

## DUCK CATCHING IN ICELAND<sup>1</sup>

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It was in 1953 that I had last heard the magical “a-aadelow, a-aadelay” of the Long-tailed Ducks and here we were again in 1958 within a few miles of that most wonderful duck paradise of Myvatn, breeding ground of these and so many other species of ducks.

There were four in our party, Kit and Michael Savage, Gina—Michael’s wife, and myself, and we were hoping that we would be able to catch Harlequins, Longtails and Scoters for the Wildfowl Trust, as these birds, though represented in the collection before, were again badly needed.

Kit Savage had sailed from Leith with a Land Rover together with all our equipment and had met us two days earlier at Reykjavik airport.

During the drive to Myvatn—carried out in easy stages and avoiding the main road to the north as far as possible, principally so that we didn’t at times have to drive amid clouds of dust stirred up by other vehicles, we saw many varieties of birds, amongst which were Ptarmigan still in winter plumage, Ravens, Snow Bunting, White Wagtail, Red-breasted Mergansers, Goosanders, Whooper Swans and, amidst a wonderful setting high up in the hills with snow as a back-cloth, our first glimpse of Harlequins. In 1953 I had unfortunately not seen the male Harlie as when we were at Myvatn the females had already begun to sit and the males had either moulted or left the females. My first glimpse therefore of this duck swimming within a few yards of our car and against a pure white background was quite unbelievable. It was perhaps the most breathtaking sight that I have ever seen. Exclamations of, ‘It can’t be real’ and ‘how beautiful’ came from my companions, and so we sat just admiring these very beautiful birds with their red flanks, dark blue and white patterned head and white stripes on their flanks. There were three males and two females who were light greyish brown, drab and untidy looking compared with the magnificence of the males.

After a time Kit Savage brought us all to our senses, jumped out of the car and exclaimed, ‘Well let’s catch them,—that’s what we’re here for,’—but our Harlies had been kind enough to us already, and flew unhurriedly upstream and out of sight, leaving us with a most beautiful memory and the desire to press on to Myvatn where we hoped to see these birds in greater numbers.

However, Peter Scott during his expedition to Myvatn in 1951 had seen Harlies on the Laxá just south of Blonduos and so we planned to visit this area again to see for ourselves. We arrived at this village during early afternoon but found no sign of any Harlies, so decided to explore inland as far as Svinavatn, because we had noticed that these ducks particularly like rivers where they joined two lakes which were fairly close to each other, and here we thought the country was made for Harlies. We were proved to be right, so having established contact again, we pitched our tents and fell asleep on a cold night with thoughts of handling on the next day those beautiful creatures which we had seen that morning.

During the early part of June the weather in Iceland was cold with temperatures often falling to well below freezing at night, with clear blue

<sup>1</sup>Illustrated by photographs at pp. 190-4.



skies and sun that by 10 a.m. was quite warm. The snow was still at the sides of the roads and all the high ground was white, the grass had not as yet started to grow and so, with no flowers, the whole country bore an arid look which would at the end of the month be magically transformed into a most luxurious green, through which in July would explode a dazzling array of alpine flowers. So with the sun warming our tents we ate our breakfast, and walked to the bridge which spanned the Laxá. We were told that Harlies take great delight in flying under bridges, so that our best chances of catching them was to hang nets from these bridges and, 'hey presto—Harlies in nets.' We later found that though one could catch them this way, setting up nets on the bends of the rivers was far more efficient, and accounted for most of the birds that we sent back to the Wildfowl Trust. However, we did catch our first two ducks under a bridge within about 50 yards of our tents. We wanted to be able to send a crate of birds back by air when we arrived in Akureyri, so not having had much further success during the day we had to bring the Icelandic twilight to our aid, for there was no doubt that the ducks could see our nets. So with Kit Savage on one bank and myself on the other and a net suspended over a weir, we tied a warning line to our fingers, got into our sleeping bags at 1 a.m. and waited. It wasn't long before we were galvanised into life, when first one and then another and another

Harlie hit our net. We no sooner had these birds out and safely crated and ourselves back in the warmth of our sleeping bags, before we were called out of bed again, and thus we filled our crate and spent a restless night.

As the sun was lifting itself above the dazzling white peaks and we were packing our nets away, there on the lake in front of us was a raft, or perhaps a family is a better term, of Red-necked Phalaropes, turning and bobbing on the rippled surface of the water. They were like a gang of boys advancing across a potato field picking up the potatoes just turned up by the harrows, as they picked the flies off the water. Suddenly a fish jumped and tumbled with a splash back into the water—the Phalaropes were away, a Great Northern Diver swung into our bay and with its characteristic laughing cry was on his way.

Later that day we loaded our first consignment of ducks aboard a Dakota, and 12 hours later they were at London Airport.

Having purchased some provisions in Akureyri, we then made our way to the estuary of the Skjálfandaflljot where we hoped to meet an Eider farmer and see for ourselves the islands on which the eiders nest, and the way which the Icelanders look after the birds and collect the down.

High up on the east bank of this great river which was now being swollen by the melting snow and ice from the glaciers and hills inland, lived the family who owned one of the best known eider farms in this region—Hellulandi. The steading looked down on the river which was here divided into many channels by the islands on which the eiders nested. Even from the farm we could see the white of the males on and around these islands. We also saw a strange erection of poles and coloured flags which we had heard a lot about but had not yet been able to understand. We were soon to learn how much importance was attached to the distribution of these poles and their different coloured attachments.

The farmer was out when we arrived but his attractive daughter offered to show us the colonies. We were lucky in this, for the Eider farmers as far as possible like to leave their islands undisturbed, for the ducks could well leave for quieter quarters which would mean a considerable financial loss.

We four climbed into a boat and much against our will we weren't allowed to take the oars, which we later found out was just as well, for by expert handling the boat was navigated over shallows and through fast water with considerable less danger than if we had been propelling her. Soon we were landing on one of the larger islands amid the eiders. All around us were laying and sitting females, whose nests in places were only a few feet apart. Most of the males with their distinctive white back, black belly and crown to their head were together in big rafts off the island. Suddenly with loud protestations a Greylag got up in front of us and revealed two newly hatched goslings with a third almost out of the shell. She alighted with the gander only 50 yards from us, telling us in no uncertain terms that we had no right to be here just at this time. After quickly photographing the nest we left, and it wasn't long before she was back and attending to her last arrival.

Scattered, at what at first sight seemed haphazard, around the islands were poles with coloured material fixed to many of them. On many of the islands there was a veritable forest of poles. We had been told earlier that these erections were an essential part of the business of eider farming and we

were keen therefore to discover what part they played. After a little difficulty due to our poor knowledge of the Icelandic language, we learned that these poles were put in the ground at places above the flood level of the river. It had been discovered that the eiders were particularly partial to setting up house around bright bunting and so by the judicious use of these flags the eiders were encouraged to nest on high ground, so that when the river became swollen later in June, the nests weren't washed away. Most of the eider colonies had their own colour schemes and it was partly the appeal to the female eye that these colours had that determined the financial result of the farm—or so we were told!

When at the end of June and beginning of July the female has hatched her young and left the nest the down, with which she had liberally lined her nest a few weeks earlier, is collected and rough cleaned by the farmer, and then sent to receiving depots where it is washed, cleaned and exported all over the world.

Back at the farm house, we were entertained to tea and, leaving the daughter dealing with a new born calf, we said our farewells and were indeed sad to leave such a delightful and hospitable family.

Later that night after a drive over roads that had only just been opened and over which melting snow water was still pouring—for we were one of the first private cars to get through to Myvatn—I found myself after a five year interval once again on the shores of this wonderful lake. Level camping sites were few near the banks of the Laxá, but after the inevitable difficulty of getting four people to agree on the ideal site, we pitched our tents a hundred yards from the farm of Helluvað owned by Jonas Sigurgeisson.

Next morning—another perfect day—we contacted the local farmers who throughout our stay in this area were all most friendly and extremely helpful. Without their help our expedition couldn't have succeeded, because although we had permission from the authorities in Reyjavik to export ducks to England, we had to get the farmer's permission to catch them on their land. This accomplished and our supply of fresh eggs and milk arranged, we got down to the business of duck catching.

There were a great number of Harlies on the river in front of our camp and as we had learned already, they were comparatively easy to catch. During the course of the next few days we managed to catch our quota and they were now all safely back in England.

Having accomplished Phase I of our mission, we considered that the time was ripe for a grand tour of the Lake itself, if possible to repeat what I had done in 1953. We learned from Ragnar Sigfinnsson, one of the farmers of Grimsstaðir, that the numbers of duck on the lake, particularly Long-tails, had greatly diminished over the past few years. This later appeared to be only too true with perhaps no more than 60% of the 1953 population of duck on the lake, which is a very sad state of affairs. There appear to be many causes, with the advent of the wild Mink being one of the major contributing factors. In recent years the numbers of Mink have increased alarmingly and it seems that as their numbers have risen so has the duck population fallen.

I had always wanted to return to the island of Slúttnes where in 1953 I had first seen all the ducks which nested there. So to-day Kit and I borrowed a boat from Ragnar and rowed ourselves across to this island. On the way

we were treated to a marvellous display of flying skill as the Longtails, with their melodious cry ringing out over the lake, weaved and turned all around our boat. Generally there were two or three males chasing a single female as they vied with each other for a mate. It appeared they were quite oblivious of our presence, for at times they came almost within arms length of the boat. We saw Red-necked Phalaropes bobbing on the water, Slavonian Grebes, Scaups, Tufted, Scoters, Barrow's Goldeneyes and a pair of Gadwall. Apart from the quantity of Longtails which had obviously diminished from 1953, there didn't seem to be so many Barrow's Goldeneyes. These beautiful ducks are distinguished from the Common Goldeneye by the rather more squashed head, coloured purple instead of green, and the crescent-shaped patch in front of the eye as opposed to a round blob. They appear to occur more commonly in parts of the lake than others. This probably has something to do with the fact that the females nest in holes, and they tend therefore to seek the area where these are most abundant.

After about half an hour's rowing, we landed on Slúttnes hoping to see the very great concentration of laying and sitting ducks I had seen a few years previously. There were of course a great number of duck but as we half expected far fewer than in 1953. And so it was on the other islands, in the bays, and everywhere on Myvatn—still a lot of duck but a tremendous drop in population since I had last been there.

We only had ten days left to accomplish Phase II of our expedition, namely to catch Longtails and Scoters. So on the next day, 10th June, we downed our fishing rods (Harlequins are not the only life on the Laxá) and drove to some marshes to the west of Grimstaðir, where we had previously seen a few Longtails. Here amidst patches of snow and a rich greenness which by now was becoming the predominant colour of Myvatn, we found a chain of small lakes set amidst marshland. As well as the Longtails and Scoters which were quite common in these secluded lakes, there were Pintails, Scaup, Wigeon and in one corner a party of Mergansers.

Over-confidence, as a result of the success that we had had with the Harlies, made us think that we should have our ducks in the bag in a couple of days and could then return to a less exacting form of recreation.

While Michael and Gina were erecting one net, Kit and I were at the other end of the marsh erecting another, in the hope that the Longtails in their passage up these string of lakes would fly into one or other of our nets.

For the next two days, all four of us took it in turns sitting over the nets, at the end of which time, morale was low and tempers short, principally through lack of sleep. The main trouble appeared to be that the birds could see the nets—due in part to the almost 24 hours of light that occurs in Iceland at this time of the year. We tried re-siting the nets with different backgrounds, but eventually hit on the idea that if we could raise the net just as the ducks were approaching, we would stand a chance of catching them.

On the next day, we re-erected our nets incorporating the latest modification and during the ensuing night had more than half our quota of ducks in crates. In order to extricate the ducks from the nets which were suspended over the narrow parts of the lake, we had to use a rubber boat which we had brought from England. Though stable, it was a precarious business standing up removing birds from the net and at the same time

endeavouring not to be drifted down-wind. We had set up two nets but one of them accounted for nearly all the Scoters and Longtails which we finally despatched to England.

Towards the end of June, a reduction in the number of male Harlequins appears to take place on the Laxá as the females are now beginning to lay and some indeed to incubate their eggs. Just before we left Myvatn, I walked down the Laxá for some miles, in order to take some photographs of Harlies amidst their natural environment of tumbling waters and white water rapids. I found quite a few Harlequin nests with their seven or eight olive brown eggs. The farmers, unlike those that actually live on the shores of the lake, do not seem to take the eggs of the birds that nest on the Laxá. So instead of finding nests with the regulation four eggs—the remainder of the clutch being removed—the ducks often were sitting on a full clutch of eight or more eggs. As I climbed amidst the thick undergrowth on the banks of the river, I disturbed many other birds who were sitting, amongst which were Wheatears, Snow Bunting, Whimbrel, Golden Plover, Meadow Pipit and Snipe. A very devoted Golden Plover parent led me up the garden path, with a marvellous display of a 'broken wing' until quite by accident I spotted her nest a few yards to my right. In fact, I owe this bird a great debt for she made me look into a deep ravine of the river where to my surprise I found about 60 or 70 male Harlequins. There wasn't a female in sight which I found extremely interesting. There has been a theory that all the male Harlequins, as soon as the females begin to sit, make their way to the sea. The males soon go into eclipse after the females start incubating, and I believe that they stay on the river in secluded spots, perhaps similar to where I had found all these birds. In late July and August, if one sees Harlequins, one assumes they are females, for then it is almost impossible to tell the sexes apart. I later asked Kiristjan Geirmundsson as to whether he thought that this might be so, and he was quite surprised to hear that we had thought that the males went down to the sea. However we should like one day to catch a sample of Harlequins in August just to see whether there are any males left on the Laxá.

On the next day I had unfortunately to return to England, so with the unforgettable cry of the Longtailed Duck ringing in my ears, and the Harlequins skimming up the river in front of our camp—two of the most wonderful ducks in the world—I said good-bye to all our good friends of Myvatn and left Iceland—the island that possesses such riches in bird life—for the second time, with a lump in my throat.



Sleepy Longtail Drake *Clangula thyemalis*