



## A GOOSE-WATCHING VISIT TO NORTHERN ICELAND

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*(Illustrated by Robert Gillmor)*

UNDUE optimism is not wise where bird watching is concerned and perhaps we should have been less disappointed had we treated the assurances that Skagafjörður swarmed with Barnacle Geese in autumn with greater caution. However, 3 September 1956 found us in this broad valley, running south from the northern coast of Iceland, eagerly awaiting the migrant Barnacle Geese fleeing the onset of Greenland's winter. The farmer in whose hay barn we camped some 20 miles from the coast, daily told us that the geese would come as they did annually, although eventually he was forced to admit that 1956 was an exceptional year.

We stayed at Silfrastadir in Skagafjörður (about forty miles south west of the second largest town in Iceland, Akureyri) from 3 to 24 September. We covered the surrounding countryside on foot for an area of about 5 miles in each direction. The weather was severe, with some very cold, sleepless nights which made us feel more like sitting down to sleep in what sun and shelter there was, than exploring further afield. The fact that we found no sizeable flocks of Barnacle Geese staying in the valley until 13 September was also discouraging. We dared not move camp lest while we were away the geese suddenly arrived en masse as we believed they would. However, we are most grateful to Jóhann Jóhannesson of Silfrastadir for his almost overwhelming hospitality, which did much to make up for our discomfort and too liberal spare time, and for his advice and information.

During our stay there were always up to 150 of the local Greylags in the area and these were quite interesting to watch when conditions were suitable. They nest in the area, mostly near the river Heradsvötn and, we were told, largely on the more rocky western side of the river. We saw many family

parties, the goslings well able to fly. On 7th we saw an adult with white primaries flying about, looking like a very athletic domestic goose. The bird seemed to be paired with a normal mate and leading two normal goslings. The Greylag flocks seemed to roost on gravel banks in the river and fed on any grazing land in the area though not near the houses. We were told that in spring they were much tamer, even tamer than the Barnacles which come into the hayfields near the farms to feed. We were also told that none were seen further up the valley during the sheep round-up between 13 and 16 September.

We were fortunate in seeing three flocks of Pinkfooted Geese flying up the valley from the north. The first were on 8 September, a flock of about 20 flying south in the morning, and in the early afternoon 29 flying south about 1000 ft. above the valley and away out of sight at hill top level towards the long valley Goddalir. The next day we saw 15 flying south late in the afternoon. On 10th we saw a family party of 6 on the ground near the river. They flew away from us, northwards down the valley and landed with a large flock of Greylags. This must be one of the only records of Pinkfeet in the lowlands of northern Iceland. Jóhann had never seen any here, nor on his sheep-fetching journeys far up the valley, although he knew they had been seen up there.

These birds could only have come from Greenland and were evidently mostly continuing into the interior where they would veer eastwards round the Kerlingarfjöll or Hofsjökull as we had seen flocks doing at the same time of year in 1954. Most likely they would stop in the Pjorsa valley before continuing to Britain.

In the first days of our stay we saw several flocks of Barnacles but they did not stay long, some flying straight over and on into the interior. Those that stopped included no young of the year. On 13th a large flock arrived from the north-west early in the afternoon, coming down from a great height. The flock turned out to be 68 strong and to include several families. They stayed through the 14th but had gone by the 15th. On 16th a flock of 11 appeared and stayed until 22nd. This flock also included some goslings and we were able to watch the behaviour of the families for some time. In 1954 in the interior we had noticed that all but the very latest flocks to arrive had no goslings in them. It looks as if the non-breeding birds leave Greenland earlier than the breeding birds. The total number of Barnacle Geese passing Silfrastadir between 3 and 23 September was about 200, a fraction of the number we had expected and certainly many fewer than the local people expected. There are various ways one could account for these "missing millions." The simplest explanation would be that the main passage was unusually late and came after we had left. The local people said that every year the first Barnacles arrive at the coast on 29 August and are soon seen in large numbers all over the valley. About half way through our stay Johann admitted that the geese were unusually late at Silfrastadir although some had been seen on the coast on 31 August. But he predicted that the north-east winds forecast for 12 September would bring cold weather and geese. It brought snow but only the one flock of geese. By the time we left Skagafjordur the Barnacles were nearly a month late if it was true that the majority had not already left Greenland. This explanation seems unlikely. Another, equally unlikely but impossible to disprove, is that numbers of Barnacles were stopping



Silfrastadir—stormy evening.

further north in the valley between us and the sea and did not come down to Silfrastadir. On 7th two small flocks appeared near Silfrastadir just after we heard shooting further north. This suggests that some were present down the valley but it seems unlikely that large numbers were there. We saw none when we came through the valley on the way to Silfrastadir and on the way back on 24 September we only saw one, with a flock of Greylags.

The most probable explanation seems to be as follows. Skagafjordur has gained its reputation as a Barnacle resort from the large numbers which stay there in the spring and crowd the hay fields of the lowland farmers while snow still covers the interior and the uplands. But in autumn all the uplands are snow-free and available for Barnacles to stop on passage. Thus there is none of the bottleneck effect that there must be in spring. Consequently the numbers of geese are spread over a huge area, and any slight variation in wind which takes them away from Skagafjordur does not matter, they may stop anywhere and need not bother to find their way into the northern valleys.

Forgetting the scientific aspects of the trip, the lack of Barnacle Geese to study made it possible for us to watch, enjoy and take part in the main September activity of the Icelandic farmers. This was the annual gathering and sorting of the sheep, and in Skagafjordur the ponies, which had been spending the summer in the highlands and interior. We saw the farmers setting off on horseback and their return a few days later driving many hundreds of ponies and thousands of sheep. The ponies, many with foals, were strung out along three miles and were slowly brought along the road running against the side of the valley. Off the road and lower down was the concrete gathering pen, surrounded by smaller pens, each allotted to a particular farm. The animals, ponies one day and sheep the next, were herded into the central pen—and then it was chaos as the farmers looked for their animals and then tried to drive

them into their own pens. When it was all over everyone gathered in a shed to celebrate the successful completion of the autumn round up.

Our most exciting occasion was on the day that brought the largest party of Barnacles. We stalked to within 150 yards and then lay behind an abrupt bank. There were 68, mostly families, separated from us by a river. Having watched for some time we moved further out of sight to eat our "lunch." Hearing the Barnacles fly up, but evidently not away, we again crawled to our vantage point and were thrilled to see that they had crossed the river and were feeding in a broad line towards us. We watched excitedly as they came nearer and nearer, quite unaware that we lay only 50 yards away. Eventually our over-exuberant attempts at photography caused some to become suspicious and the flock went off, not far and not in panic but it finished that day's watching. We had watched them for some hours and had quite forgotten the frustrations of the previous ten days of searching in poor weather for just such a flock.

Once, attracted by the sudden clamour of frightened geese, we watched a large white gyrfalcon hurtling after a flock of Greylags. The terrified geese split up in wild confusion, flinging themselves low over the valley floor. The gyrfalcon, looking almost as large as a goose, did not make a kill and we know of no such record but it certainly did not give the impression of a playful stoop. In 1954 we had seen one stooping at Barnacles. They reacted even more violently, several flying straight downwards, diving headlong into the river. This was a most forcible demonstration of the use of "whiffling" so familiar in a mild form to those who have watched geese at the New Grounds or elsewhere in this country.

