

Guinness and Gulls

In recent years the north and west coasts of Ireland have held the premier sites for seeing scarce gulls in late winter and early spring. With this in mind I was keeping a keen eye on the pagers and phoning the Irish Birdlines on a regular basis. By early to mid-February 2000 it became apparent that very large perhaps record numbers of Iceland Gulls were being regularly seen in the counties of Donegal, Galway and Clare. After speaking to Dave Pitman he informed me that very reasonably priced flights were available from Liverpool to Belfast with Easyjet (you can always rely on Dave to hunt out a bargain!) Through the Easyjet website I found return flights for around £45 per person. Several phone calls later I managed to convince Paul Ellis, Pete Scholes and Cheshire birder Jonathon Williams that we could have an excellent long weekend birding for a very reasonable price (most important for Pete!).

Friday 3rd March arrived and we all met up at Liverpool's John Lennon Airport about 5pm. Less than an hour later we were in the air Belfast-bound and about forty minutes on we were landing and hunting out our hire car which we had pre-booked. From Belfast we headed over to the west coast fishing town of Killybegs in Co.Donegal where three hours later we booked in to our B&B. Myself Pete and Johnno were ready for an early night and lots of sleep but our very own club secretary insisted on dragging us kicking and screaming to the Sail Inn, a local pub with live folk music and draught Guinness where he forced us to drink in rather large quantities for the next few hours.

Saturday morning arrived with a few bleary eyes but a cold crisp dawn soon woke us up. We wandered down to the quay and managed to see 14 Iceland Gulls, four Glaucous gulls and a Black Guillemot before a superb late breakfast in the bar above the Sail Inn. By late morning we were heading west to Mountcharles where we located at least a dozen Great Northern Divers and five Pale-bellied Brent Geese before heavy rain stopped play. Early afternoon we arrived at Raghley Point in Co.Sligo where we quickly found the Taverner's Canada Goose which was wintering with about 3,000 Barnacle Geese in the area.



A quick stop with a loaf of bread in Sligo town helped us to see another seven Iceland Gulls and an adult Ring-billed Gull, moving swiftly south we arrived in Galway by late afternoon and the gull hotspot of Nimmo's Pier where we soon caught up with a stunning first-winter Ross's Gull, two Ring-billed Gulls, a Glaucous and three more Iceland Gulls at close range. At dusk we again headed south, this time to Co.Clare where we booked in to an excellent B&B at the small town of Kilrush. Whilst getting changed to again be dragged to the nearest watering hole by our very thirsty secretary to drink that awful looking black beer, a call to Irish rare bird hotline BINS informed us of a white morph Gyr Falcon at nearby Poulnasherry Bay (the site we would be visiting the next morning).

Early morning dawned very windy, no not a reference to our secretaries Guinness intake of the previous evening, but outside where it was a typical Irish winters day, cold damp and very breezy. Poulnasherry Bay did not disappoint, one of the first birds we saw was a close adult Kumlien's Gull with lots of Iceland Gulls nearby. During the next few hours in the bay we managed to see many Icelands, a Glaucous, a Mediterranean, a hybrid Glaucous x Herring,

Spoonbill, Little Egret, two Greenshank, Whimbrel, Bonxie and at least 150 Pale-bellied Brent Geese. In the afternoon we decided to visit other nearby sites and caught up with 10 Chough and a single Raven at Loop Head before moving on to Clahane Beach where we soon located the Bonaparte's Gull returning for its second winter feeding in the surf with Blackheads and nearby two Little Gulls bringing the weekends gull tally to 13 species! We returned to Poulnasherry to check out the gulls prior to dusk and managed to see 36 Iceland Gulls in the same large flock bathing in the bay, what an end to the day!



Monday morning again dawned very wet, very windy and very cold but not to be beaten by the weather we had a quick look in the bay before breakfast, which also helped Johnno's hangover. Moving north after breakfast we decided to follow the coast road back to Galway occasionally stopping to check the sea for divers. Great Northern's were fairly common and we saw at least one Red-throat before seeing 5 Blackthroats together giving superb views just below us in a small sheltered area beneath the road. We reluctantly left the divers and the coast and started the long drive back to Belfast for our late evening flight back to Liverpool.

The whole trip from start to finish was one of the best birding trips I have ever done in Britain or Ireland, excellent birding, excellent company and I have to reluctantly admit the Guinness was rather good. I am already looking forward to doing a return trip in 2001 and I would thoroughly recommend the same or a similar trip to anyone.

Paul Slade