

Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus* is mainly a migratory bird and is commonly found nesting in the lowlands by the sea. Most Icelandic oystercatchers leave for the British Isles during the winter, but 2-3,000 remain on the south and west coasts of Iceland; a number of these stays in the Breiðafjörður area. The oystercatcher gets the bulk of its food from the shores, in particular during winter months. This food consists mainly of mussels and lugworms. When searching for food inland during the summer, it will predominantly search for insects and earthworms. The oystercatcher is a totally protected species.



Oystercatcher 0101

Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis* is almost exclusively a migratory bird and is a very common seabird around Iceland. It is sometimes confused with gulls but is not closely related to them, since it belongs to the petrel and shearwater family. The fulmar stays mainly at open sea for the greater part of the year but will arrive in its nesting grounds in early spring. It nests on islands, sea cliffs and mountain slopes along the coast, although it has also been found nesting in mountains inland.



Fulmar 05



Kittiwake 08

Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla* is predominantly a migratory bird and is a very common breeding bird on the rocks and cliffs of islands and the mainland. It arrives in its nesting grounds in January or February, but will mainly stay in the open ocean during the non-nesting season. The kittiwake population of Iceland has increased significantly during the last two centuries and is now one of

the largest bird populations in Iceland. Its main nesting grounds are high bird cliffs but it is also very common in Breiðafjörður Bay. Sand eel is its most important food, but kittiwakes will also eat squid and organic waste from fishing boats and fish factories.

Arctic tern *Sterna paradisaea* is a common migratory bird and is one of the most common and widespread Icelandic birds. Most Arctic terns arrive in Iceland from southern oceans in May, following the longest migratory flight of any Icelandic bird. They stay in Iceland until mid-August. They mainly nest in colonies in various habitats close to the sea. Arctic terns nest in many places around Breiðafjörður, but the largest nesting ground in Breiðafjörður is at Rif on the Snaefellnes peninsula, which is also one of the largest Arctic tern colonies in the whole of Iceland.

Greylag goose *Anser anser* is almost exclusively a migratory bird and is the commonest goose species in the lowlands of Iceland. Before 1950, the greylag goose was almost unknown on the Breiðafjörður islands and in the West Fjords, but in the wake of a population increase during the following decades, the goose began nesting there. At present, greylag geese nest on islands in numerous areas around Breiðafjörður Bay, although seldom more than a few on each island. The greylag goose is more common in Breiðafjörður in late summer when thousands of geese from all over the country shed their feathers there.

ECONOMIC USE

Throughout history, humans have used birds in various ways. In most cases for food — although not always. Elder and puffin are the commonest birds in Breiðafjörður, and are also the species that have been most utilized by humans.

Eider farming has been pursued from the time Iceland was settled in the mid-800s. Farmers collect eider down, a valuable commodity, from eider nests during their nesting period. Over the centuries eider husbandry has undergone development; although many of the present-day eider nesting grounds are located where former nesting grounds were located, other nesting grounds are man-made in the sense that the birds have been lured to nest in particular places. In most eider nesting grounds the farmer keeps the eider's natural enemies at bay. The eider down is collected during May and June, cleaned during the following months and then mostly exported. For a long time, Breiðafjörður has been considered the cradle of eider down production in Iceland. Any traffic through protected eider nesting grounds is prohibited during the nesting period.

Feather collecting: A great number of geese and whooper swans *Cygnus cygnus* shed their feathers in Breiðafjörður during late summer. Up until the First

World War, swan feathers were collected in late summer and used for quill pens, amongst other things.

Collecting eggs and young for human consumption has for a long time been one of the more significant prerequisites around Breiðafjörður, although the custom has decreased during recent years. The eggs have mainly been collected from kittiwakes, black-backed gulls, glaucous gulls and black guillemots, while the collection of young birds has mainly been from cormorants and puffins.

Shooting is not much pursued within the protected area and has mainly been carried out by those who make use of the area for their livelihoods. Most bird species are protected during summer, but hunters kill black guillemots, shags, cormorants and gulls in winter as well as black-backed gulls and ravens *Corvus corax* to some extent all year round. There is little or no shooting of geese in the protected area, but in other places around the bay hunters shoot geese to some extent.

Puffin hunting by use of hand nets has been practised for centuries. Every year, sustainable hunting of over 100,000 puffins is carried out in Iceland. They come from a large population of puffins. Hunters kill most puffins in the Westman Islands (S-Iceland) — but a considerable amount of their slaughter also takes place in Breiðafjörður.



BIRDWATCHING

Most migratory birds arrive in Iceland in April and May and begin to leave the country in late summer. By October, most of them have left. The most favourable time for birdwatching is May and June when the number of bird species, weather conditions, access to birdwatching areas, plumage of the birds and their prominence are considered. During winter there are fewer bird species in Iceland and they mainly stay around the coast. But you may find a few species that are not seen during the summer period, such as the Iceland gull *Larus glaucoides*, king eider *Somateria spectabilis* and grey heron *Ardea cinerea*. The winter plumage of several bird species is also different from their summer plumage.

Birdwatching can be carried out almost anywhere in the Breiðafjörður area, although some parts of the area are more rewarding than others. Access for tourists to the islands is limited because of lack of transport, but a number of interesting nature sightseeing trips are offered from Stykkishólmur by boat or kayak. Likewise, one may travel by ferry across Breiðafjörður Bay in order to get to the island Flatey, where birdlife is particularly rich. Other interesting areas worthy of mention are Kolgráfrárfjörður, Hofstaðavogur and Álftarfjörður on the Snæfellsnes peninsula, the road by the Fells- and

Skarðsbrú coastline, by Gufufjörður, Berufjörður, Vatnsfjörður, and the area around Reykhólar. These areas differ according to season, but usually the birdlife is most prolific during spring and early summer. The middle of April until the beginning of June are the best times for spotting the passage migrants.

Other interesting spots for birdwatching in the Breiðafjörður area that are located a short distance from the protected area are the magnificent Látarbjarg sea cliff formations in the northern part of Breiðafjörður, which no nature observer should miss, as well as the Þúfubjarg and Saxhólsbjarg cliffs close to the tip of the Snæfellsnes peninsula. In these areas, members of the auk family — guillemot *Uria aalge*, Brünnich's guillemot *Uria lomvia*, and razorbill *Alca torda* — nest in large colonies, but these are rare species in the protected area as a whole.

In addition to the bird species mentioned above, the following species usually nest in Breiðafjörður: Red-throated diver, great northern diver, Slavonian grebe, harlequin duck, tufted duck, scaup, long-tailed duck, wigeon, mallard, teal, red-breasted merganser, goosander, gyrfalcon, merlin, ptarmigan, ringed plover, golden plover, dunlin, whimbrel, black-tailed godwit, redshank, purple sandpiper, red-necked phalarope, grey phalarope, Arctic skua, lesser black-backed gull, black-headed gull, herring gull, common gull, short-eared owl, meadow pipit, white wagtail, wren, wheatear, redwing, starling, redpoll and snow bunting.



Arctic tern 09



Eider nest 06



Greylag goose 10



Snipe 04