



# Birdlife in Breiðafjörður



## BREIÐAFJARÐARNEYFND

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## BREIÐAFJÖRÐUR

Breiðafjörður Bay is an extensive yet shallow bay located on the west coast of Iceland. Among its distinctive features are its shallow water, which covers a vast area, and the tide difference, which is more marked here than in other places in Iceland. These two features cause the landscape to undergo substantial changes according to the state of play of the tides. Of note, it is estimated that a quarter of Iceland's seashore is in Breiðafjörður. One other distinctive feature is the large number of islands, islets and reefs located in the inner part of the bay, which are estimated to number around 2,500.

Breiðafjörður is one of the most important areas of Iceland for birdlife and has been listed as one of the most important bird areas in Europe. Breiðafjörður is especially important for seabirds, waders, geese and sea eagle. The islands and coastline of the inner part of Breiðafjörður are protected areas according to Icelandic Act No. 54/1995 on the Conservation of Breiðafjörður. The information here will mainly deal with the most important species of birds that characterize the islands and shores of this protected area, but it is not exhaustive, either regarding the birdlife in the area or Breiðafjörður's adjacent geographical areas.

### Characteristics of the birdlife

Birdlife in Breiðafjörður is characterized by species who are totally dependent on the marine ecosystem. Some of these species nest in large colonies. In addition to the Icelandic breeding birds, thousands of other birds from a few migrant species pass through Breiðafjörður on their way from Western Europe to and from their nesting grounds in Greenland and the northern part of Canada.

### Why this abundant birdlife?

The main reason for such rich birdlife here is an abundance of food, resulting from interplay of the geography, great differences in tide levels and the sea's richness. Around 65% of the rocky shores of Iceland and 40% of all mudflats are located in Breiðafjörður. These two types of shore formation have an extremely rich biota and contain a much more diverse range of species than any other of Iceland's shore areas. These shores, together with other plant and animal marine habitats that have high species diversity, are accompanied by particularly dense colonies of seabirds and waders. Waders are especially common in spring, when they have access to abundant food on the shores of Breiðafjörður during a period of food scarcity further inland. On the other hand, seabirds dominate the area during summer, when they have both access to food from the sea and suitable nesting grounds on the islands.



Islands in Hvammsfjörður



Eider



Puffin



Black guillemot with butterfish

## THE MAIN BIRD SPECIES

The most common bird species in the Breiðafjörður protected area during the summer months are puffin, eider and kittiwake. Eider is the dominant species during the winter, but gulls, shags and cormorants are also abundant. In Iceland white-tailed eagles are more common in Breiðafjörður than anywhere else. But, although they may be spotted throughout the year, they are not a frequent sight. Here we shall discuss some of the characteristic bird species of Breiðafjörður.

### Breeding birds

There are 35 bird species who nest regularly on Breiðafjörður's islands — almost half of the Icelandic breeding bird species. Usually 57 species nest on or around the bay. The following birds are the most common on the islands and shores alike:

**Eider** *Somateria mollissima* is a resident bird who stays close to the seashore all year round. It is estimated that up to one million eider winter in Iceland, and accordingly the eider stock is larger than all other duck populations combined; likewise, the eider makes up one of the largest bird populations of the country. The eider nests in diverse conditions on islets, islands and along shores. The eider's food is a variety of invertebrates, such as mussels, periwinkles, limpets, crustaceans and starfish. The eider has been totally protected since 1847, but is caught for food in many other countries. For centuries, co-existence between eider and humans has been a tight-knit one in Iceland.

**Puffin** *Fratercula arctica* is almost exclusively a migratory bird and the most common bird in Breiðafjörður Bay during summer, although puffins are seldom spotted close to human habitation. Puffins nest in dense colonies in grassy habitats on the islands but stay mainly at open sea during winter. Puffins eat mainly fish — in particular sand eel and capelin — but also a variety of invertebrates. The puffin is a good diver but is not good at flying. Arctic skuas, Arctic terns and kittiwakes are quite aware of the puffins' disability as they follow the puffin in flight and steal its prey.

**Black guillemot** *Cephus grylle* belongs to the auk family, like the puffin. The black guillemot is a resident bird, common around Breiðafjörður and can be seen in numerous places along the seashore. The black guillemot nests in crevasses or holes close to the ocean, frequently on land covered by large boulders, but the bird will also use buildings for nesting. The black guillemot prefers fish, such as butterfish and sand eel, but it will also eat invertebrates such as shrimp, lugworm and shellfish. Adult black guillemot are for the most part resident birds, but their young travel some distance away from Iceland during winter.



Shag



Young cormorant



White-tailed eagle



Glaucous gull



Black-backed gull

**Shag** *Phalacrocorax aristotelis* is another resident bird that stays along the shores. The greatest part of the Icelandic population nests in colonies on low rocks on islands or reefs in Breiðafjörður. The shag looks similar to the cormorant although the shag is smaller, and has a more delicate beak and a more spherical head. Its crest may be spotted on adult birds from January till spring. Sand eel is the mainstay of the shag's food during the nesting season, but bull-rout, cod (and related fish) are its most important food during autumn and winter.

**Cormorant** *Phalacrocorax carbo* is an Icelandic resident seabird but may also be found occasionally in freshwater. The cormorant nests in colonies, mainly on plain barren reefs (skerries) in Breiðafjörður and Faxaflói Bay. The young birds disperse around the country during winter, but the adult birds mainly stay close to the nesting grounds. Adult cormorants have a white area on the front of their necks below the beak and a light-coloured spot on the upper part of each leg. The cormorant catches fish, particularly bull-rout, in shallow waters. Other important food sources for the cormorant are butterfish, plaice and fish from the cod family.

**White-tailed eagle** *Haliaeetus albicilla*, commonly called the king of the birds of Iceland, is a resident bird and nests in the western part of the country. For a long time, Breiðafjörður has been the most important area for the sea eagle and two-thirds of the population can be found there. The sea eagle is steadily increasing in numbers, albeit slowly, after it became almost extinct around 1960. The eagle is very sensitive during the nesting period and therefore no one is allowed to get within 500 metres of an eagle's nest except for the landowner while working his land. The main food of the eagle during the summer period is fulmar, eider and various types of fish. The eagle enjoys absolute government protection.

**Glaucous gull** *Larus hyperboreus* is also, for the most part, a resident bird. It nests mainly on steep mountain slopes with ledges close to the sea in the western part of the country. Its largest nesting ground is at Mýrarhyma in Grundarfjörður. The glaucous gulls' choice of food is quite variable, but its most important food types are mussels, crabs and other shore fauna, sand eels, and waste from fishing vessels. This gull also consumes the eggs and young of other species.

**Great black-backed gull** *Larus marinus* is a resident bird and the largest of the gulls. During winter the black-backed gull keeps mainly to the coast, but during summer it will move slightly inland. The black-backed gull nests in a variety of circumstances, either as single pairs or in colonies. The black-backed gull is an opportunist when it comes to food and will eat almost anything. Its main food includes various types of fish, e.g. sand eel, butterfish and capelin, but in summer it also eats the eggs and young of various species. In addition to this, it eats fish remains and other waste from human processing, as well as shellfish and animal carcasses.