Birds of the Faroe Islands





Unspoiled, Unexplored, Unbelievable

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Introduction

Gannet (Morus bassanus) colony at Mykineshólmur.

Thousands and thousands of Puffins flying over your head. Black sea cliffs painted white by the sheer number of birds breeding there. The constant and powerful roar of thousands of Kittiwakes calling at the same time. The power of a Gannet as it dives and penetrates the water like a torpedo in the hunt for fish. These are all but a few of the things you can experience when watching the birds of the Faroe Islands.

The 18 small islands constituting the Faroe Islands are located in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean several hundred kilometers away from neighbouring countries. The islands' isolated position is the frame for a special and rich birdlife.

The first thing that you might notice when coming to the Faroe Islands in summer is the large number of breeding birds. Millions of birds come to the Faroe Islands each summer to breed. A total of 305 bird species have been recorded in the Faroe Islands as of 1. January 2012. Of these, around 50 species breed regularly on the islands and another 60 are regular visitors, while almost 200 of the recorded bird species are either scarce or rare visitors to the Faroe Islands.

Bird watching is evidently dependent on the seasons. Most visitors come to the Faroe Islands during summer, which is the breeding season for the Faroese birds.

The aim of this booklet is to help you enjoy the rich birdlife of our country focusing on both seabirds and landbirds.

We hope you will enjoy the birds of the Faroe Islands!

Respect nature

Arctic Skua (Stercorarius parasiticus) protecting its nesting area from intruders.

When walking in nature it is important to respect it and take into consideration the well-being of its inhabitants. This means that there are a number of guidelines that you should follow when it comes to birds.

If birds give warning calls or keep flying over your head - sometimes even diving towards your head - it means that you are close to the bird's nest. Do not try to find the nest or the young. As long as you are close to the birds the parents are stressed and they have less time to search for food or keep their eggs warm. So leave the area immediately or observe the birds from a safe distance.

If you see chicks away from any apparent nests and with no adult birds around just leave the chicks alone. It is normal for chicks to leave the nest and walk around. Do not touch the chicks, but leave the area, so the parents can provide food etc. An exception to this rule is puffin chicks that have tried to fly towards the ocean but have landed in streams or other places. If possible you can help these birds to reach the ocean.

Do not litter.

Never sail closer than 200 meters from sea cliffs during the seabirds' breeding season (1 May to 1 September).



SEABIRDS have played a major role for Faroese people for centuries as a source of nourishing food. Puffins and Guillemots have been a crucial meat source for the Faroese household, but even Gannets, Fulmars, Kittiwakes, Shags, Manx Shearwater and other species have been hunted.

Today most of these species are still caught to some extent, but they do not play the same vital role in the Faroese household as in earlier decades and centuries. Today mostly Puffins and Fulmars are caught for food. Puffins are mostly caught from land with a "fleyingarstong" - a long stick with a net on the end - whereas young Fulmars are caught on the ocean just after they leave the nest, as they are too fat to escape the hunters.

Seabirds like Kittiwakes, Puffins, Guillemots and Arctic Terns have decreased significantly during the last decades. Many factors have been mentioned to explain the decline. Lack of food, changing currents and consequences of global warming probably all play a role. But species like Gannet, Fulmar, Shag and Black Guillemot have not seen the same decline as the others. Due to the lack of breeding success during the last years Puffins are now locally protected and the hunting has almost stopped until the population hopefully again will increase. nes you can get close to birds like Puffins, Gannets and Kittiwakes and bird watching can be done easily with the naked eye. However, most birds do not allow such close observations and in order to get satisfactory views of most birds we recommend the use of binoculars. 7 to 10 times magnification is good and will allow you to enjoy the birds in a different way than without binoculars.

If you wish to do sea watching or watch birds at greater distances a telescope is recommended. But with a telescope it is also possible to study breeding birds from a distance for longer periods without disturbing them.

There are no watch towers dedicated to bird watching in the Faroe Islands. So birding is mostly done by walking around in nature or by finding natural hills from where an area can be overlooked.

EQUIPMENT FOR BIRD WATCHING

Bird watching in the Faroe Islands does not necessarily require a lot of equipment. In places like Myki-

Ramsar areas

Mykines.

RAMSAR AREAS

The Faroe Islands have a rich birdlife. But it is not taken for granted, that it will stay this way. Therefore the government has appointed three areas as Ramsar areas. Ramsar is an international treaty, where governments promise to protect areas that have a special significance for the birdlife and biological diversity both in a national and an international perspective.

The areas that have been appointed as Ramsar areas are the islands of Mykines, Skúvoy and Nólsoy.



MYKINES

The westernmost island of the Faroes Islands is called Mykines. It is famous for its rich bird life during the summer months. West of the sole village on the island you can follow a marked footpath towards Mykineshólmur and the lighthouse. Before you reach the bridge to Mykineshólmur you will pass through a place called Lamba. There you will find a colony containing thousands of Puffins and if the weather permits many will stand right next to their breeding holes just next to the path.

When you cross the bridge to Mykineshólmur you will be able to see Kittiwakes on their nests next to the bridge.

When you have crossed the bridge you can walk towards the lighthouse. South of the lighthouse you will find a large colony of Gannets. Observing them is quite a sight in the stunning settings. Both younger brown birds and adult striking black and white birds are normally present. And if you have a little patience Great Skuas fly by the colonies on a regular basis.

When you walk back from the lighthouse you can follow the ridge of Mykineshólmur, where you will find more breeding Gannets and Fulmars too. Along this ridge is the only known breeding site for Leach's Storm Petrel in the Faroe Islands. The birds can only be seen during the night, when they come to their nesting sites. European Storm-petrel breeds in the area too.

If you head east from the village following the road you will reach the heathlands. There you can find most of the typical heathland birds including Oystercatcher and Whimbrel. Purple Sandpiper is known to breed around the summit of the islands. And Arctic and Great Skua also breed in the heatlands.



NÓLSOY

East of the capital Tórshavn is the island of Nólsoy. It contains what is probably the world's largest colony of European Storm-petrels. They breed on the eastern side of the island and only come in to their breeding grounds during the night.

Guided trips to the colonies are arranged on a regular basis. During these trips birds are often caught in mist nets by professional ringers and ringed in order to acquire knowledge about the population. In order to enjoy the birdlife of Nólsoy you can walk from the village towards the lighthouse to the south to Borðan. On this route you can see birds like Oystercatcher, Whimbrel, Golden Plover, Northern Wheatear, Meadow Pipit and if you are lucky you might find Red-necked Phalarope and Red-throated Diver.

But please do not disturb the birds as they and their eggs and young are vulnerable during the breeding season.



SKÚVOY

West of Sandoy the small island of Skúvoy is located. When arriving on Skúvoy Puffins might be some of the first birds to greet you as they breed right by the village.

Skúvoy is named aftur Skúgvur, which is the Faroese name for Great Skua – some even say that the bird might be named after the island. And the island contains one of the largest colonies of Great Skua in the Faroe Islands. You should be careful if you walk through the Great Skua colonies as the birds are likely to dive towards you in order to scare you away from their breeding grounds. In the heathland you can also find Arctic Skua, Oystercatcher, Golden Plover, Common Snipe, Whimbrel and Rock Pipit to mention a few.

Skúvoy also contains the largest colony of Manx Shearwater in the Faroe Islands. The birds can be seen in large flocks in the summer evenings off the coast as they prepare to fly towards their breeding grounds.

Towards the northwest of the island, Høvdin is found. On the steep sea cliffs thousands of Guillemots are breeding.

Seabirds

When can the birds

It is not possible to give exact dates concerning arrival and departure of migrant birds. Wind, weather and other factors play a role and affect each species in different ways. Furthermore there will always be some birds that do not follow the normal migration pattern for its species. This overview shows the gen-

oe seen

Guillemot sea cliffs.

eral pattern for some of the seabirds of the Faroe Islands. X indicates regular occurrence and (x) indicates irregular occurrence or occurrence in low numbers. Note that some birds for instance might be common in early autumn, but rare in late autumn or rare in early spring but common in late spring.

	SPRING	SUMMER	AUTUMN	WINTER
Puffin (Fratercula arctica)	х	х	х	(×)
Red-throated Loon (Gavia stellata)	х	х	х	(X)
Great Northern Loon (Gavia immer)	х	(X)	х	х
Fulmar (Fulmarus glacialis)	х	х	х	х
Manx Shearwater (Puffinus puffinus)	х	х	х	
European Storm-petrel (Hydrobates pelagicus)	х	х	х	(X)
Gannet (Morus bassanus)	х	х	х	х
Shag (Phalacrocorax aristotelis)	х	х	Х	х
Eider (Somateria Molissima)	х	х	х	х
Red-breasted Merganser (Mergus serrator)	х	х	Х	х
Arctic Skua (Stercorarius parasiticus)	х	х	х	
Great Skua (Stercorarius skua)	х	х	Х	
Lesser Black-backed Gull (Larus fuscus)	х	х	х	
Herring Gull (Larus argentatus)	х	х	Х	х
Great Black-backed Gull (Larus marinus)	х	х	х	х
Kittiwake (Rissa tridactyla)	х	х	Х	х
Arctic Tern (Sterna paradisaea)	х	х	х	
Guillemot (Uria aalge)	х	х	Х	х
Razorbill (Alca torda)	х	х	х	х
Black Guillemot (Cepphus grylle)	х	х	х	х

Where to watch seabirds

Mykines.

Seabirds like Guillemots, Razorbills, Fulmars and Kittiwakes breed on sea cliffs. Most sea cliffs in the Faroe Islands are to the north and to the west. The sea cliff Høvdin on Skúvoy can be seen from land. Skúvoy also has the largest colony of Manx Shearwater. They can be seen in large numbers on summer nights east of the island. Other famous Faroese sea cliffs include Vestmannabjørgini on Streymoy and Enniberg and Settorva on Viðoy.

Boat trips are arranged daily to Vestmannabjørgini and occasionally to Enniberg and Settorva weather permitting.

One of the areas where most different seabirds can be seen is Mykineshólmur. Here you can see breeding Gannets, Puffins, Kittiwakes, Manx Shearwaters, European and Leach's Storm-petrel. Furthermore Arctic Skuas breed east of the village and further west on the island, Great Skuas can be found. But both Arctic and Great Skua can be seen on Mykineshólmur. The Storm-petrels can be seen by walking to a memorial monument located west of the village.

Under cover of darkness Storm-petrels come to their nests and can be seen from there. Sea watch-

ing can be done from the village or from Mykineshólmur and both Manx and Sooty Shearwater are fairly easy to see.

Generally seabirds are doing best on islands where there are no rats. These islands are Fugloy, Svínoy, Kallsoy, Nólsoy, Mykines, Hestur, Koltur, Sandoy, Stóra Dímun, Lítla Dímun and Skúvoy. For instance it seems like European Storm-petrels totally disappear if rats get a foothold on an island. Therefore it is very important not to transport rats to rat-free islands.

Cats are also a threat to many seabirds, and on a few islands cats are not allowed as pets or they are only allowed to stay inside.



PUFFINS are one of the most numerous bird species in the Faroe Islands, only preceded by Fulmars. More than a million Puffins are believed to breed here. They breed in colonies on grassy, steep slopes where they dig a nesting burrow. Puffins are colourful birds due to their large red, yellow and black bills and thus they have been called the parrots of the sea.

At the breeding colonies it is possible to observe these stunning birds at a close range as birds constantly come and depart from the colonies in order to make a nest, lay their eggs or feed their young. At the colonies a deep grunting "arrh-uh" can be heard from the burrows.

Puffins are primarily summer visitors. During winter they are scarce. Outside of the breeding areas Puffins can be seen foraging on the firths and off shore.



and Great Northern

Gavia immer

Great Northern Diver (Gavia immer) in active moult. Juvenile Great Northern Diver (Gavia immer).

RED-THROATED LOON is an uncommon breeding bird. It breeds on fresh water lakes but can also be seen on firths. In summer it has a narrow rusty stripe on the throat, a finely striped neck, plain greybrown back and a black bill.

Red-throated Diver can be seen all year, but in winter it is scarce. It is mostly seen on lakes, but can also be seen on the firths. Great Northern Loon can be seen all year round, but it does not breed in the Faroe Islands. Numbers significantly increase during autumn and winter, when they move south from their breeding grounds in Iceland and Greenland. Furthermore Yellow-billed Diver and Black-throated Diver have been recorded on a few occasions in the Faroe Islands.

-Ulmarus glacialis



Fulmar (Fulmarus glacialis) on its nest. Fulmar (Fulmarus glacialis) flying in the mist.

FULMAR is the most common breeding bird in the Faroe Islands now. But 400 years ago it was so rare that it was taken as an omen of menacing weather. It started to breed in the Faroe Islands in the early 19th century and has had tremendous success since then in spite of the fact that it only lays one egg each year. Their success is thought to be a consequence of their ability to feed from behind whaling boats and later fishing vessels in the North Atlantic - where tens of thousands of Fulmars can be seen around a single fishing vessel. At the breeding sites characteristic guttural cackling notes are uttered often in duet between the sexes. Fulmars from the high arctic are typically darker than the Faroese birds. These grey Fulmars can be seen occasionally.

Fulmars breed mostly on sea cliffs, but they can also be found further inland. It is a characteristic bird as it flies with a fast wing beat and stiff wings.

It can be seen all year off the coast and at the breeding sites in steep mountain slopes and rock walls.

Puffinus puffinus Puffinus puffinus And European Storm-petrel

Hydrobates pelagicus

Manx Shearwater (Puffinus puffinus) off Mykines. European Storm-petrel (Hydrobates pelagicus) being ringed on Nólsoy.

MANX SHEARWATER is a common breeder. But not many people see this bird as it only flies to its nest under the cover of darkness. At the colony a raucous, coughing call can be heard during the night. During the day Manx Shearwater mostly forage on open sea but now and then they can be seen from land - for example on Skúvoy, where the largest colony is located. Manx Shearwater is dark brown and looks almost blackish - above and white beneath. Manx Shearwater breeds on grassy slopes where they dig a nesting burrow much like Puffins. Manx Shearwater can be seen during spring, summer and autumn. It is most easily seen during the late evenings where flocks fly to their breeding sites after spending the days off the coast.

The largest European Storm-petrel colony in the world is on Nólsoy. As with Manx Shearwaters they only come to the breeding grounds during the night and the best way to see them is to go to the breeding colonies during the night. Tours are arranged to the breeding colony on Nólsoy. At the colonies a purring sound with imposed grunts can be heard from the birds' nest burrows. The breeding season is long - the last chicks fledge in December. Apart from Nólsoy European Storm-petrels breed only on rat-free islands like Svínoy, Fugloy, Kallsoy, Sandoy, Hestur, Koltur, Skúvoy, Sandoy and Mykines. On Mykines Leach's Storm-petrels also breed in small numbers.

European Storm-petrel can be seen all year round, but is most common during spring, summer and autumn.

There is an alternative way to see both Manx Shearwaters and European Storm-petrels. When the weather is a little windy there is a good chance of seeing these species from the ferry between Tórshavn and Suðuroy. Furthermore four species of Skuas and Sooty Shearwater can be seen and one Pterodroma-petrel has been seen and photographed from the ferry.



Morus bassanus

Adult Gannet (Morus bassanus) flying with nesting material. Gannets (Morus bassanus) at Mykineshólmur. Subadult Gannet (Morus bassanus) with both brown and white feathers



GANNETS only breed in the westernmost part of the Faroe Island on the island of Mykines and Mykineshólmur along with two sea stacks, Píkarsdrangur and Flatadrangur. It is the largest breeding bird in the Faroe Islands with a wing span of up to almost two meters. They lay their eggs in early May and the young fledge in early September. The young birds are grey. As they get older they gradually turn brown before they obtain the eye-catching black and white adult plumage with the yellow head.

Gannets can be seen all year round, but numbers are generally lower during winter. It is most easily observed close to its breeding colonies on Mykines, but birds can be seen off shore all around the islands.



SHAG is a fairly common breeder. In the breeding season they are scattered around the islands in small colonies at boulder screes close to the sea. Outside of the breeding season many hundreds can be seen together in the firths as they catch fish together.

Cormorants were breeding in the Faroe Islands until the middle of the last century. Now it is a scarce but regular visitor, so there is hope that they might start breeding again.

Elder Somateria mollissima and Red-breasted Merganser Mergus serrator

Adult male Eider (Somateria mollissima). Male Red-breasted Merganser (Mergus serrator).

EIDER and red-breasted merganser are the only sea ducks that breed in the Faroe Islands although several other species have been recorded. The Eiders belong to a special subspecies S. m. faeroeensis. They are smaller and the females darker brown than birds from mainland Europe. As the Eiders are not hunted their numbers have increased and now they are easy to see in the firths. Eiders are vocal during the breeding season with a deep cooing display-call, a far-carrying, deep sound.

Eiders are resident in the Faroe Islands. They can easily be found along the shoreline in flocks mounting up to several hundred birds.

Red-breasted Merganser is fairly common and is also found on firths and larger lakes. Adult breeding males have a glossy green head with an obvious crest. The outer wing is dark and the inner wing is white and it has a grey back. Females have a grey body with a dark red-brown head. Both sexes have a long, narrow red bill.

Red-breasted Merganser can be seen all year. It is mostly found along the coast during winter, but during the breeding season birds can also be seen on lakes.

When looking through the flocks on Eiders be aware that King Eiders occur every once in a while as do Harlequin Ducks and other species. Rare duck records include American White-winged Scoter, Barrow's Goldeneye, American Black Duck, Lesser Scaup and several Ring-necked Ducks.

Arctic Skua

Stercorarius parasiticus



Dark and intermediate morph Arctic skua (Sterorarius parasiticus) flying together. Dark morph Arctic Skua (Stercorarius parasiticus) chasing Kittiwake Light and dark morph Arctic Skua (Stercorarius parasiticus).

ARCTIC SKUA is a fairly common breeder in heathland. It mostly gets its food by stealing fish from Kittiwakes and other birds. It forces the birds to give away the catch intended for their own chicks. Arctic Skuas occur in different morphs ranging from birds being totally dark brown to birds having dark back, white belly, breast and neck and dark cap. Between these two morphs there are a wide range of variations.

Arctic Skuas are summer visitors, they often breed in loose colonies in the heathland away from human settlements. They can also be seen foraging in firths and off shore.

Great Skua

Stercorarius skua



Adult Great Skua (Stercorarius skua). Juvenile Great Skua (Stercorarius skua).

GREAT SKUA is a fairly common breeder. It mostly breeds in colonies, often at higher altitudes, but single breeding pairs can also be found. Great Skuas mostly get food by stealing from Gannets and other birds, but they also scavenge on dead sheep and other animals. Great Skuas have a rather limited distribution in the North Atlantic and the world population is rather small. This means that some of the larger colonies in the Faroe Islands contain more than 1% of the entire world population. If you come across a colony you should be cautious as the parent birds can be quite aggressive and can sometimes actually hit your head - it really can be quite a scary experience. So try to avoid breeding areas and if that is not possible go through the breeding area as fast as possible.

Great Skua is a summer visitor, but it can also be seen during both spring and autumn. In summer they breed in colonies in the heathland, but can also be seen foraging along the coast and off shore.

Lesser Black-

and Herring Gull Larus argentatus

Lesser Black-backed Gulls (Larus fuscus) in breeding plumage. In front: Ad. Lesser Black-backed Gull (Larus fuscus). Middle: Ad. Herring Gull (Larus argentatus). Back: Juvenile Iceland Gull (Larus glaucoides).

LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL is a common breeding bird. It is normally seen between March and September as it migrates further south during winter. It is the subspecies graellsii, which breeds in the Faroe Islands. Lesser Black-backed Gulls are frequently seen in most harbours and usually breed in colonies away from inhabited areas. Adults have dark grey upperparts, yellow legs and limited white on the primaries. Herring Gull is also a common breeder. It can be seen all year round - especially in harbours with fishing industry. Adults have pale grey upperparts, pink legs and more extensive white on the primaries than Lesser Black-backed Gull.





Second winter Iceland Gull (Larus glaucoides). Iceland Gull (Larus glaucoides) in Klaksvík. Great Black-backed Gull (Larus marinus) in front and Fulmar behind.

Great Black-backed Gull and other gulls Larus marinus

GREATER BLACK-BACKED GULL is the largest gull in the Faroe Islands. It is a fairly common breeding bird and it can be seen all year round. It is both seen in harbours and around sea cliffs where it is an opportunistic hunter. Besides the size adult Greater Black-backed Gulls are told by almost entirely black upperparts and dull pink legs.

Other gulls that breed in the Faroe Islands include Common Gull and Black-headed Gull. Several other gull species have also been recorded. These include American species like Bonaparte's Gull and Franklin's Gull and arctic species like Ross's Gull, Ivory Gull and Sabine's Gull. During winter both Glaucous Gull and Iceland Gull occur on a regular basis and during invasions they can occur in their hundreds and even thousands.



Rissa tridactyla

Kittiwakes (Rissa tridactyla) on nesting grounds + Mykines. Adult Kittiwake in winter plumage to the right and a first winter Kittiwake to the left.

KITTIWAKE is a small member of the gull family. It is a common breeding bird on sea cliffs. It is a neat and elegant bird. The adults have black wing tips, are grey above and otherwise white. The bill is yellow and the short legs and feet are dark. During winter the adult birds develop a dark area behind the eye. The juvenile birds are attractive with a grey back and otherwise a black and white appearance. Black colours on the upper side of the wings form a distinct W-pattern. Otherwise it has a black neck, tail and bill. In the colonies Kittiwakes are loud and noisy. The commonest call is a repeated, quick, nasal "kitt-i-wake" from which its English name is derived.

Kittiwakes can be seen all year, but they are uncommon in winter. In summer they can be seen at their breeding sites on sea cliffs, but they also visit firths and harbours.

Arctic Terna

Adult Arctic Tern (Sterna paradisaea) looking for fish.

ARCTIC TERN is a common breeder in the Faroe Islands. It breeds in colonies around the islands. Arctic Tern is an elegant bird with long narrow wings and a long forked tail. The adult birds have a dark cap during summer, dark red bill and legs, a grey body and white rump and tail. Juvenile birds do not have a complete black cap and the forehead tends to be a little ginger-brown.

The Arctic Tern undertakes one of the most impressive migration routes done by any bird. Every year the Arctic Terns migrate from their breeding grounds in the north to the Antarctic in the south. Some birds have been proven to fly up to 80,000 kilometres every year. Arctic Terns can reach the age of 30 years, which means that they can fly more than two million kilometres during a lifetime.

Arctic Tern is a summer visitor. It breeds away from human settlements in the heathland, but is frequently seen foraging in the firths and off shore.

Guillemot uria aalge and Razorbill

Adult Razorbills (Alca torda). Guillemots (Uria aalge) breeding on sea cliffs.

GUILLEMOT is a common breeder on sea cliffs. It is a beautiful black and white bird with a long pointed black bill. Razorbills are much less numerous than Guillemots and they often prefer broader, sheltered ledges or boulders for nesting. Guillemots and Razorbills are roughly the same size, but they are told apart by the shape and size of their bills. Whereas Guillemots have long pointed bills the Razorbill has a short, deep and blunt black bill with white lines on it. Brünnich's Guillemot is a scarce visitor but a few are seen every now and then. It is very similar to Guillemot, but has a shorter, down-curved bill with a whitish line along the upper edge of the gape. Guillemots can be seen all year round, but in winter they tend to be off shore. They breed on steep cliff faces, but can be seen foraging in firths and off shore.

Razorbill is much less numerous than Guillemots. It can be seen all year round, but is quite scarce in winter. Apart from the breeding grounds they can be seen foraging on firths and off shore.

Cepphus grylle

Adult Black Guillemots (Cepphus grylle) in full summer plumage. Black Guillemot (Cepphus grylle) in moulting plumage.

BLACK GUILLEMOT is a fairly common breeder and is found on most firths all year round. The Faroese Black Guillemots constitute an endemic subspecies C. g. faeroeensis. It nests among boulders and in rock crevices, singly or in small, loose colonies. In summer plumage Black Guillemots are, as the name implies, black. The feet are red and on the wing it has a large white patch. During winter Black Guillemots become white and grey with some black markings on the back, head and neck. The wings remain black with the large white patch.

Black

Landbirds

Summer in the heathlar

Male Golden Plover (Pluvialis apricaria

Mountains and the heathlands are dominated by birds during summer. When hiking in the heathland one of the first things you might notice is the sound of Oystercatchers protecting their nesting territory from intruders. These striking black and white birds characterize the heathland and uninhabited areas of the Faroe Islands. Indeed it is the national bird of the Faroe Islands - loved by the people because it fiercely protects its nest and young from all enemies even when it is smaller and outnumbered and thus provides safety even for other birds nesting in their vicinity. Many other species also inhabit the heathlands. Whimbrels are less aggressive towards intruders, but their fast, rippling whistle can be heard from far away. The Common Snipe can give you quite a shock as it suddenly takes off just a meter or two away from you while you are hiking. The Common Snipe's display, usually more conspicuous after rain, can be seen and heard as it gives its distinctive drumming sound produced by air vibrating through the spread-out outer tail-feathers as the bird plunges through the air.



Northern Wheatears are easily seen in rocky areas, and Rock Pipits often breed in the same areas. Meadow Pipits tend to prefer more grassy areas with heather and more dense vegetation.

If you are lucky you might see a Merlin perched on a rock as it scans the area for small birds and other foods. If it sees a bird it can suddenly take off and fly with stunning speed pursuing its prey.

Colonies of Arctic Terns. Arctic and Great Skua and several gull species can be found in the heathland as well. But be careful not to disturb the breeding birds more than necessary. It might bring the eggs and chicks in danger. And especially Great Skuas can be very aggressive if you get too close to their nests.

Spring migration

Subalpine Warbler (Sylvia cantillans) displaying in Trongisvágur in May.

Due to the fact that the Faroe Islands are situated far away from the European Mainland, the islands are not on the normal migration routes for most European birds. Geese and Whooper Swans and different shorebirds might stop over in the Faroe Islands due to bad weather on their way north to countries like Iceland and Greenland - but generally numbers of roosting migrants are low.

In spring the Faroe Islands often receive overshooting birds. These are birds that fly too far north when trying to reach their breeding grounds. This means that birds from central and southern Europe can show up in spring given the right weather conditions. Some birds that arrive in May linger here and attempt to breed. For instance, both a male and a female Subalpine Warbler were seen one year from mid-May until June. The male was displaying and the birds favoured one particular shrub in a garden in Trongisvágur, Suðuroy.

If there are continuous south-easterly winds in May passerines can be seen in great numbers and rare birds can be seen among the common migrants in gardens and trees.

Autumn migration

Barred Warbler (Sylvia nisoria) in Klaksvík in autumn. Pechora Pipit (Anthus gustavi) in autumn in Hvalba.

Perhaps the most interesting time to search for rare birds in the Faroe Islands is in the autumn. Autumn migration includes both drift migrants from Scandinavia and far eastern birds performing a so called reverse migration – flying for example northwest instead of southeast. This means that a good number of birds from eastern Asia are recorded every year. An example of this is the Yellow Browed Warbler that breeds no closer than 3,500 km to the east. 19 of this birds have been recorded on one day on the island of Vágar. Other common reverse migrants include Barred Warbler – about 1 of every 10 sylvia-warblers seen in the Faroe Islands in autumn is a Barred Warbler.

Most eastern birds arrive during days with easterly winds. Easterly winds from August to early November are almost guaranteed to bring some migrants. These birds can show up everywhere, but some good spots include Svínoy, Mykines and Suðuroy as many birds first make landfall on these islands. Due to the lack of forests many birds seek to the villages, gardens and plantations. Some good records of eastern vagrants in autumn include two Pechora Pipits in one day, two Red-flanked Bluetails in three days, Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler and two White's Thrushes.

American birds have also been recorded in autumn. American Bitterns, Common Nighthawk, American Coot, Sandhill Crane and Tenneessee Warbler are a few of them. The arrival of American passerines demands certain weather conditions. A fast moving low pressure heading north along the eastern coast of North America, then east from Newfoundland and reaching the Faroe Islands, preferably within 48 hours.

Migrating Whooper Swans (Cygnus cygnus).

It is not possible to give exact dates concerning arrival and departure of migrant birds. Wind, weather and other factors play a role and affect each species in different ways. Furthermore there will always be some birds that do not follow the normal migration pattern for their species. This overview shows the general pattern for some of the land birds of the Faroe Islands. X indicates regular occurrence and (x) indicates irregular occurrence or occurrence in low numbers. Note that some birds for instance might be common in early autumn, but rare in late autumn or rare in early spring but common in late spring.

	SPRING	SUMMER	AUTUMN	WINTER
Hooded Crow (Corvus cornix)	х	х	х	х
Raven (Corvus corax)	х	х	х	х
Merlin (Falco columbarius)	х	х	х	х
Oystercatcher (Haematopus ostralegus)	х	х	х	(X)
Golden Plover (Pluvialis apricaria)	х	х	х	
Purple Sandpiper (Calidris maritima)	х	(X)	х	х
Dunlin (Calidris alpina)	х	(X)	х	(X)
Common Snipe (Gallinago gallinago)	х	х	х	х
Whimbrel (Numenius phaeopus)	х	х	х	
Black-tailed Godwit (Limosa limosa)	(X)	(X)	(×)	
Turnstone (Arenaria interpres)	х	(X)	х	х
Red-necked Phalarope (Phalaropus lobatus)	(X)	х	(×)	
Rock Dove (Columba livia)	х	х	х	х
Meadow Pipit (Anthus pratensis)	х	х	х	
Rock Pipit (Anthus petrosus)	х	х	х	х
White Wagtail (Motacilla alba)	х	х	х	
Wren (Troglodytes troglodytes)	х	х	х	х
Robin (Erithacus rubecula)	х	х	х	х
Northern Wheatear (Oenanthe oenanthe)	х	х	х	
Blackbird (Turdus merula)	х	х	х	х
Redwing (Turdus iliacus)	х	(X)	х	(X)
Goldcrest (Regulus regulus)	х	(X)	х	(X)
Starling (Sturnus vulgaris)	х	х	х	х
House Sparrow (Passer domesticus)	х	х	х	x

Where to watch land birds

Common Snipe (Gallinago gallinago) hiding in the grass.

The most dominant habitats in the Faroe Islands are heathland and moorland. Birds like Oystercatchers, Whimbrels and Common Snipes that favour these habitats can be found almost all over the islands.

That being said some areas are richer in birds than others. Lakes generally attract many birds. Toftavatn on the southern end of Eysturoy is a rich area with lots of heather. Here you can see Oystercatchers, Whimbrels, Common Snipes and Golden Plovers but Curlew and Greylag Geese also breed in the area. All year round different duck species can be seen on the lake. Rare birds seen in the area include Ring-necked Duck and the only Mediterranean Gull ever recorded in the Faroe Islands.

On Sandoy there are several lakes, but the two largest ones are Sandsvatn and Gróthúsvatn. Here you can see good numbers of shorebirds, ducks and geese. A population of Barnacle Geese breed around Gróthúsvatn, but they are thought to have a domestic origin. Several hybrid geese can also be seen in the area. Rare birds seen in the area include Blue-winged Teal, Lesser Scaup, Ring-necked Duck, American Wigeon, Steller's Eider, Surf Scoter, White-winged Black tern and Spoonbill.

Generally land birds are more common on islands where there are neither cats nor rats. Especially Wren and Common Snipe can be found in greater numbers on islands like Svínoy, where neither rats nor cats are present. Svínoy is also a good place for migrants and birds like Palla's Grashopper Warbler, Arctic Warbler, Melodious Warbler, Arctic Redpoll and Lesser Grey Shrike have been recorded.

The rat-free islands are Fugloy, Svínoy, Kallsoy, Nólsoy, Mykines, Hestur, Koltur, Sandoy, Stóra Dímun, Lítla Dímun and Skúvoy.



HOODED CROW is a common breeding bird. It can be seen almost everywhere. Both Hooded Crows and Ravens have now increased significantly after being hunted to the brink of extinction a century ago as people were afraid that they would threaten livestock and were thus considered a pest.

Hooded Crow is a resident bird that can be found both in the heathlands and in association with human settlements.

The Faroese ravens belong to the subspecies varius otherwise only found in Iceland. Pied Ravens used to breed in the Faroe Islands. The white colour was caused by mutation in the melanin metabolism, which became fixed in the population, causing some birds to have about half of their feathers entirely white. As these birds gained interest from collectors abroad they were shot and sold. The last Pied Raven was seen on Nólsoy in 1902.

Ravens are present in the Faroe Islands all year round. It is typically a shy bird and is often seen at quite a distance away from human settlements. But now and then birds can be seen in inhabited areas.


MERLIN is the only bird of prey that breed in the Faroe Islands. It is the smallest falcon in Europe. In the Faroe Islands it is a rare breeding bird, but it is more common during spring and autumn migration. Merlins can show up almost everywhere as they hunt for small birds and other foods. Females and juvenile birds are mostly brown whereas males are blue-grey on the back, and the chest and belly have an orange hue. Merlin breeds on most islands and can show up everywhere all year round. They tend to show a preference for plantations.

However, no less than 15 other birds of prey have been recorded in the Faroe Islands, but besides Merlin only Kestrels and Sparrowhawks occur on a somewhat regular basis.



THE OYSTERCATCHER is the national bird of the Faroe Islands. It is a common breeding bird in heathland. When walking in uninhabited areas during summer you are likely to encounter several of these striking black and white birds with their red bills. If you get too close to the nest the parent birds will try to chase you away. Try to leave the nesting area right away in order to disturb the birds as little as possible.

Due to the Oystercatcher's ability and willingness to protect their nesting area shorebirds and other small

birds like to breed in the vicinity of the Oystercatcher's nest as it means additional protection for them. It brings great joy to many Faroese people when the first Oystercatchers of the year are seen and maybe especially heard. On the 12th of March, the people of the Faroe Islands celebrate Grækarismessa, which means, among other things, that the Oystercatchers have arrived and summer is at hand.

Golden Plover Pluvialis apricaria

GOLDEN PLOVER is a fairly common breeder and a common migrant in the Faroe Islands. During spring and autumn larger flocks can be seen, but during summer pairs or singles are the more common sight. Golden Plovers breed in moorland and heathland, sometimes close to the nests of Oystercatchers as they provide additional safety from enemies. Golden Plovers can be hard to detect in the breeding areas, but they are often vocal giving a plaintive flat whistle. When a Golden Plover has been detected on the breeding grounds it is a strik-

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ing bird with a golden back and a black belly, chest and face.

Golden Plovers can be found in the heathland away from human settlements during summer. Almost the entire population migrates south during the winter.

The males generally have more intense colours whereas the females have less black on the belly, chest and face and thus appear more anonymous.

Purple Sandpiper Calidris maritima and

Purple Sandpiper (Calidris maritima) Dunlin (Calidris alpina).

PURPLE SANDPIPER and Dunlin are two very scarce breeders, which are mostly found near mountain summits. But during spring and autumn Dunlins can be seen in greater numbers and Purple Sandpipers are common winter visitors. Ten species of Calidris-sandpipers have been recorded in the Faroe Islands including American species like Baird's Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper, Semipalmated Sandpiper and White-rumped Sandpiper.

Dunlins are easy to recognize during summer due to the black belly patch and bright rufous back. Purple Sandpiper is more anonymous, but is a bit larger than Dunlin. During winter the bill has a yellowish base and the legs are orange-yellow.

Common Snipe Gallinago gallinago



THE COMMON SNIPE is a fairly common breeding bird and a common migrant. The subspecies breeding in the Faroe Islands is G. g. faeroensis, which is more rusty-brown than birds from mainland Europe. Common Snipes can be hard to notice on the ground, but when walking around in the moorland you might flush a bird from a very close distance sometimes so close that you inevitably get a minor shock.

The Common Snipe is a medium sized wader. It has a long straight bill and striped head and body. When

landing the reddish tail can be seen. When displaying, a distinctive drumming sound can be heard. It is produced by air vibrating through spread out outer tail-feathers as the bird plunges through the air.

Common Snipes can be seen all year round. It prefers wet meadows and moorland. It can be hard to see unless you happen to flush it right in front of you. Numenius phaeopus

and Black-tailed Godwit

Whimbrel - (Numenius phaeopus). Black-tailed Godwit (Limosa limosa islandica).

WHIMBREL is a common breeding bird in the heathland. It is easily seen and heard as it gives a fast, rippling whistle that can be heard from far away.

Whimbrels are rather big waders with curved bills. They are grey-brown but during flight a white "cigar" can be seen on the back.

Whimbrel is a summer visitor. It is mostly recorded from May to September and is most often found in the heathlands away from human settlements. The Whimbrel's larger relative the Curlew is a very rare breeder in the Faroe Islands, but during migration and during winter it is more numerous.

Black-tailed Godwit of the subspecies islandica is also a rare breeder, but regular migrant. The adult bird is characteristic with its deep rufous belly, chest and neck and long, straight bill. During flight it reveals a white rump, white wing-bars and a black tail.

Turnstone Arenaria interpres and Red-necked Phalarope

Turnstone (Arenaria interpres). Female Red-necked Phalarope (Phalaropus lobatus).

TURNSTONES do not breed in the Faroe Islands, but can be seen all year round though numbers increase significantly during autumn and winter. It can be found along the shores, in harbours and around lakes.In summer-plumage it has a striking black and white face and chest, while the back is golden or rusty-colored with black stripes. In winter it is much duller grey.

Red-necked Phalarope is a scarce breeder in small ponds and lakes. Their numbers have declined in recent years and breeding is confined to a handful of areas. We advise people not to disturb these birds or any birds when they are seen on breeding grounds. Keep your distance and observe the birds without causing them any stress.

Phalaropus lobatus

Red-necked Phalarope is present in the Faroe Islands during the summer months. It prefers small ponds and lakes, but during migration it can also be seen along the coast.

Rock Dove ^{Columba livia} and Turtledove ^{Streptopelia turtur}

Rock Dove (Columba livia). Turtle Dove (Streptopelia turtur).

THE ROCK DOVES of the Faroe Islands are considered fairly uninfluenced by domestic pigeons.

That being said domestic pigeons are being held in the Faroe Islands and in Tórshavn it is not uncommon to see birds with domestic influence. So the Faroese Rock Dove population is threatened by pigeon breeders who allow their domestic doves to interbreed with wild Rock Doves. Rock Doves can be seen all year round. It can be found both in the heathlands and in association with human settlements.

Collared Dove breeds in Tórshavn, but can be seen occasionally all over the country. Wood Dove is also a fairly common migrant. Turtle Dove is mostly seen during migration in spring and autumn, but is a regular visitor while Stock Dove is very rare and Oriental Turtle Dove only has been recorded once.

Meadow Pipit Anthus pratensis

and Rock Pipit Anthus petrosu

Meadow Pipit (Anthus pratensis). American Buff-bellied Pipit (Anthus rubescens rubescens), Rock Pipit (Anthus petrosus kleinschmidfi).

MEADOW PIPIT and Rock Pipit are the only two pipit species that breed in the Faroe Islands

Meadow Pipit prefers areas with more vegetation than Rock Pipit. Meadow Pipit can be seen from early spring to late autumn.

The Rock Pipits of the Faroe Islands belong to the subspecies kleinschmidti, which is a bit darker and has less obvious eye-brows than Scandinavian

birds. Rock Pipit can be seen all year round. In winter birds are found along the shore, but during the breeding season most birds go to higher altitudes.

Even though only two pipit species breed in the Faroe Islands another six species have been recorded including the American Buff-bellied Pipit and Pechora Pipit and Olive-backed Pipit from Asia.

White Wagtail Motacilla alba and Wren Troglodytes troglodytes

Male White Wagtail (Motacilla alba). Wren (Troglodytes troglodytes borealis).

WHITE WAGTAIL is a scarce breeder in the Faroe Islands, but during migration in spring and autumn it is a fairly common visitor. It is a striking black and white bird with a long tail. It favours wet habitats, but can be found everywhere on migration. Yellow, Grey and Citrine Wagtail have all been recorded on several occasions, but they all remain rare visitors.

The Wren in the Faroe Islands belongs to an endemic subspecies (ssp. borealis). It is darker and bigger than continental Wrens. One of the Faroese names for this bird literally means "Brother of the mouse". This name describes quite accurately how you often encounter this little brown bird. It spends most of its time on the ground and rather than flying away it often runs or jumps for cover when disturbed. Especially on islands where there are no rats or cats Wrens can be very common and obliging. Compared to its tiny size the Wren has an amazingly loud song. It can be heard all year round as it makes repeated metallic ringing notes and trills. It can be seen both in the heathland and in association with human settlements. It is more numerous on rat-free islands.



and Northern Wheatear

Robin (Erithacus rubecula) in a plantation. Two-barred Crossbill (Loxia leucoptera) in Kunoy. Northern Wheatear (Oenanthe oenanthe).

ROBINS are fairly recent breeding birds in the Faroe Islands. As there are no suitable habitats occurring naturally, it only arrived after plantations and larger gardens were planted. Now it breeds around the islands, but most pairs are found in Tórshavn. It can be found throughout the year, but during spring and autumn migration it can be quite numerous.

Like Robins several other species are attracted to the plantations, which function as magnets for migrants that normally live in forested areas. Birds like Chaffinch, Siskin, Chiffchaff and other species have all attempted to breed. And during migration, birds like Common Crossbills and rarely Two-barred Crossbills are found in the plantations.

Northern Wheatear is a common breeding bird. It is mostly found in rocky areas in the heathland, but birds can show up almost everywhere. Males are colourful creatures with black wings, pink-buff breast, black facial mask, white eyebrow and grey back. Females are paler brown-grey.

Northern Wheatear is a summer visitor to the Faroe Islands.

Blackbird Turdus merula and Redwing Turdus iliacus

Male Blackbird (Turdus merula). Redwing (Turdus iliacus).

BLACKBIRD is the only thrush that breeds commonly in the Faroe Islands and can be seen throughout the year. A few Redwings of the subspecies coburni breed in plantations and larger garden across the islands.

Redwings can be seen in large numbers during spring and autumn migration. In both summer and

winter it is much less common. It often prefers gardens and plantations, but during migration they can be seen on grassy fields in open areas often joined by Fieldfares, Song Thrushes and rarely Mistle Thrushes and Ring Ouzels. Furthermore both White's Thrush and Dusky Thrush have been recorded during autumn and winter.

Goldcrest ano Yellow-browec

Goldcrest (Regulus regulus). Yellow-browed Warbler (Phylloscopus inornatus). Palla's Grashopper Warbler (Locustella certhiola).

GOLDCREST is the only regular warbler species that breeds in the Faroe Islands although no less than 29 warbler species have been recorded. During autumn migration the tiny Goldcrest can be seen in large numbers. In both spring, summer and winter it is less common. It often prefers plantations with pine trees, but during migration they can show up almost everywhere. It is the smallest bird in the Faroe Islands and can be hard to see as it is very active when foraging in the trees. Females have a yellow crown whereas the males' crown is more reddish on top.

Several warbler species have made breeding attempts during summer, but autumn really is the best time to look for warblers. For instance, Yellow-browed Warblers occur on a regular basis from late September throughout October.

And up to 19 individuals have been observed in one day on one island. Interestingly a Yellow-browed Warbler and a Tennessee Warbler - one originating 3.000 – 4.000 km km to the east and the other one to the west - were caught in the same ringing-net within an hour during autumn in Sumba, Suðuroy. Other remarkable warbler records include a Palla's Grasshopper Warbler in autumn, Black and White Warbler in summer and no less than five Subalpine Warblers in just two weeks during spring. Furthermore in early June a Green Warbler (Phylloscopus niditus) has been caught in the Heligoland Trap on Nólsoy - the only place in the Faroe Islands where passerines are caught and ringed on a regular basis.

Starling and Sparrow

Sturnus vulgaris faroensis

Adult Starling (Sturnus vulgaris faroensis). House Sparrows (Passer domesticus).

THE FAROESE STARLINGS constitute a specific subspecies Sturnus vulgaris faroensis, which is only found in the Faroe Islands. The Faroese starlings are significantly bigger than starlings from the European mainland and the juvenile birds are darker than their European relatives. Starlings are resident in the Faroe Islands. Most birds are associated with human settlements, but that can also be found in the heathlands.

House Sparrows first came during the 1940's. Now they are present all year round. They are closely associated with human settlements. Tree Sparrow have bred in the Faroe Islands in the past, and after being gone for many years they started breeding on Svínoy in 2013. Everywhere else it is a rare visitor.

Key facts

The Faroe Islands are a Nordic country situated between Norway, Iceland and Scotland

The Faroese population originates from the Norwegian Vikings, who came to the islands around the year 850

The first settlement in the Faroe Islands was made by the Irish monks and dates back to year 625

The Faroe Islands land area is 1,399 km2

The capital of the Faroe Islands is Tórshavn with 20,000 inhabitants

The population of the Faroe Islands is just below 50,000

The Faroese speak Faroese, its origin is of the Old Norse language

The Faroe Islands are a selfgoverning nation within the Kingdom of Denmark

The Faroe Islands practice their autonomy through one of the world's oldest parliaments, The Løgting

Fishing is the main industry of the Faroe Islands

The Faroe Islands have a very rich and exciting cultural life

The Faroe Islands have a modern and well organised infrastructure

How to get to the Faroe Islands:

Throughout the year there are good connections to the Faroe Islands from our neighbouring countries both by plane and car-ferry.

For further information: www.visitfaroeislands.com

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