

Important Bird Areas in Iceland 1997

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1 INTRODUCTION

In Iceland 72 bird species can be considered to be regular breeders. The number is rather low compared to most of the European countries. However, most of the bird populations in Iceland are large. The species belonging to Anatidae, Charadrii and Alcidae are particularly prominent in the Icelandic fauna. Thousands of pairs of ducks and grey geese, hundreds of thousands of pairs of waders, and a few million pairs of auks breed in Iceland. Few breeding species but large populations are characteristic of the Icelandic bird fauna.

It is equally important for Iceland as it is for other countries to identify Important Bird Areas (IBAs). Some Icelandic publications have listed important bird areas and underlined their conservation value. The book *Votlendi* (Wetlands), published by the Icelandic Environment Union (Garðarsson 1975), contained a list of important wetlands in Iceland, all of which were later listed in Grimmett & Jones (1989) in which data for IBAs in Iceland were first compiled. In the Nature Conservation Register (The Icelandic Nature Conservancy Council 1996), all protected areas are listed as well as other areas that were regarded as having conservation value although their IBA status is not mentioned.

In 1997 it was decided to review the IBA register in Iceland and compile a new IBA database in line with the new criteria and methodology developed by BirdLife International (Anon 1995, Heath *et al.* 1996).

2 METHODS

The work began in early March and ended in the beginning of June 1997. It took about 80 days to complete the database. A number of people assisted in various ways, contributing information and commenting on different parts of the database before it was sent to BirdLife International. Those individuals are listed in acknowledgements.

The foundation for the current work was the previous compilation in Grimmett & Jones (1989), other published material, and unpublished information from individual ornithologists and birdwatchers in Iceland. Most of the current work was aimed at locating and extracting this information from those various sources and entering the data into the IBA computer program provided by BirdLife International. The database program has fields that cover the general geography, the IBA criteria, bird populations, habitats, threats, land use, area protection, interventions, references, and notes. The program is written in FoxPro 2.5 for Windows and proved to be reasonably user-friendly and straightforward when used with the accompanying help manual.

Geographical information was obtained from topographic maps published by the Icelandic Geodetic Survey. Information on bird populations was obtained from previously published or unpublished material in various Icelandic journals and reports. These references were typed in for relevant areas in the computer database. It took considerable amount of time to extract the information on bird populations. A number of birdwatchers and ornithologists also kindly supplied information and data from their own personal data collection. All data on birds were evaluated in line with the criteria supplied by BirdLife International (Anon 1995).

Data on habitat were based on the compiler's personal experience of visited sites, but otherwise on information from birdwatchers and ornithologists, and maps from the Icelandic Geodetic Survey. Data on threats and land use was also based on the compiler's knowledge or others familiar with the relevant IBAs.

Provisional maps of the areas were prepared from maps published by the Icelandic Geodetic Survey. These show the name of each site, rough boundaries of the IBA and the scale of each map. The size of the IBA was measured if their boundaries were changed or if the area was new on the IBA list.

3 RESULTS

Grimmett & Jones (1989) listed 53 IBAs in Iceland, covering about 506.000 ha. IBA coverage has now increased by 213.200 ha to about 719.200 ha in total. However this may change during the present revision process by the BirdLife International.

Table 1 lists the proposed IBAs in Iceland. Currently 64 sites were identified, 12 additions were made and one deletion. The location of each of the proposed areas is shown in Figure 1.

One area, Ástjörn in south-west Iceland, was removed from the IBA list as it did not qualify under the present criteria. All other areas listed in Grimmett & Jones (1989) are on the present list, although a few appear under a different name now because of boundary changes. There were many other changes to the list; some of the areas have been completely redefined and others enlarged, for instance the areas Oddaflóð-Lambhagavatn and Veteifsholtsbugar-Pykkvabæjarvatn, a total of 22 (Table 1). The same applies to the Langanes and Skoruvíkurbjarg cliffs (Table 1). The remaining 30 areas are defined in more or less the same fashion as in Grimmett & Jones (1989).

Substantial information on bird populations has now been included in the IBA database. Information on various bird species and areas in Iceland has improved considerably since the publication of Grimmett & Jones (1989), although still many gaps remain. A computerised IBA database should make future updates easier.

Most of the IBA on the list are wetlands, either freshwater or coastal. The other main habitat type is bird cliffs. Other habitat categories also represented are lava fields, glacial out-wash planes (called "sandur" in Icelandic), and heathlands. The variety of habitats is larger now than it was in the previous IBA list (Grimmett & Jones 1989). Many habitats types do not hold dense populations of birds and are therefore not regarded as important IBA habitats. These habitats are usually inhabited by dispersed species and consequently do not enjoy the same attention for conservation as the IBAs.

Fig.1. The Location of the Proposed Important Bird Areas in Iceland.



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Table 1. List of previous and proposed Important Bird Areas (IBAs) in Iceland

Area name	Area size (ha)	Changes*	Area name	Area size (ha)	Changes*
Apavatn-Laugarvatn	4900	R	Krísuvíkurborg	1200	O
Arnarvatnshciði-Tvíðægra	60000	O	Látrabjarg	2000	O
Austara Eylandið	3300	R	Lónsfjörður	2700	O
Álftafjörður-Hamarsfjörður	3500	O	Löngufjörur	17000	O
Álftafjörður-Hofsstaðavogur	3000	O	Markarfljótsaurar	10500	N
Álftanes-Akrar	13300	R	Melrakkaslétta	24600	N
Ástjörn	25	D	Miklavatn-Skógar	2100	R
Borgarfjörður	7000	O	Mývatn-Laxá	10200	O
Breiðafjörður	300000	O	Oddaflóð-Lambhagavatn	1500	R
Breiðamerkursandur	6900	N	Ósar	400	O
Brunasandur	14000	N	Ósasvæði Ölfusár	7400	R
Brúará	2900	R	Papey	540	O
Drangey	1500	O	Pollengi-Hrosshagavík	1400	R
Eldey	1	O	Ritur	700	O
Eyjabakkur	6800	N	Sandur-Sílalækur	500	O
Eyjavatn-Friðmundarvötn	7500	R	Skarðsfjörður-Hornsvík	6970	R
Ferjubakkaflói-Norðurá	1500	O	Skeiðarársandur	33100	N
Garðskagi-Hvalnes	1100	R	Skerjafjörður	3300	R
Grenlækur-Steinsmýrarflóð	5200	R	Skoruvík-Skálabjarg	5300	R
Grímsey	700	O	Skrúður	400	O
Guðlaugstungur-Álfgeirstungur	11500	N	Skúmsstaðavatn	800	O
Hestgerðislón-Hornafjarðarfljót	6800	N	Sog	500	O
Hólmarnir	700	O	Stokkseyri-Eyrbakki	4300	R
Hóp-Vatnsdalur	12000	R	Svarfaðardalur	600	O
Hrísey	767	N	Úthérað	15900	R
Hvalfjarðareyri-Laxárvogur	900	R	Veiðivötn	7600	R
Hvalnesskriður-Þvottárskriður	1800	N	Vestmannaeyjar	27500	O
Hornbjarg	1100	O	Vestmannsvatn	500	O
Hælavíkurbjarg	1000	O	Vetleifsholtsbugar-Þykkvabæjarvatn	5600	R
Höfðahverfi	60	N	Þjórsárver	37500	O
Höfðavatn	800	O	Æðey	1100	N
Hörgárósar	540	R	Öxarfjörður	2500	O
Innstavogsnes-Grunnafjörður	1900	R			

*O = area appears on the previous IBA list and little or no changes have been made in definition of the site, N = a totally new area, R = site redefined or changed in some other way, D = site deleted from the list.

The type of land use is given for each IBA in the database. No attempt was made to give a coverage of land use since no visits were made to the IBAs in connection with the present work.

Although qualitative information on threats is available for most sites, it was not regarded feasible to present data on the importance of the various threats. More information is needed before this is possible.

No effort was made to deal with the various measures taken by government institutions, NGOs and others regarding threats to IBAs in Iceland. This would have required a considerable amount of work and was not considered to be a priority for the completion of the IBA database. The emphasis was on the bird population data and this was given the highest priority during the limited time available to finish the IBA work.

The Nature Conservation Register lists all protected areas and areas that the national conservation authorities regarded as having high conservation value (Náttúruverndarráð 1996). Only four of the proposed IBAs are not on the Nature Conservation Register.

Of the 63 proposed IBAs 14 are either entirely or partly protected. Three of the protected IBAs are also designated as Ramsar sites: Þjórsárver, Mývatn-Laxá, and Grunnafjörður (Fig. 1 & Table 2).

Table 2. The protection status of IBAs

IBA name	Size of IBA	Size of protected area	Designation	IUCN code
Álftafjörður-Hofsstaðavogur*	3000	3000	Conservation Area	IV
Breiðafjörður**	300000	1200000	Conservation Area	IV
Eldey	1	1	Scientific Reserve	I
Hælavíkurbjarg-Hornbjarg	2100	58000	Nature Reserve	V
Innstavogsnes-Grunnafjörður	1900	1470	Nature Reserve	IV
Mývatn-Laxá	10200	40000	Conservation Area	V
Oddaflóð-Lambhagavatn	1500	540	Nature Reserve	IV
Pollengi-Hrosshagavík	1400	684	Nature Reserve	IV
Ritur	700	58000	Nature Reserve	V
Skarðsfjörður-Hornsvík	6970	15	Country Park	V
Skrúður	92	92	Nature Reserve	IV
Svarfaðardalur	600	600	Nature Reserve	IV
Vestmannaeyjar	27500	270	Scientific Reserve	I
Vestmannsvatn	500	500	Nature Reserve	IV
Þjórsárver	37500	37500	Nature Reserve	IV

* The area is part of the Breiðafjörður conservation area.

** A few of the Breiðafjörður islands are also protected individually by special regulations.

Table 3 indicates the quality of the data presented in the IBA database. The population data and information on type of habitat, land use and threats were evaluated and graded on a rough scale A, B and C according to the amount and quality of information available for each of the 63 areas. The population data received the lowest score (grade C), with 32 (51%) of the areas in that category. Data for those areas was not good, with hardly any counts or other data; bird population size given was based on "guesstimates". Most of the remaining 27 areas were given grade B for the information on bird populations. Only three areas are considered to be well covered, with the results of counts published. Those areas are the Gannet colony on Eldey, the Eyjabakkur wetland area and the Mývatn-Laxá area.

The information on habitat was better, i.e. 17 areas with good data, 35 with reasonable information and only 11 areas with poor data. Information on land use and threats was also reasonably good, with about 30% of the areas in grade A about 70% in grade B and no areas in grade C (Table 3). However, it should be emphasised that habitat and land use cover and importance of threats were not taken into account when those categories were graded.

Table 3. Evaluation of the quality of data at the 64 proposed IBAs

Data category	Scale					
	A	%	B	%	C	%
Population	4	6	28	44	32	50
Habitat	17	27	36	56	11	17
Land use	19	30	45	70	0	0
Threats	18	28	46	72	0	0
Total	58		155		43	

4 DISCUSSION

4.1 Future work on Important Bird Areas in Iceland

It is clear that much more work is still needed on IBAs in Iceland. For instance, much more detailed information on population size of birds is needed for a number of areas. Financial resources and time did not allow for any additional fieldwork during the present compilation. This inevitably placed constraint on the results, information limited on some parts of the database especially on bird populations in the more remote areas and areas far away from the south-west part of the country (where most of the birdwatchers and ornithologists reside). It should be a priority to fill the gaps in the population data and launch a monitoring scheme in as many of the IBAs as possible.

Information on habitats, land use and threats is limited for many of the areas. It is clear that the data presented for these categories only gives a rough indication for most of the sites, since visits could not be arranged in relation to the IBA work. With a systematic collection of data for each of the areas, and more information from individuals familiar with the sites, it would be possible to obtain more detailed picture of the important habitats, land use and potential threats.

There are no management plans available for any of the areas, even the protected IBAs. Work has begun on the Breiðafjörður conservation area and a management plan should be ready in 1998 or 1999.

In many areas boundaries of the IBAs have not been clearly defined. Better definition of the boundaries of IBAs and detailed maps have to be made as soon as possible.

The work on Important Bird Areas in Iceland in the future depends mainly on the funds and manpower available. In general, little has been done to promote IBAs in the country and no formal translation of the Icelandic section in Grimmett & Jones (1989) exists. In fact, IBAs as such are not well known among Icelanders, apart from a few ornithologists and birdwatchers.

At the moment there are no plans to publish the updated version of the IBA inventory in Iceland. Such publication is important, though, in order to gain advocates for the conservation of those areas and focus attention on the matter. It would also give politicians, land users, decision-makers and others much easier access to information on Important Bird Areas.

Following proposed actions are needed during the next few years for the benefit of IBAs in Iceland:

- Filling gaps in the population data. Priority should be given to the 32 areas that were considered to have poor data on bird populations, and a monitoring scheme should be launched in as many of the IBAs as possible.
- Visits to IBAs that have insufficient information on habitat, threats and land use, to obtain detailed and systematic information on those issues.
- The boundaries of IBAs should be clearly defined and detailed maps produced for each area.
- Developing a management plan for every IBA.
- Monitoring threats to IBAs.
- Taking conservation action for as many unprotected sites as possible.
- An Icelandic version of the new IBA inventory should be published as soon as possible.

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7 ÚTDRÁTTUR

Árið 1989 kom út bók á vegum Alþjóðlega fuglaverndarráðsins *International Council for Bird Preservation* (nú *BirdLife International*) þar sem fjallað er um mikilvæg fuglasvæði í Evrópu. Í þeirri bók var kafli um Ísland þar sem talin voru upp 53 mikilvæg svæði fyrir fugla. Undanfarin ár hefur verið unnið að því á vegum *BirdLife International* að skilgreina ný viðmið „criteria“ til að flokka mikilvæg fuglasvæði, ásamt því að semja tölvuforrit (*Important Bird Area database*, IBA-gagnagrunn) þar sem hægt er að slá inn allar upplýsingar um mikilvæg fuglasvæði. Endurskoðun og skráning nýrra gagna er komin vel á veg í flestum ríkjum Evrópu. *BirdLife International* stefnir að því að gefa út nýja bók um mikilvæg fuglasvæði í Evrópu á árinu 1999.

Vorið 1997 var íslenska skráin endurskoðuð. Gerð var tillaga um 64 mikilvæg fuglasvæði á Íslandi (1. mynd og 1. tafla). Miklum upplýsingum var safnað um hvert svæði og þær skráðar í IBA-gagnagrunninn. Þar á meðal eru gögn um umhverfispætti og staðhætti s.s. hæð yfir sjávarmáli, stærð svæðis, sýslur og hreppa sem svæðin tilheyra og nákvæma staðsetningu þeirra. Þær fuglategundir sem gefa viðkomandi svæði alþjóðlegt gildi voru skráðar og mat á stofnstærð þeirra á hverju svæði og eins ástand stofna, ef vitneskjan er fyrir hendi. Upplýsingar um aðra varpfugla voru skráðar sem athugasemdir. Skráð eru gerð búsvæða, landnotkun og ógnir sem steðja að svæðunum, upplýsingar um hvort svæðin séu friðuð eða ekki ásamt almennum athugasemdum og heimildum um hvert svæði.

Í skýrslunni er lagt gróft mat á hve góðar upplýsingarnar eru um hvert svæði, í mörgum tilfellum vantar mikið á að til séu fullnægjandi gögn, enda á eftir að skoða mörg þeirra með skipulegum hætti. Í lok skýrslunnar eru talin upp forgangsatriði varðandi áframhaldandi vinnu tengda mikilvægum fuglasvæðum á Íslandi. Þau eru m.a.:

- Að afla gagna um stofnstærðir fugla á þeim 32 svæðum með ófullnægjandi upplýsingum.
- Heimsækja þau svæði þar sem upplýsingar vantar um búsvæði, ógnir og landnotkun.
- Að gefa út á íslensku rit um mikilvæg fuglasvæði á Íslandi.