



Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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Iceland
17 – 25 June 2022

Holiday participants

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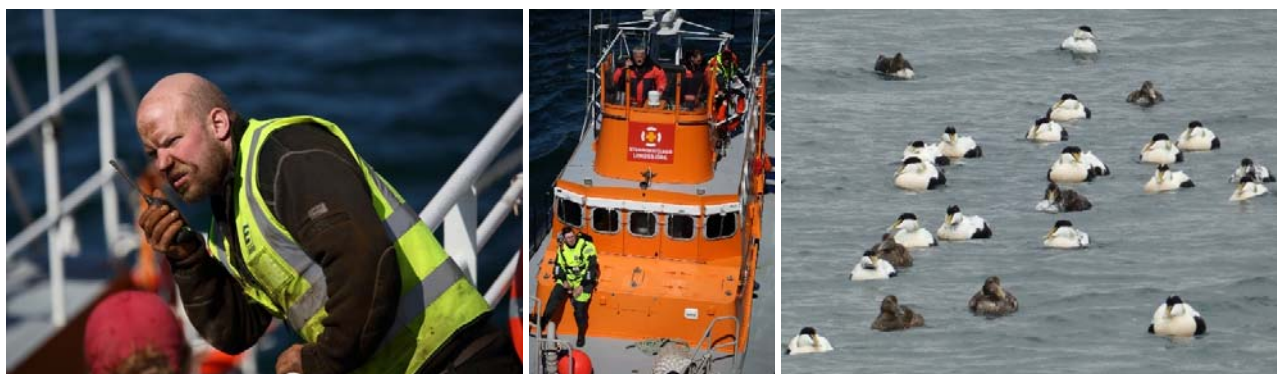
Leader

Christopher Hall

Report by Christopher Hall, plus contributions from group members.



Photos by Christopher Hall or as attributed, all taken on the holiday.
Cover, top: great northern diver family (TW) and spouting Geysir (TW).



Scenes from the Flatey Island adventure (CH); eiders (AG)

As on every Honeyguide wildlife holiday, we contributed to a conservation project. The conservation contribution of £40 per person, supplemented by gift aid through the Honeyguide Wildlife Charitable Trust, totalled £350 for Whale and Dolphin Conservation (WDC), an NGO that campaigns for the survival of whales and dolphins, including against whaling in Iceland. That was successful for a time with no whaling in 2019-21, then hunting for fin whales resumed in 2022, so the work remains vital. The total for all conservation contributions through Honeyguide since 1991 is £142,877 (July 2022).

Awesome Iceland ~ Birds, whales & landscapes
17 – 25 June 2022

Daily diary

17 June – arrival in Iceland

So here we are at last in 'awesome Iceland', two years later than planned thanks to that blessed virus! Heading north along route 1, from Reyjavík to Stykkishólmur, roadside birds include whooper swans, eiders, redshank, oystercatcher, drumming snipe, Arctic tern, raven and even Arctic skua!

18 June – ship that didn't go to Flatey, and Snaefellsnes peninsula

After a 'white night', despite the grey sky and driving rain, it's a glorious sunny morning with a big blue sky, ideal for sailing across Breidafjörður Bay to Flatey Island. Barely ten minutes from the harbour, a senior officer running from the bridge across the deck towards the stern is not a good sign, and we soon realise that the ship is drifting aimlessly, rather than sailing purposefully north across the bay! Ten minutes later the sound of the anchor being dropped suggests we have a problem. As we sit patiently waiting for good news, the approach of a couple of high-speed ribs driven by crews in high visibility dry suits, looks ominous, while a circling reconnaissance drone attracts the attention of a vociferous oystercatcher, even though we must be half a mile out to sea! Meanwhile, the captain is a man of few words but he calmly reassures us that, "There is no danger", despite the arrival of a bright orange lifeboat and a circling coastguard helicopter! Consequently, the mood among the passengers is one of bemused resignation rather than blind panic and we while away the hours soaking up the sunshine and sea watching. As I point out sightings like, "There goes another Arctic tern" and "here's another Kittiwake", I feel like a cricket match commentator describing inactive periods, like when the most exciting thing might be pigeons on the pitch! We soon abandon all hope of reaching Flatey and wonder why we can't simply abandon ship, given that the harbour and even the hotel are still within sight!



All action around, though little on-board (CH).

After over two and a half hours 'at sea', the good news is that the engine problem is fixed, while the bad news is that the anchor is now firmly caught on the sea bed! You just couldn't make it up! Meanwhile, for some unknown reason, thanks to the paucity of the captain's briefings, the lifeboat is now tied alongside the ship and so there is widespread conjecture among the passengers over the possible scenarios, solutions and outcomes. Would we be asked to jump from the ship to the lifeboat for example? After a couple more hours of drifting in circles around a trapped anchor, the captain announces that "the anchor is free" and we 'limp' back to port. So, after six hours at sea, we had travelled about half a mile out, about half a mile in circles around the trapped anchor, and another half a mile back to port, with the offer of free soup and counselling back at the harbour office! No wonder this was top story on Iceland's six o'clock news!

This afternoon, we explore the southern coast of the dramatic Snaefellsnes peninsula, with waterfalls cascading from precipitous cliffs, where the coastal pools provide plenty of sightings including red-throated diver, Slavonian grebe, wigeon, scaup, golden plover, black-tailed godwit, families of whooper swans with downy cygnets, and bubbling whimbrel, plus more Arctic terns and Arctic skuas, and so by the end of the day we had seen almost half of Iceland's different birds! That was one day we will never forget.



Snæfellsnes peninsula; Arctic tern (CH).

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19 June – towards Lake Mývatn

At 8.05am we set off eastwards on a long but magnificently scenic drive and just fifteen minutes into the journey, we spot three pairs of harlequin ducks resting on a large mossy rock in one of the many fast flowing streams draining melt water from the tundra along this remote stretch of the north coast. After stops for elevenses at Brú, and lunch at Varmahlíð, I suggest that we "look out for pink-footed geese" and our next new bird soon appears on cue along the braided streams of Heradsvötn, with numerous pairs of pink-footed geese nervously guarding their downy goslings. Passing through the dramatic scenery of Öxnadalur, we stop to admire the rocky pinnacles here while also finding a colourful flora including indigo rock speedwell, peachy water avens, delicate pink lady's smock, bright yellow marsh marigolds and purple spikes of Alpine bartsia, as well as northern green orchid, which is restricted to Iceland, Greenland and Alaska.

Beyond Akureyri we visit Godafoss, where the Skjáfandafljót River cascades over one of the most impressive waterfalls in Iceland. From here it's a short drive to the famous Lake Mývatn, where a quick look at the western lake shore adds long-tailed duck and rafts of red-neckedpPhalaropes daintily jumping the breakers on a black sandy beach. Not a bad lot of experiences for a long travelling day.

20 June - Lake Mývatn

Numerous drumming snipe, vocal redshanks and incessantly singing redwings, are 'car park' birds outside our hotel this morning.



Snipe and redshank (CH).

On a short walk from the hotel to the lake shore we quickly realise why this is called 'Fly Lake' as the air swarms with billions of 'in your face' black flies, but at least they don't bite. Such prolific insect life provides a feast in the food chain for a bevy of water birds including Slavonian grebe, Arctic tern, whooper swan, long-tailed duck, red-breasted merganser, wigeon with ducklings, incredibly tame red-necked phalaropes and super views of a drake common scoter with a vivid bill, described as deep yellow by some and orange by others, including myself.



Redwing; whooper swans (CH).

Moving on, we make an anti-clockwise circuit of this large lake, which is so much calmer today, and a perfect setting for the eerie 'song' of a great northern diver. From the northwest shore we find a red-throated diver and a couple of female common scoters, plus gadwall, and several scaup among the many tufted ducks, along with close views of whimbrel and a rusty red black-tailed godwit. From a beach of black sand on the west side of the lake we enjoy close views of a dunlin, two drake long-tailed ducks, a passing Arctic skua and a male scaup alongside a male 'tufty', making a useful comparison of these two closely related species. Meanwhile, the two drakes are joined by a male Barrow's goldeneye, which occurs nowhere else in the Western Palearctic. Just as we are about to move on after a picnic lunch on the beach, a great northern diver sails imperiously by close inshore, as if coming to check us out, thereby providing a very obliging photo-shoot, in stark contrast to the distant views of their grey shapes so often seen off the British coast in winter.

Along the south shore of the lake at Skútustadir, we circuit a lake within a lake, enclosed by several pseudocraters, where we enjoy incredibly close and intimate views of a pair of great northern divers, feeding two tiny dark brown fluffy chicks. The confiding adults remain completely unphased by their audience, watching the happy family just twenty yards from the lakeside path! At such close range one can clearly see the intricate patterns within the smart monochrome plumage of the parents. At one stage, dad goes off on a fishing expedition, while the chicks nuzzle up to mom for a snooze on her leeward side, while she also dozes with her dagger-like bill tucked in between her wings. What a privilege to see such scenes, normally only made possible by the best wildlife documentaries! Eventually we move on leaving the family completely at ease, and soon encounter another fabulous view; a splendid female red-necked phalarope, with a rich rufous neck patch, posing on the beach next to the path, providing yet another super spectacle and deserving of a celebratory afternoon tea back in the village before heading back to base for a soak in the hot tub and dinner.



Great northern diver; red-necked phalarope (CH).

21 June – Lake Mývatn

It's the summer solstice today when theoretically, at this latitude, the sun can shine for over twenty one hours, and although the day starts bright it soon clouds over. A meally redpoll in a tree top outside the hotel is another 'car park' bird here, along with the usual snipe, redshanks and redwings. From the hotel, it's a short drive to the sulphur-coated bare ground at Námafjall Hverir, where the Earth's crust is so thin that steam heated by magma gushes out from vents called fumaroles, and pools of grey mud boil and plop like cauldrons of overheated porridge. Next stop is Leirhnjúkur,

where steam rising from cracks in an unearthly landscape of crumpled black lava is reminiscent of the scene which might follow a nuclear holocaust, and yet even here there are snow buntings!



Námafjall Hverir (CH)



Mealy redpoll; snow bunting (CH).

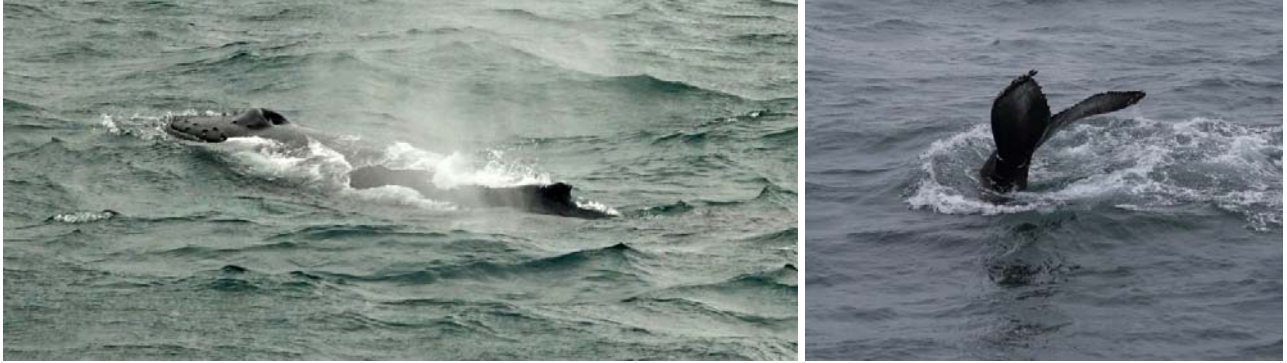
Driving east through a dusty rocky desert, which could be in North Africa were it not for the surrounding panorama of snow-covered mountains, we reach a canyon where tons of glacial melt water thunder every second down a 147 foot sheer cliff, whereupon the spray creates a mist across the canyon. This awesome spectacle is Dettifoss, Europe's mightiest waterfall and the grand finale to an amazing day in an amazing place.



Dettifoss, Europe's mightiest waterfall (CH).

22 June – whale watching

Due to a forecasted increase in wind speed, with unpleasant squally rain, our planned whale watching cruise from Húsavík is brought forward from 1.30pm to 10am. Sailing out of port into a stiff north wind, whipping up the swell across Skálfandi Bay, it soon becomes clear why we were issued with thick survival suits and bright orange waterproof overcoats as the ship's bow crashes into the sea throwing wave after wave of spray across the foredeck and soaking the hardy sailors who declined the advice to move to more sheltered parts of the ship. At this stage of the cruise it all seems unpleasant and futile, but in less than an hour we are rewarded with a mighty humpback whale passing right in front of the ship's bow, and any thoughts of cold wet faces are instantly forgotten. The next hour or so flies by as we enjoy several sightings of at least two of these thirty five ton giants, breaking the surface with their arching backs, with tail flukes trailing before each dive, accompanied by a cheering chorus of wows from the onlookers on board. Once back in town, after a warm café lunch, the Whale Museum is an appropriate way to follow this morning's cruise.



Humpback (TW) and humpback tail fluke (CH).

23 June – the barren interior

It might be June, but the thermometer says just 4°C this morning and there is fresh snow on the hill tops as we leave Akureyri, whereas it was 20°C last time we passed through just four days earlier! On the way back alongside Heradsvötn, summer home to 'our' pink-footed geese, a beautiful display of white, yellow and orange Iceland poppies, growing wild beside the road, provides a welcome break for a photo-shoot, as they sway in the stiff breeze.



Iceland poppies (CH).

Next we head south on a long but scenic drive on the F35, a rough gravel road through the desolate tundra landscape of the uninhabited interior, spotting numerous golden plovers and an Arctic skua nurturing a tiny fluffy chick en route to the bubbling hot springs and gushing fumaroles at Hveravellir, almost in the dead centre of this amazing country. Continuing south, between the Hofsjökull and Langjökull ice sheets, the 'road' gets even rougher and the terrain even more desolate, in a virtual desert, making the bumpy drive with mud sprayed from fords lashing the windscreen, feel

like an excerpt from Top Gear! Along the way, we pass more harlequins and pink-feet and eventually reach 'civilisation' where the tarmac reappears and we come out the other side of the F35, shaken but not stirred!



Golden plover; harlequin duck (CH).

Next stop is Gullfoss, an impressive double waterfall, fed by melt water from the massive Langjökull glacier draining into the Hvítá River, and looking even more impressive in the sunshine thanks to a rainbow arching across the falls. Journey's end is the Geysir Hotel, providing yet another gourmet meal, this time within sight of the famous spouting Geysir.



Gullfoss double waterfall, "Looking even more impressive in the sunshine thanks to a rainbow arching across the falls" (CH).

24 June – Thingvellir National Park, Reykjavík

A deep blue sky provides a perfect backdrop this morning for watching the Geysir perform its spectacular geothermal routine. The pool of hot water ebbs and flows with a gentle welling action, gaining momentum each time, before exploding every few minutes with clockwork regularity into a white plume of steam as high as a house!



The Geysir in ebb and flow (CH)

Our next stop on the 'Golden Circle' is Þingvellir (Thingvellir) National Park on the North Atlantic rift between the Eurasian and North American tectonic plates which are very slowly tearing Iceland apart! After dispersing to see the site at our own paces we rendezvous after lunch and pool our sightings which include close views of a pair of red-breasted mergansers and a pair of red-throated divers, a pair of ptarmigans at just ten feet, at least 25 harlequins resting on rocks in the Öxará river, which flows out of a gap in the rift, and most surprising of all, four crossbills in a recently planted clump of conifers. A later check of Tim's photos (*right*) show they were parrot crossbills, which are scarce vagrants on Iceland.



Those close ptarmigans were quite a surprise, and Roger Theobald takes up the story.

"As we walked along the path between the Eurasian and North American tectonic plates in Þingvellir National Park, Imogen saw a flash of white fly in front of us, seemingly landing on a rocky outcrop. Suddenly the head of a male rock ptarmigan appeared, picking at the green shoots, followed by a female behind having a dust bath. We watched for perhaps 20 minutes as they gradually came into full view, the male at the top of the outcrop. The female, however, decided to walk down, eating as she went, and then crossed the path in front of us, perhaps three metres away. Later, as we walked around the outcrop, the male showed about five metres away. We left, walking down the hill, only to be followed by the male flying down too while making a deep croaking call. A wonderful encounter."



Ptarmigans: as Roger says, the haze around the female (left) is from a dust bath (RT).

Last stop is Reykjavík for a spot of sightseeing before another delicious meal and a chance to reflect on the many highlights of our visit to 'awesome Iceland', such as the Flatey 'misadventure', the hardy bumblebees, the colourful Iceland poppies swaying in the breeze, the dainty Red-necked Phalaropes jumping the breakers on Lake Mývatn, the humpback whales, the intimate views of the great northern diver family and of course the amazing landscapes with their spectacular waterfalls and geothermal features. Yes, Iceland is awesome!

Statue of Leifur Eiríksson in Reykjavík (CH).



Wildlife lists

Birds

| |
|------------------------|
| Whooper swan |
| Pink-footed goose |
| Greylag goose |
| Wigeon |
| Gadwall |
| Mallard |
| Tufted duck |
| Scaup |
| Eider |
| Harlequin duck |
| Long-tailed duck |
| Common scoter |
| Barrow's goldeneye |
| Red-breasted merganser |
| Red-throated diver |
| Great northern diver |
| Fulmar |

| |
|--------------------------|
| Cormorant |
| Shag |
| Slavonian grebe |
| Oystercatcher |
| Ringed plover |
| Golden plover |
| Dunlin |
| Snipe |
| Black-tailed godwit |
| Whimbrel |
| Redshank |
| Red-necked phalarope |
| Arctic skua |
| Kittiwake |
| Black-headed gull |
| Common gull |
| Lesser black-backed gull |

| |
|-------------------------|
| Herring gull |
| Great black-backed gull |
| Arctic tern |
| Black guillemot |
| Puffin |
| Raven |
| Starling |
| Blackbird |
| Redwing |
| Wheatear |
| White wagtail |
| Meadow pipit |
| Mealy redpoll |
| Parrot crossbill |
| Snow bunting |



Red-throated diver; whooper swan (TW).

Other wildlife: humpback whale, rabbit, common carpet moth.

Plants

| Group/family | Species | Scientific name | Notes |
|--------------|----------------------|---------------------------|-------|
| Trees | Dwarf birch | <i>Betula nana</i> | |
| | Downy birch | <i>Betula pubescens</i> | |
| | Dwarf willow | <i>Salix herbacea</i> | |
| | Woolly willow | <i>Salix lantana</i> | |
| | Rowan / mountain ash | <i>Sorbus aucuparia</i> | |
| | Juniper | <i>Juniperus communis</i> | |
| Docks | Alpine bistort | <i>Bistorta vivipara</i> | |
| | Mountain sorrel | <i>Oxyria digyna</i> | |
| | Common sorrel | <i>Rumex acetosa</i> | |

| | | | |
|------------------------------------|--|---|--|
| | Sheep's sorrel | <i>Rumex acetosella</i> | |
| | Northern dock | <i>Rumex longifolius</i> | |
| | Alpine dock | <i>Rumex alpinus</i> | aka monk's rhubarb |
| Pink family | Common mouse-ear | <i>Cerastium fontanum</i> | |
| | Red campion | <i>Silene dioica</i> | |
| | Sea campion | <i>Silene uniflora</i> | |
| | Common chickweed | <i>Stellaria media</i> | |
| Buttercup family | Columbine | <i>Aquilegia vulgaris</i> | |
| | Marsh marigold | <i>Caltha palustris</i> | |
| | Meadow buttercup | <i>Ranunculus acris</i> | |
| Poppy family | Iceland poppy | <i>Papaver (nudicaule) croceum</i> | Orange, white or yellow flowers, garden escape |
| Cress family (crucifers) | Alpine rock-cress | <i>Arabis alpina</i> | |
| | Cuckoo flower | <i>Cardamine pratensis</i> | |
| | Common scurvy-grass | <i>Cochlearia officinalis</i> | |
| | Hoary whitlowgrass | <i>Draba incana</i> | |
| | Shepherd's purse | <i>Capsella bursa-pastoris</i> | |
| Stonecrops | Roseroot | <i>Rhodiola rosea</i> | |
| Saxifrages | Grass of Parnassus | <i>Parnassia palustris</i> ssp <i>obtusifolia</i> | |
| | Mossy saxifrage | <i>Saxifraga hypnoides</i> | (Eng name from web, not book) |
| Rose family | Alpine lady's mantle | <i>Alchemilla alpina</i> | |
| | Hairy Lady's Mantle | <i>Alchemilla filicualis</i> # | |
| | Clustered lady's mantle | <i>Alchemilla glomerulans</i> # | |
| | Marsh cinquefoil | <i>Comarum palustre</i> | |
| | Mountain avens | <i>Dryas octopetala</i> | |
| | Wild strawberry | <i>Fragaria vesca</i> | |
| | Water avens | <i>Geum rivale</i> | |
| | Silverweed | <i>Potentilla (=Argentina) anserina</i> | |
| | Alpine cinquefoil | <i>Potentilla crantzii</i> | |
| | Stone bramble | <i>Rubus saxatilis</i> | |
| Pea family | Nootka lupin | <i>Lupinus nootkatensis</i> # | |
| | White clover | <i>Trifolium repens</i> | |
| | Meadow vetchling | <i>Lathyrus pratensis</i> | |
| Geranium | Wood cranesbill | <i>Geranium sylvaticum</i> | |
| Violet | Heath dog violet | <i>Viola canina</i> | |
| | Northern marsh violet | <i>Viola epipsila</i> | |
| | Wild pansy | <i>Viola tricolor</i> | |
| Carrot family (umbellifers) | Garden angelica | <i>Angelica archangelica</i> | |
| | Cow parsley | <i>Anthriscus sylvestris</i> # | Near habitation, invasive |
| | Sweet cicely | <i>Myrrhis odorata</i> | |
| Thrift | Thrift | <i>Armeria maritima</i> | Thrift |
| Bogbean | Bog-bean | <i>Menyanthes trifoliata</i> | Bogbean |
| Crowberry | Crowberry | <i>Empetrum nigrum</i> | Crowberry |
| Heather family | Bearberry | <i>Arctostaphylos uva-ursi</i> | |
| | Heather | <i>Calluna vulgaris</i> | |
| | Matted cassiope or Mossy mountainheather | <i>Harrimanella (=Cassiope) hypnoides</i> | |
| | Creeping (=trailing) azalea | <i>Loiseleuria procumbens</i> | |
| | Bilberry | <i>Vaccinium myrtillus</i> | |
| Labiates | Wild thyme | <i>Thymus praecox</i> | |
| Figwort family ('Scrophs') | Rock speedwell | <i>Veronica fruticans</i> | |
| Broomrape family | Alpine bartsia | <i>Bartsia alpina</i> | |
| | Yellow-rattle | <i>Rhinanthus minor</i> | |
| Butterwort | Common butterwort | <i>Pinguicula vulgaris</i> | |
| Plantain | Sea Plantain | <i>Plantago maritima</i> | |
| Bedstraws | Slender bedstraw | <i>Galium normanii</i> | |
| | Lady's bedstraw | <i>Galium verum</i> | |
| Borage family | Oyster plant | <i>Mertensia maritima</i> # | Coastal |
| | Common comfrey | <i>Symphytum officinale</i> | |
| Labiates | Self-heal | <i>Prunella vulgaris</i> | |
| Daisy family | Yarrow | <i>Achillea millefolium</i> | |

| | | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| (composites) | Dandelion spp. | <i>Taraxacum</i> spp. | |
| | Colt's-foot | <i>Tussilago farfara</i> | |
| | A hawkweed | <i>Hieraceum</i> agg | |
| | Alpine aster | <i>Aster alpinus</i> | |
| | Groundsel | <i>Senecio vulgaris</i> | |
| | Northern green orchid | <i>Platanthera hyperborea</i> # | |
| Orchids | Heath spotted orchid | <i>Dactylorhiza maculata</i> | |
| Ferns | Lady fern | <i>Athyrium filix-femina</i> | |
| | Brittle bladder fern | <i>Cystopteris fragilis</i> | |
| Grasses | Sweet vernal grass | <i>Anthoxanthum odoratum</i> | |
| | Wavy-hair grass | <i>Avenella flexuosa</i> | |
| | Common cotton-grass | <i>Eriophorum angustifolium</i> | |
| | Mat-grass | <i>Nardus stricta</i> | |
| | Timothy | <i>Phleum pratense</i> | |
| Sedges, rushes, woodrushes | Alpine meadow grass | <i>Poa alpina</i> | |
| | Common sedge | <i>Carex nigra</i> | |
| | Alpine rush | <i>Juncus alpinarticulatus</i> | |
| | Heath wood-rush | <i>Luzula multiflora</i> | |
| Horsetails | Field horsetail | <i>Equisetum arvense</i> | |

List compiled June 2022 by Irene Wilkinson though the plants were seen and identified by several group members. 'The Alpine Flowers of Britain and Europe' by Christopher Grey-Wilson and Marjorie Blamey, 1979, was the main source for identifications. # species not in this book.



Top: water avens, roseroot, alpine bartsia. Middle: bogbean, heath spotted orchid, sea campion. Bottom: the invasive Nootka lupin with cow parsley, grass of Parnassus, alpine aster. Photos by Ann Greenizan.