pair were at Lon, near Husavik on the 10<sup>th</sup> and noted as present at Lake Jos Vatn also on the 10<sup>th</sup>.

**Slavonian Grebe** *Podiceps auritus*

10 were at Vikingavatn on the 10<sup>th</sup> and various other sites throughout.

**Manx Shearwater** *Puffinus puffinus*

Over 700 flying offshore from Gardhur ponds near Keflavik on the 12<sup>th</sup> and from the nearby lighthouse.

**Northern Gannet** *Morus bassanus*

Noted as present at Valthjofsstavir on Melrakkasletta on the 11<sup>th</sup>.

**White-tailed Eagle** *Haliaeetus albicilla*

One near Borgarnes on the 12<sup>th</sup>.

**Merlin** *Falco columbarius*

Two were at Asbyrgi on the 11<sup>th</sup>.

**Gyr Falcon** *Falco rusticolus*

2 (one very pale bird) were at Valthjofsstavir, one at Hrafnhafnartangi and one at Raudinupur carrying a prey item on the 11<sup>th</sup>.

**Ringed Plover** *Charadrius hiaticula*

Noted as present at Lon Estuary on the 11<sup>th</sup>.

**European Golden Plover** *Pluvialis apricaria*

Present virtually everywhere, even on roundabouts in the road at Akureyri.

**Grey Plover** *Pluvialis squatarola*

A single adult in breeding plumage was present at Hrafnhafnartangi on the 11<sup>th</sup>.

**Red Knot** *Calidris canutus*

14 were noted at Hrafnhafnartangi on the 11<sup>th</sup>.

**Sanderling** *Calidris alba*

Noted as present at the Lon Estuary and two at Hrafnhafnartangi on the 11<sup>th</sup>.

**Purple Sandpiper** *Calidris maritima*

Noted as present at the Lon Estuary on the 11<sup>th</sup>.

**Dunlin** *Calidris alpina*

Over 200 were recorded at Hrafnhafnartangi on the 11<sup>th</sup> and in smaller numbers elsewhere.

**Common Snipe** *Gallinago gallinago*

Five were at a small pond near Godafoss on the 10<sup>th</sup> and at Vikingavatn on the 11<sup>th</sup>. Noted as present between Keflavik and Akureyri on the 9<sup>th</sup>.

**Black-tailed Godwit** *Limosa limosa*

Three were at the Lon Estuary, with two's at Eyja Fjord, Akureyri and near Godafoss on the 10<sup>th</sup>.

**Whimbrel** *Numenius phaeopus*

Seen everywhere throughout the trip

**Common Redshank** *Tringa tetanus*

Seen regularly at many locations throughout the trip.

**Ruddy Turnstone** *Arenaria interpres*

Seven were present at Hrafnhafnartangi on the 11<sup>th</sup>.

**Red-necked Phalarope** *Phalaropus lobatus*

Largest count was 25 at Holl on the 11th. 10 were Near Godafoss on the 10<sup>th</sup> and eight at Hafalaskur also on the 10<sup>th</sup> with smaller numbers at numerous other locations.

**Arctic Skua** *Stercorarius parasiticus*

Five were noted at Hrafnhafnartangi on the 11<sup>th</sup> with varying numbers at Valthjofsstavir, Gardhur Lighthouse and Eyja Fjord, Akureyri.

**Great Skua** [Bonxie] *Stercorarius skua*

Four were at Tjornes Cliffs on the 11<sup>th</sup> with smaller numbers at five other locations.

**Little Gull** *Larus minutus*

Three were at Lon on the 10<sup>th</sup>.

**Common (Mew) Gull** *Larus canus*

Noted as common at Eyja Fjord, Akureyri on the 10<sup>th</sup> and present between Keflavik and Akureyri on the 9<sup>th</sup>.

**Lesser Black-backed Gull** *Larus fuscus*

Noted as numerous at Eyja Fjord on the 10<sup>th</sup> and around Gardhur lighthouse on the 12<sup>th</sup>.

**Herring Gull** *Larus argentatus*

Noted as present in Husavik harbour on the 10<sup>th</sup>

**Iceland Gull** *Larus glaucoides*

Two were in Husavik Harbour on the 10<sup>th</sup>.

**Glaucous Gull** *Larus hyperboreus*

Noted as present at numerous locations including four at Hrafnhafnartangi on the 11<sup>th</sup> and three in Husavik Harbour on the 10<sup>th</sup>.

**Great Black-backed Gull** *Larus marinus*

Present at all coastal locations.

**Black-legged Kittiwake** *Rissa tridactyla*

Numerous at Raudinupur offshore stacks and Hrafnhafnartangi on the 11<sup>th</sup> also noted at sea from Gardhur lighthouse on the 12<sup>th</sup>.

**Arctic Tern** *Sterna paradisaea*

Large breeding colonies of 1000's of birds were seen at Valthjofsstavir, Vikingavatn, Hrafnhafnartangi. Also noted at all coastal locations.

**Common Guillemot** *Uria aalge*

Hundreds were at the breeding colony at Raudinupur offshore stacks on the 11<sup>th</sup>, noted at sea at several locations.

**Brunnich's Guillemot** *Uria lomvia*

Up to 30 birds were present at the Raudinupur offshore stacks on the 11<sup>th</sup>.

**Razorbill** *Alca torda*

Ten were at the breeding stacks at Raudinupur on the 11<sup>th</sup>.

**Atlantic Puffin** *Fratercula arctica*

Thousands were at the Tjornes Cliffs breeding colony, present in large numbers at Valthjofsstavir and Raudinupur on the 11th and at Gardhur Lighthouse, Nr Keflavik on the 12<sup>th</sup>.

**Meadow Pipit** *Anthus pratensis*

Noted at various locations throughout.

**White Wagtail** *Motacilla alba*

Two were at Asbyrgi on the 11th

**Wren** *Troglodytes troglodytes islandicus*

One was seen at Asbyrgi on the 11<sup>th</sup>.

**Northern Wheatear** *Oenanthe oenanthe*

Present at Valthjofsstavir on the 11<sup>th</sup>.

**Redwing** *Turdus iliacus*

Common throughout. Numerous at Asbyrgi and six at Vikingavatn on the 11<sup>th</sup>. Also noted as present at most other locations.

**Common Raven** *Corvus corax*

One was near Godafoss on the 10<sup>th</sup> and present at Holl on the 11<sup>th</sup>.

**Common Starling** *Sturnus vulgaris*

Seen only at Gardhur near Keflavik on the 12<sup>th</sup>.

**Common Redpoll** *Carduelis flammea islandica*

Four were seen at Asbyrgi on the 11<sup>th</sup>.

**Snow Bunting** *Plectrophenax nivalis*

Seen at numerous locations including Hravnhafnartangi, Raudinupur and Vikingavatn on the 11th