PHOTO STORY

# Seventeen Arctic Birds to Search for on Iceland to Greenland: In the Wake of the Vikings

By **Dennis Minty** | December 09, 2020

**Related expedition:** Iceland to Greenland: In the Wake of the Vikings

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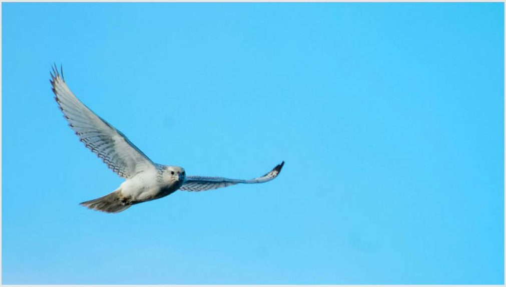
*Seabirds, songbirds, waterfowl, birds of prey—the Arctic offers plentiful avian wildlife spotting opportunities! Photographer Dennis Minty shares some fun facts and highlights which species to look out for on Adventure Canada's Iceland to Greenland: In the Wake of the Vikings expedition.*



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## Gyrfalcon (Falco rusticolus)

The world's largest falcon is also one of fastest birds, able to reach speeds over 200 kilometres per hour as it hunts small mammals and ground birds on the tundra. While perched on high boulders, they scan the landscape, regurgitate pellets, and defecate—thereby creating a micro-environment around the base of the boulders, which is more fertile than the surrounding terrain.

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## White-tailed eagle (Haliaeetus albicilla)

This close cousin to the bald eagle is sometimes called the white-tailed sea eagle, since it is one of a group of eagles that hunts in coastal areas, mainly for fish. It is a Eurasian species that reaches its western extent in Greenland.

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## Great skua (Stercorarius skua)

This is the gangster of the seabird world. Skuas eat the chicks of other seabirds whole and attack other birds to pirate their food. They will even work together to drown the much larger northern gannet, then feed on the floating carcass.

© Dennis Minty

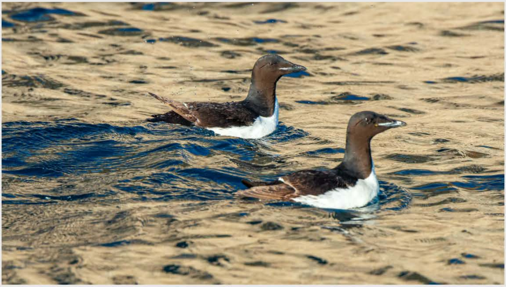
## Parasitic jaeger (Stercorarius parasiticus)

This gull-like “lord of the tundra” has characteristics similar to hawks. It preys on songbirds, seabirds, waterfowl, and small mammals, favouring eggs and the young when available. It also pirates food from other birds, especially fish. In Europe it is also known as the Arctic skua.

© Dennis Minty

## Atlantic puffin (Fratercula arctica)

The puffin can fly at over eighty kilometres per hour, dive to over sixty metres, swim fast enough to catch speeding fish, thrive through a winter on the North Atlantic, find its home nest through dense fog, and lay an egg that is twenty percent of its body size. It may look comical, but that belies its true competence.



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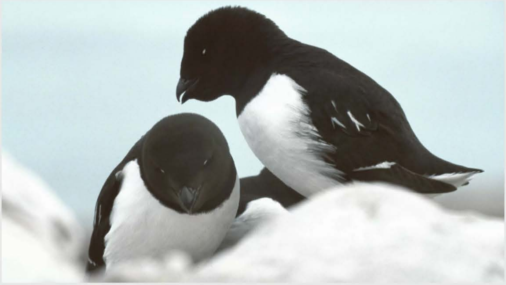
## Thick-billed murre (Uria lomvia)

The thick-billed murre (also known as Brünnich's guillemot) nests on high, near-vertical cliffs in the Arctic, laying a single egg on a narrow ledge barely more than an egg-length wide. When the downy chick is ready to leave, it still cannot fly. So, coached by its parent, it must leap from high on the cliff to the sea below.



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## Dovekie (Alle alle)

Known as a little auk in Europe, or as a bull bird in Newfoundland and Labrador, the dovekie is a member of the seabird family known as alcids (which includes puffins, murres, and razorbills). It is the most abundant seabird in the North Atlantic, with large breeding colonies in Greenland and Iceland, and it's also the most abundant alcid in the world.

© Dennis Minty

## Black guillemot (Cepphus grylle)

As the most widespread breeding bird in Greenland, this black and white beauty can be found all around the coast, where it feeds on crustaceans and small fish. When it takes to wing, white shoulder patches flash like a strobe light. In contrast to its monochrome body, its legs and mouth are brilliant red.

© Dennis Minty

## Arctic tern (Sterna paradisaea)

Having the longest migration (48,000 kilometres!) in the animal kingdom, from the Arctic to southern South America and Antarctica, this aerobatic flyer sees more hours of daylight—and therefore has more feeding time—than almost any other animal.

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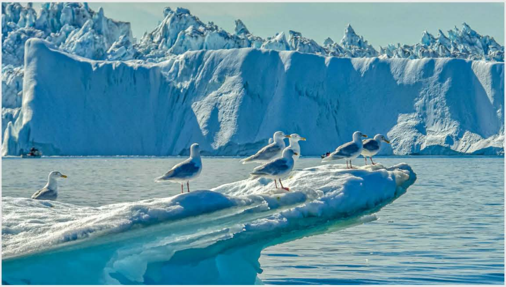
## Red-throated loon (Gavia stellata)

Also known as the red-throated diver, this smallest of the loons is the one that breeds furthest north, as far as northern Greenland. Most loons take flight by running across the water, but this is the only one that launches directly from either land or sea.

© Dennis Minty

## Ivory gull (Pagophila eburnea)

This Arctic specialist, the only gull with pure white plumage, overwinters near the ice edge and around polynyas, where it feeds on small fish and crustaceans. It is also an adept scavenger that follows polar bears and cleans up after them. Although chances are rare, it is only in the Arctic that a sighting is possible.



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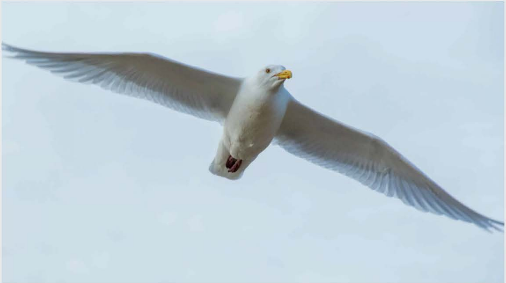
## Iceland gull (Larus glaucoides)

Smaller and more delicate than the glaucous gull, it breeds in Arctic Canada and Greenland, but, surprisingly, not in Iceland. Many other gulls of the North Atlantic have black wing tips, but not this one—a characteristic among many that it shares with the glaucous gull.



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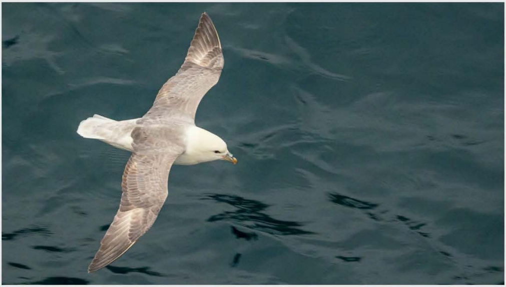
## Glaucous gull (Larus hyperboreus)

This omnivore of the Far North rivals the great black-backed gull for the position of world's largest gull. Aggressive feeders, they will swallow whole live animals like fish, small mammals, and other birds. They have a contrasting red spot near the tip of their yellow bill, which serves as a "target" for the precocial chicks to peck at to elicit feeding by the adults.



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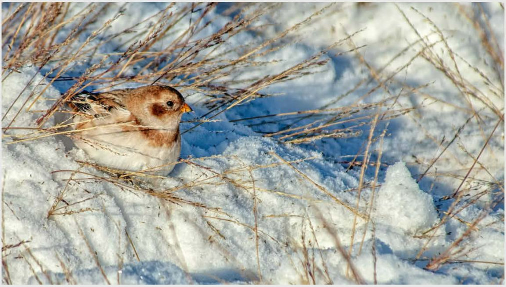
## Northern fulmar (Fulmarus glacialis)

Appearing much like a gull, the fulmar is more closely related to the albatross. It has a short, stocky body and stiff, straight wings that it uses to soar close to the waves and skim up small floating creatures. It is the most common bird sighted from the ship, which it likes to follow for long distances. With a well-developed olfactory system, it seems to be able to locate food, find its nesting sight, and identify its own young by smell alone.



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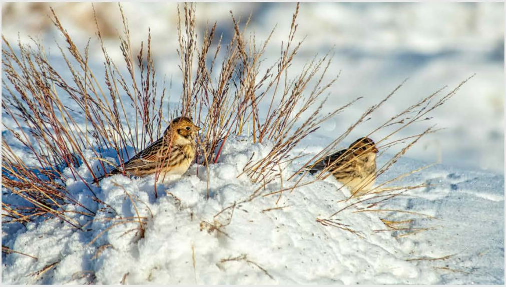
## Snow bunting (Plectrophenax nivalis)

A High Arctic breeder, males arrive to choose nesting sights weeks ahead of the females, when air temperatures are as low as -30°C (-22°F). The feather-lined nests insulate the chicks, but even so, the female must remain on the nest in the cold spring temperatures, while the male brings food every fifteen minutes or so.



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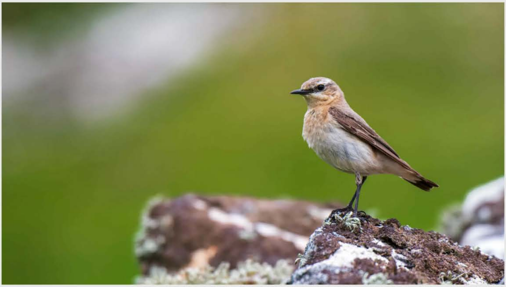
## Lapland longspur (Calcarius lapponicus)

This tundra breeder is one of the more common songbirds seen on a shore visit, along with the snow bunting and northern wheatear. Breeding males are easily identified by their striking black masks. Feeding almost constantly, they eat between 3,000 and 10,000 insects and seeds per day.



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## Northern wheatear (Oenanthe oenanthe)

With its white tail flashes obvious in flight, you can easily identify this northernmost breeding thrush. It follows one of the longest migratory routes in the world for a small bird, from sub-Saharan Africa as far as northern Greenland.