

## **Birding in the Faroe Islands.**

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The eighteen Faroe Islands lie in the North Atlantic, roughly half way between Norway and Iceland. Though they share their latitude with South Greenland, they are washed by the Gulf Stream, which gives them relatively warm winters and cool summers, and a climate described as maritime sub-arctic that brings strong winds and frequent rain. If you are willing to accept the vagaries of the weather, then there is great potential, both for spotting resident birds and the many accidentals that blow in across the seas. It was largely an interest in the birds of the Faroes that had drawn me here as well as David Lindo, one of my companions, also known as The Urban Birder.

Having booked into Hotel Hafnia in Torshavn, the smallest capital city in Europe, we strolled down to Tinganes, a small peninsula jutting into the harbour, which houses Logting, the Faroese parliament. On reaching the rocky point, and despite a thin drizzle and cool wind, we were able to photograph some black guillemots and eider ducks that bobbed about in the harbour. Herring gulls and a hooded crow scavenged on the unattended boats.



There are an estimated two million breeding pairs of sea birds on the islands. About half of these are puffins, while the rest consist of kittiwakes, guillemots, razorbills, fulmars, shags, skuas, terns, gannets, shearwaters and the world's largest colony of storm petrels. Some of these, such as the black guillemots, are a subspecies, endemic to the islands. The only breeding sea ducks are red-breasted mergansers and eiders, the latter, also a sub-species, being perhaps the most abundant bird that we saw during our



short stay.



The following day, we drove to Vestmanna, on the largest island, Stremoy, and boarded the ferry that would take us along the base of the western cliffs. Black guillemots and eiders floated in the harbour along with a pair of red-throated divers.





We sailed out of the sound into the open sea, clinging to the northern cliffs which, though steep, were not vertical, and so held grass, which was being cropped by many sheep, some of which ventured down to the water's edge. As we progressed, the cliffs became steeper, more rocky and taller, approaching 700 metres in height. Seals lay on the rocks and kittiwakes crowded onto tiny ledges. We had come here before the nesting season had fully arrived, so the numbers of birds on the cliffs were tiny compared with what they would become in a few weeks. Nevertheless, puffins, shags and guillemots flew low over the waves and a small raft of razorbills bobbed close to the cliffs. A great skua flew past, perhaps looking to make a meal of an early chick.

We passed small caves and navigated narrow channels between the cliffs and huge, shark-fin stacks. We approached a cave that looked ridiculously small, but sailed into it and through an archway, to emerge in a gully, the walls of which appeared to impend over the boat. The cliffs reached higher as we progressed. Cameras clicked incessantly. After about an hour-and-a-quarter, we reached the limit of our trip and turned back toward Vestmanna.



Not all of the birds in the Faroes cling to the coastal cliffs. Indeed the country's national bird, the oystercatcher is more likely to be seen on the hills than by the shore. Other birds, such as the resident starlings and wrens, have been isolated on these islands for sufficient generations to have evolved into distinct sub-species, both slightly larger and of darker plumage than their continental mainland relatives. The



only resident bird-of-prey is the merlin.



We spent the night in Gjaargardur guest house, in Gjogv, a pretty village with a dramatic harbour guarded by cliff-nesting fulmars, in the north of Esturoy island. The next day, David and I accepted the offer of a trip with bird expert, Silas Olofson. To meet him, we were driven through an undersea tunnel to the island of Bordoy and the town of Klaksvik, the second largest on the archipelago.

Before setting out on our trip, Silas brought us into his home to show us his wall of photographs of rarities he had discovered on the islands. These included a long-billed dowitcher and a greater yellowleg.

He informed us that the eastern island of Svinoy was his favourite place to study birds. "This is where the eastern migrants first come ashore before they disperse. American migrants tend to stay where they arrive. You need to know where the birds go in order to find them." He was proud of the fact that he had made a number of first sightings in the Faroes. Unfortunately, the low cloud, drizzle and rough sea crossing would preclude a visit to Svinoy that day. Instead, he took us through some single-carriageway tunnels, with occasional passing places, and on up to Vidareidi, the most northerly village in the Faroes.

Villingsdalsfjall mountain rose gently above the village to a height of 844 metres, before plunging down the Enniberg sea cliffs, the second tallest in Europe. Despite the increasingly heavy rain, we ventured a short distance up the hillside. David and I thought it was windy, but Silas assured us of the contrary: "It's windy when the



waterfalls don't reach their bases." We were rewarded with sightings of a whimbrel, great skua, arctic skua, pairs of oystercatchers and small flocks of dunlin and barnacle geese. On our way back to Klaksvik, we paused for half-an-hour at the head of the fjord at Arnafirdi where we added a common scoter, long-tailed duck, grey willow warbler, yellow wagtail and an eastern chiffchaff to our total.



The final day of our fleeting visit saw us following a mountain footpath from Torshavn to Kirkjubour, accompanied by the piping calls of oystercatchers, and the occasional whirring wingbeat of a snipe. One oystercatcher demonstrated its aggressive instinct when a raven flew too close to its nesting site. Later in the afternoon, we returned to Vagur for our flight back to Edinburgh. As we taxied to our take-off, flocks of greylags and solitary oystercatchers foraged in the grassy areas to the sides of the runway.