

Ornithological Work on Surtsey in 1969 and 1970

By

FINNUR GUDMUNDSSON

Museum of Natural History, Reykjavík

1969

In 1969 ornithological work on Surtsey was continued, especially during the spring migration period. Mr. Hálfdan Björnsson and Mr. Völundur Hermóðsson stayed on the island from April 11 to May 15 and Mr. Hálfdan Björnsson stayed there again from September 11 to September 18.

All birds seen each day during the above periods were registered and 173 birds were collected. The species and numbers of birds collected in spring were as follows:

Squacco Heron (<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>)	1
Grey Lag Goose (<i>Anser anser</i>)	2
Barnacle Goose (<i>Branta leucopsis</i>)	1
Ringed Plover (<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>)	1
Golden Plover (<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>)	1
Whimbrel (<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>)	2
Redshank (<i>Tringa totanus</i>)	1
Dunlin (<i>Calidris alpina</i>)	1
Short-eared Owl (<i>Asio flammeus</i>)	1
Fieldfare (<i>Turdus pilaris</i>)	1
Song Thrush (<i>Turdus philomelos</i>)	1
Redwing (<i>Turdus iliacus</i>)	14
Wheatear (<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>)	64
European Robin (<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>)	1
Meadow Pipit (<i>Anthus pratensis</i>)	50
White Wagtail (<i>Motacilla alba</i>)	12
Brambling (<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>)	1
Snow Bunting (<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>)	12
Total	167

In September the following birds were collected:

Ringed Plover (<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>)	1
Wheatear (<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>)	2
Chiffchaff (<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>)	1
Snow Bunting (<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>)	2
Total	6

All collected birds were weighed and sexed and their degree of fatness determined according to McCabe's scale proposed in the Auk, 1943. Furthermore, most of the collected birds were prepared as study skins for the Natural History Museum, Reykjavík.

Among the collected birds, the Squacco Heron is new to Iceland while the following species are drift migrants: Field Fare, Song Thrush, European Robin, Brambling, and Chiffchaff. Further drift migrants observed on Surtsey in 1969 but not collected were Sky Lark (*Alauda arvensis*), Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*), Jackdaw (*Corvus monedula*), and Ring Ouzel (*Turdus torquatus*).

The arrival of Icelandic passerines such as the Wheatear, the Meadow Pipit, and the White Wagtail was somewhat delayed, probably due to unfavourable weather conditions in the British Isles, which may have caused a delayed departure. The peak passage of Meadow Pipits was thus on May 8 although they also passed the island in some numbers on May 2, May 5, and even on May 14. Wheatears passed the island from May 1 to May 15 with peaks on May 8 and May 14 while peak passage of White Wagtails occurred on May 2. As in 1968, there was a very distinct difference between Wheatears and Meadow Pipits as regards degrees of fatness. As in previous years most of the Snow Buntings collected on Surtsey in the spring of 1969 belonged to the nominate race and not to the mostly resident Icelandic race.

Peak passage of the boreal Greylag occurred on April 18 and 19 while the peak passage of the two arctic species, the Pink-footed Goose and the Barnacle Goose, did not take place until the first two days of May and on May 8.

So far no birds have nested on Surtsey, but throughout the summer both Fulmars (*Fulmarus*

glacialis) and Kittiwakes (*Rissa tridactyla*) have constantly been occupying cliffs on the west side of the island, and Fulmars are probably the most likely birds to become the first nesters there. A pair of Ravens (*Corvus corax*) has also stayed on the island for several years and this pair may sooner or later start nesting there.

1970

In 1970 some ornithological work was carried out on Surtsey as in previous years. Mr. Hálfðan Björnsson stayed on the island from April 18 to May 16. He was accompanied by Mr. Ragnar Jónsson from April 18 to May 12. Throughout the period June 15 to September 11, Mr. Erling Ólafsson and Mr. Björn Jóhannsson were stationed on the island. Both Hálfðan Björnsson and Erling Ólafsson are highly skilled and experienced bird watchers.

All birds seen each day during the above periods were registered and 174 birds were collected. The species and numbers of birds collected were as follows:

Corncrake (<i>Crex crex</i>)	1
Oystercatcher (<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>)	1
Ringed Plover (<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>)	2
Golden Plover (<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>)	1
Turnstone (<i>Arenaria interpres</i>)	2
Whimbrel (<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>)	3
Redshank (<i>Tringa totanus</i>)	3
Purple Sandpiper (<i>Calidris maritima</i>)	10
Dunlin (<i>Calidris alpina</i>)	5
Sanderling (<i>Crocethia alba</i>)	4
Red-necked Phalarope (<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>)	25
Puffin (<i>Fratercula arctica</i>)	1
Redwing (<i>Turdus iliacus</i>)	20
Wheatear (<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>)	29
Willow Warbler (<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>)	1
Meadow Pipit (<i>Anthus pratensis</i>)	28
White Wagtail (<i>Motacilla alba</i>)	15
Brambling (<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>)	1
Snow Bunting (<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>)	22
Total	174

As in 1969, all collected birds were weighed and sexed and their degree of fatness determined, and most of them were prepared as study skins for the Natural History Museum, Reykjavík.

Among the collected birds the Corncrake (*Crex crex*), the Willow Warbler (*Phylloscopus trochilus*), and the Brambling (*Fringilla montifringilla*) are stragglers, which are only known to occur in Iceland during the migration periods. Further drift migrants or stragglers observed on Surtsey in 1970, but not collected, were the Fieldfare (*Turdus pilaris*), one specimen being seen on May 8, 10, 11, and 12. It may possibly have been the same specimen on all occasions. A male Redstart (*Phoenicurus phoenicurus*) was positively identified on May 14, and a Little Gull (*Larus minutus*) was seen among Great Black-backed Gulls and Kittiwakes on September 3.

The most important ornithological event happening on Surtsey in 1970 was the nesting of the first two species on the island: the Fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*), and the Black Guillemot (*Cepphus grylle*). One pair of each of the above species nested successfully on the island.

The nest of the Black Guillemot was found on July 27 when it contained two half-grown young. The nest was in a crevice 7 m above sea level in 13 m high cliffs on the south-west side of the island. The young left the nest about August 20. A second nest may possibly have been in the same area but this could not be ascertained satisfactorily. Black Guillemots were common along many parts of the shore of the island, and no doubt will now start to nest there in increasing numbers.

The nest of the Fulmar was found on August 19 on a ledge 10 m above sea level in 25 m high cliffs on the west side of the island. On that day an adult bird was sitting on the ledge beside a not fully grown young. The young left the nest on September 4. That part of the cliffs where the nest was found has been occupied by Fulmars for a number of years. As in the case of the Black Guillemot, the Fulmar is expected to start nesting in this particular area of Surtsey in increasing numbers.

The third species most likely to start nesting on Surtsey is the Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*). For several years Kittiwakes have been occupying cliffs on the west side of the island some distance away from the cliffs occupied by the Fulmars.

It is intended to publish in one paper the results of the ornithological work carried out on Surtsey in 1969 and 1970.