

Bird Observations on Surtsey in 1966

by

Finnur Gudmundsson
Museum of Natural History

Introduction

No birds nested on Surtsey in 1966 although certain species, particularly kittiwakes and black guillemots, appeared to be prospecting the island for future nesting sites. One and probably the main reason preventing birds from nesting on the island up to now has undoubtedly been the more or less continuous volcanic activity of the two subsidiary crater islands Syrtlingur and Jólnir close to Surtsey. The crater island Syrtlingur was active from May to October 1965, while the crater island Jólnir was active from late December 1965 to August 1966. However, both these islands have now disappeared, but as a result of their volcanic activity Surtsey became and still is covered by a thick layer of volcanic ash which is blown up in windy weather and makes life on the island most unpleasant. For further information regarding the volcanic activity of these two subsidiary islands I should like to refer to Dr. Sigurdur Thorarinsson's paper in this report.

Although birds have not started to nest on Surtsey they are making increasing use of the island as a resting place. This applies particularly to gulls (Larus and Rissa), which habitually roost on the island. The number of gulls and kittiwakes roosting there may sometimes reach 5-10 thousand, and it is obvious that through their excrements considerable quantities of organic substances are added to the sterile soils of Surtsey.

In 1966 I only visited Surtsey once, i.e. on October 14 when there were no land birds on the island. Other persons who visited Surtsey in 1966 for the purpose of making ornithological observations were Mr. Árni Waag who went there on July 16 and again on September 5 to September 9, Mr. Jón B. Sigurdsson who visited the island on March 17, and Mr. Arnthór Gardarsson

who was on the island on April 2. Several other visitors to Surtsey have also made available their information about birds observed there, and I am much indebted not only to the gentlemen mentioned above but also to Dr. Sigurdur Thorarinsson, Dr. Sturla Fridriksson, Mr. Björn Johnsen, and Mr. Páll Steingrímsson who have all contributed notes on birds seen on Surtsey. Altogether I have had at my disposal bird notes from 13 visits to Surtsey in 1966, and it is on these that the following list is based.

List of species

Merlin (*Falco columbarius*). One seen flying over the lava on September 6.

Oystercatcher (*Haematopus ostralegus*). About 20 on the sandy north beach on April 2. One seen on September 5.

Ringed Plover (*Charadrius hiaticula*). One on the sandy north beach on August 12 and one among other waders in the same place on September 9. The next day one was seen at the lagoon but this may have been the same bird.

Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*). Four seen on July 28. On September 5 about 50 turnstones were scattered along the shore on the north side of the island. The next day 31 turnstones were observed at the lagoon and some additional birds were on the shore and at the edge of the lava.

Redshank (*Tringa totanus*). On*April 2 no less than 15-20 redshanks were present on the island, and two were seen on September 9.

Knot (*Calidris canutus*). Two were on the island on July 28 and on September 6 two were at the lagoon.

Purple Sandpiper (*Calidris maritima*). On April 2 a flock of 11 purple sandpipers was observed at the lagoon.

Sanderling (*Crocethia alba*). 10-15 sanderlings were associating with turnstones on the sandy north beach on September 5,

and the next day about 20 were at the lagoon and a few additional birds on the shore.

Red-necked Phalarope (*Phalaropus lobatus*). On July 16 hundreds of red-necked phalaropes were swimming close to the shore at different parts of the island. On this day large patches of pumice were floating on the sea around the island and the phalaropes appeared to prefer patches of calm water between floating rafts of pumice. On August 12, August 17 and August 18 large flocks of red-necked phalaropes were seen close to the island. However, in late August and early September phalaropes became scarcer, though 30-40 were still present on September 5, but on September 7 only 15 were seen.

Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*).

Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*).

Glaucous Gull (*Larus hyperboreus*).

Gulls of the above three species frequented the island throughout the year, and regular gull roosts were typical for the sandy north beach, the area around the lagoon and the isolated bluff between the lagoon and the sea. By far the most common species in the roosts were great black-backed gulls, chiefly immature birds in their first, second and third year, but the other two species were present in varying numbers on most occasions. The number of gulls roosting on the island was much higher in summer than in winter.

Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*). Ten among great black-backs on the sandy north beach on July 16 and two among other gulls on the shore on the southwest side of the island on July 28.

Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*). In 1966 the kittiwake was probably the most common bird on Surtsey. Kittiwakes frequented the island throughout the year and during the summer they formed very large roosts, both on flat beaches and on bluffs, especially on the north side of the island. They were often present in thousands and their numbers may sometimes have reached 6 to 8 thousand. Kittiwakes, together with some Larus gulls, also

rested on the crater island Jólnir during intervals between explosive eruptions and even during eruptions. In 1966, as in 1965, kittiwakes also occupied cliffs on Surtsey. They were first seen occupying this habitat on May 24 but from then on and throughout the summer they were observed in varying numbers on the cliffs on the west side of the island. Considerably more kittiwakes were occupying cliffs on Surtsey in 1966 than in 1965 and they were also occupying bigger areas and sometimes overflowing to the cliff top. The cliffs occupied by the kittiwakes gradually became white - washed by their excrements. Although a large number of the kittiwakes occupying cliffs on Surtsey in 1966 were adult birds, there was no sign of nesting.

Razorbill (*Alca torda*). One or more on cliffs on the west side of the island on July 29.

Common Guillemot (*Uria aalge*). One on the shore on August 21. It stayed on shore all day and may have been a sick bird although it was not oiled. No oiled sea-birds were encountered on Surtsey in 1966.

Black Guillemot (*Cepphus grylle*). This species apparently did not discover Surtsey until 1966. It was never seen on or around the island in 1964 and 1965, but on July 16, 1966, at least 20 black guillemots were seen close to the shore on different sides of the island. They were mostly swimming close to the shore below the cliffs, one or two together in each place, and their behaviour strongly indicated nesting. When a human intruder approached they would come closer, constantly uttering their feeble, melancholic alarm calls. In spite of this there was not the slightest sign of nesting anywhere on the cliffs. On July 28 the situation was much the same. However, on September 5 the birds had disappeared, although a moulting specimen was encountered off the north shore. And on September 7 two moulting specimens were seen ca. 50 m off the west coast.

Raven (*Corvus corax*). Two seen on March 17, one on April 2, and two seen daily from August 13 to August 17.

Wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*). Two seen daily from August 12 to August 21. They kept mostly to the research station. On August 29 one was found dead and on September 5 four were observed at the edge of the new lava.

Meadow Pipit (*Anthus pratensis*). One at the research station and one near the new crater on September 5. Two (probably the same birds) were seen again the next day.

White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*). Three at the research station on August 13 but only one on August 17. On September 5 seven were seen, four on the north beach and three in the lava. The next day two were seen at the research station.

Lapland Bunting (*Calcarius lapponicus*). Two encountered on September 8 about 100 m from the research station. One was an adult male and the other a female or an immature bird. The Lapland bunting is an irregular drift migrant in Iceland, turning up occasionally in spring and autumn.

Snow Bunting (*Plectrophenax nivalis*). One found dead in the lava on June 27. One seen on July 28 and one on August 18.

In addition to the species listed above, various species of sea-birds have been seen at sea around the island, but it is not considered necessary to list them here. Neither are carcasses of birds washed up on the shore included in the list. As regards food available to birds on Surtsey, it may be mentioned that not only the waders encountered on the island but also passerines (including the raven) and gulls have been observed feeding on living Euphausiids (chiefly Meganyctiphanes norvegica), sometimes washed upon the shore in large quantities. Turnstones have also been seen eating Cirripeds (Lepas) and a knot is known to have attempted to do the same. Any dead birds washed upon the shore are eaten by gulls and/or ravens and the same also applies to several marine organisms (molluscs, sea-urchins, etc.).