

Birds observed on Surtsey

by

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Introduction.

The following notes on birds observed on Surtsey are based on observations made by various scientists who have visited the island at one time or another. The author of this report made three visits to Surtsey in 1965, viz. on February 20, April 4, and June 3. On the first two trips he was accompanied by Agnar Ingólfsson and on the third trip by Arnthór Gardarsson. Furthermore, Agnar Ingólfsson visited the island again on September 7, 1965. The ornithological observations made during these four visits have been greatly augmented by information supplied by Sigurdur Thorarinsson and Sturla Fridriksson, and some information has also been received from Eythor Einarsson and Sverrir Scheving Thorsteinsson.

As the existing information about bird life on Surtsey has been obtained by scientists in various fields who have only made short visits to the island and at irregular intervals, it is obvious that this information must be fragmentary. If an observer had been stationed on the island for longer periods there is no doubt that many more birds would have been seen, and particularly so if the island had been manned during the migration periods in spring and autumn.

As yet no birds have nested on Surtsey, but in view of the fact that the Vestmann Islands are occupied by huge sea bird colonies, it will probably not be long before the first birds will start nesting there. The successive colonization of Surtsey by birds is per se of considerable ecological interest and therefore deserves full attention. A virgin island like Surtsey furthermore provides unique opportunities for studying

the role of birds in facilitating the transport of seeds and perhaps also terrestrial invertebrates across ecological barriers, in this case the body of water separating Surtsey from the other islands of the archipelago and from the mainland of Iceland. It would also be of considerable interest to collect certain migratory birds on Surtsey when they return from their winter quarters in spring. Surtsey is now the southernmost point of Iceland and many migratory birds will no doubt make use of the island as their first landing-place when reaching Iceland in spring. The viability of any seeds found in the alimentary canal of such birds should be tested by germination experiments in order to find out if and to what extent birds may in the past have contributed to the colonization of Iceland by plants. The same also applies to another category of birds or the so-called drift migrants, which sometimes reach Iceland in large numbers in autumn and spring and will no doubt also turn up on Surtsey (cf. the turtle dove listed below).

List of Species.

Oystercatcher (*Haematopus ostralegus*). In 1964 seven oystercatchers were seen on the island on May 14. In 1965 five were seen on April 4, three on May 9, and in the afternoon of June 3 seven came flying from NE toward the island, where they settled. In all these cases the oystercatchers frequented the sandy beach on the north side of the island and on April 4 they were seen feeding on living Euphausiids washed upon the shore by the surf.

Ringed Plover (*Charadrius hiaticula*). On August 19, 1965, two ringed plovers were encountered on the sandy north beach.

Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*). In 1965 turnstones were twice observed on the island. On April 4 six turnstones were sitting on the lava front in the southwestern part of the island and on September 7 a flock of fifteen turnstones was seen in the westernmost part of the sandy north beach. The same day 8 turnstones were observed on the lava edge on the south side of the island.

Knot (*Calidris canutus*). On September 7, 1965, one knot was among the turnstones on the sandy north beach.

Purple Sandpiper (*Calidris maritima*). On January 31, 1965, a number of purple sandpipers was encountered on the eastern shore of the island.

Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*). Two dunlins were seen on the island on May 14, 1964.

Sanderling (*Crocethia alba*). On September 7, 1965, four sanderlings were associating with turnstones on the sandy north beach.

Red-necked Phalarope (*Phalaropus lobatus*). On June 7, 1964, fourteen red-necked phalaropes were swimming close to the shore on the west side of the island and on August 1 large flocks, amounting to hundreds of birds, were found swimming close to the shores of the island. In early August 1965 red-necked phalaropes were again seen in large numbers close to the island, and on September 7 eight were encountered off the westernmost part of the island.

Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*)

Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*)

Glaucous Gull (*Larus hyperboreus*)

Already at an early stage of the Surtsey eruption the new island, which rapidly increased in size, was used by gulls as a resting place. Thus on December 1, 1963, or only two weeks after the eruption had started, unidentified gulls were seen to alight on the island during intervals between explosive eruptions. Later on when the eruption had changed from an explosive to an effusive phase gulls gradually started to rest regularly on the sandy northern beach of the island. There a typical gull roost soon developed where gulls in varying numbers were seen throughout the summer of 1964. On February 20, 1965, at least 50 gulls were seen resting in this part of the island. Most of these birds were great black-backed gulls and among them immature

and subadult birds greatly outnumbered adults. Among the greater black-backs there were, however, a few glaucous gulls and a few herring gulls. On April 4 relatively few gulls were present on the island, but this time three adult herring gulls were seen near the lagoon. In late April and in May there were again many gulls roosting on the island, but on June 3 only nine greater black-backs (5 juvenile, 2 subadult, and 2 adult birds) and two adult herring gulls were encountered. Throughout the summer 1965 gulls were roosting on the island in varying numbers and on September 7, 1965, about 80 gulls were present, 30 on the sandy northern beach and 50 on the shore below the lava cliffs on the south side of the island. The majority of these birds appeared to be greater black-backs, while a few glaucous gulls and herring gulls were also present.

Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*). Along with the true gulls of the genus Larus kittiwakes were probably the first birds to alight on Surtsey and later on they started to roost regularly on the island. During the spring and summer of 1964 small flocks of kittiwakes were repeatedly observed resting on tephra bluffs and ridges away from the Larus gulls which occupied the flat, sandy beach. But in 1965 kittiwakes started to occupy low vertical cliffs which has by now been formed at the lava front by marine abrasion. The first time kittiwakes were found to occupy such sites was on June 3, 1965, when three adult birds and one immature bird were sitting on cliff ledges on the west side of the island. A month later (on July 3) the number of birds occupying this site had increased considerably and the cliffs in this particular place had by now become white-washed by excrements. On July 24 no less than 70-80 kittiwakes were occupying this part of the cliffs, and the same day a flock of about 50 kittiwakes was resting in the lower part of a steep tephra bluff on the north side of the island. On September 7 kittiwakes were occupying cliffs in four different places on the west and south side of the island. Altogether 120 kittiwakes were counted in these four places. Most of these birds

were young of the year, a few were second year birds but no adults were present. The same day three young kittiwakes were sitting on the sandy beach on the north side of the island.

Arctic Tern (*Sterna paradisaea*). On June 7, 1964, a few arctic terns were seen on the island.

Common Guillemot (*Uria aalge*). Oiled specimens of Uria aalge were repeatedly encountered on the island, the first one being found on October 15, 1964. In 1965 one was found on January 31, five on February 20, one on April 29, three on May 9 and one on August 17. All these birds were still alive when found, but they apparently died soon afterwards and were later eaten by scavengers (ravens and/or gulls).

Turtle Dove (*Streptopelia turtur*). On October 4, 1964, a turtle dove was seen by Sturla Fridriksson in the lava flow in the southwestern part of the island. The turtle dove is known as an irregular drift migrant to Iceland, particularly in autumn and spring.

Raven (*Corvus corax*). In the first half of 1965 two ravens were regularly encountered on the island. They were first seen on January 31, but again on February 20, February 28, March 13, March 19 and on May 9. These two birds were at first believed to be a pair and it was thought that they might eventually nest on the island, but they disappeared sometime in May.

Redwing (*Turdus iliacus*). During migration redwings were occasionally encountered on the island. Thus on April 16, 1964, a few redwings were seen. On October 15 one was seen in the lava west of the crater and on November 25 a few were seen on the sandy north beach and around the lagoon. In 1965 on the other hand no redwings were seen except on October 4, when a few were seen in the lava and near the lagoon.

Wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*). In 1965 wheatears were observed on the island on three different occasions. On July 3 two were seen at the west side of the lava flow. On September 7

two were seen in the lava south of the crater and on October 4 a few were seen in the lava near the crater and one was found dead west of the crater.

Snow Bunting (*Plectrophenax nivalis*). Snow Buntings were encountered on the island on three occasions in 1964 but never in 1965. On May 14, 1964, one snow bunting was seen, on August 19 two were seen flying over the lava flow and on October 10 several were seen in the lava.

In addition to the species listed above various species of sea birds have at different times been seen at sea around the island. Among these fulmars (*Fulmarus glacialis*) and gannets (*Sula bassana*) have probably been the most regularly occurring species. It may also be mentioned that on June 3, 1965, two geese (probably pink-footed geese (*Anser brachyrhynchus*)) were seen flying over the island and the same day goose droppings were found on the sandy beach on its north side. This shows clearly that geese must have rested there.

A number of dead birds has also been found washed upon the shore of the island. Thus on June 3, 1965, no less than thirteen fulmars, partly eaten by scavengers, were found along the tide line, and the same day a razorbill (*Alca torda*) was found dead on the shore. And on April 4, 1965, a mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*) was found washed upon the shore. This was an adult male. Other dead birds found on the shore were gulls, kittiwakes and common guillemots.