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# Grímsey:

Iceland's Piece of the Arctic

*The hardy inhabitants of Grímsey thrive on their tiny North Atlantic island and still revere the memory of their 19th-century American benefactor, Daniel Willard Fiske.*

By Richard J. Litell

Photographs by Friðþjófur Helgason

**Grímsey is home** to some 100 fishermen and an estimated one million sea birds. It lies in often stormy seas about 25 miles north of the Icelandic mainland (seen in background).

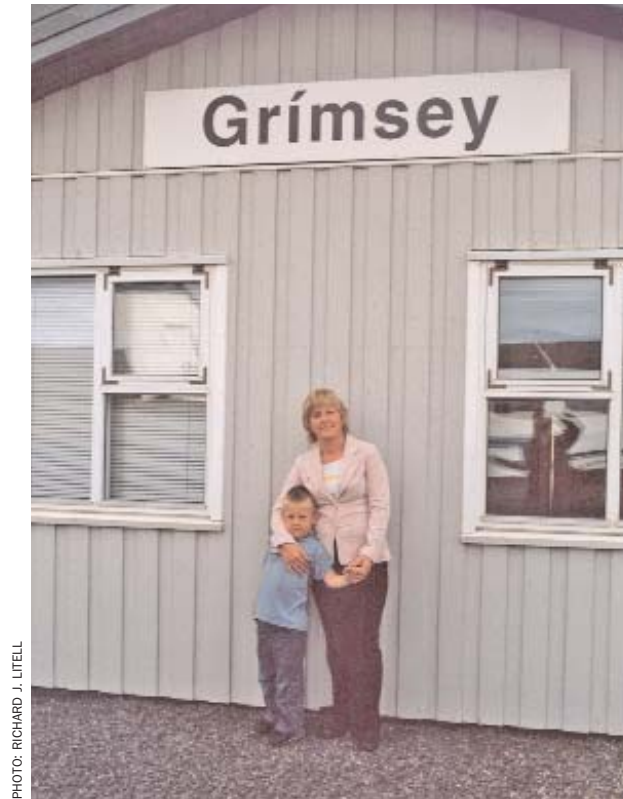


PHOTO: RICHARD J. LITTELL

**Óli Hjálmar Olason** (facing page) is Grímsey's oldest active fisherman. His daughter, Sigrun Oladottir, seen at left with her young son, runs a guesthouse on the island and serves as a tourist guide.

**A**FTER LESS THAN A HALF-HOUR FLIGHT from the Icelandic mainland, our small plane descended slowly over the tiny harbor causing scores of startled bobbing fulmars to take to the air. Seconds later we touched down on the narrow tarmac, scattering hundreds of arctic terns, irritated at being dislodged from their favorite resting surface.

We had flown from Iceland's second-largest city, Akureyri, along the scenic Eyjafjord (Eyjafjörður) to land on the island of Grímsey, a tabular chunk of land in the middle of the North Atlantic roughly the size of New York's Central Park, and the only part of Iceland to be bisected by the Arctic Circle. Grímsey measures about 2 by 6 kilometers and lies 41 kilometers from the mainland. Its highest point is slightly more than 100 meters, which is along the steep cliffs on the northeastern coast. Actually the entire island, except for the harbor and inhabited area on the southwestern coast, consists of cliffs furnishing ideal breeding sites for huge numbers of sea birds of all varieties. The Arctic Circle, at 66°33' 17" North Latitude, cuts across the



**Two ways to fish:**  
While a puffin (left) picks up its catch with its bill, Grímsey's fishermen have the more arduous task of hauling in cod on choppy seas.

island near the end of the airstrip. Legend has it that the line crossed—lengthwise—the marital bed of a former fisherman's house. Being a gentleman, the husband slept on the north side of the bed but must have crossed the line frequently because the couple had many children.

The island slopes gently toward the harbor and is richly covered by marshland, grass and moss. A single road runs along most of the harbor coast out as far as the lighthouse on the southern tip. Along this stretch are most of the 35-odd buildings housing the 120 inhabitants on the island, and





**Inhabitants of Grimsey** still cherish the memory of Daniel Willard Fiske, having erected monuments in his honor.



**Two senior islanders** indulge in a centuries-old island pastime. Grimsey's children (facing page) attend school on the island until the age of 12. Thereafter they go to school in Akureyri on the mainland.

including a church, originally built from driftwood in 1867, and a school-house. Thus, every home affords a view of the far-off mainland.

The lodgings for my overnight stay were at a guesthouse located next to the airport waiting room. It was run by an energetic young woman whose fluency in English was a blessing. Sigrun Oladottir, who had once studied travel industry management in Honolulu, asked me to join her and her young son for dinner (I was the only guest that night) and proved to be a wealth of local information. She is the only resident of the island to spend the winter months on the mainland where she and her husband operate a photo shop in Akureyri.

**S**IGRUN TOLD ME THAT THERE ARE DAILY FLIGHTS to the island during the summer (three times a week in the winter) and ferry service three times a week year round. The average age of residents is about 30. There are no day-care services, so motherhood is a full-time responsibility. There is no resident doctor and pastor visits are now infrequent. Children attend the local school until they are 12; thereafter they must go to the mainland. Grimsey elects a mayor (usually a non-fisherman) every four years, and he and the runway keeper are the only ones who don't fish.



**The yellow lighthouse** (facing page) is at the southern end of the island. Grímsey's tiny but well-protected harbor (above) is home to about 20 fishing boats. Nesting sites (below) seem to be at a premium on these island cliffs.



My hostess also explained that children who remain on the island may start working as fish processors from the age of 13. She said that boys tend to stay while girls tend to leave. There is little intermarriage on Grímsey, she said, but surprised me by adding that she is related, in some way, to 80 percent of the island. Her most well-known relative, of course, is the island's oldest active fisherman, Óli Hjálmar Ólason, her father.

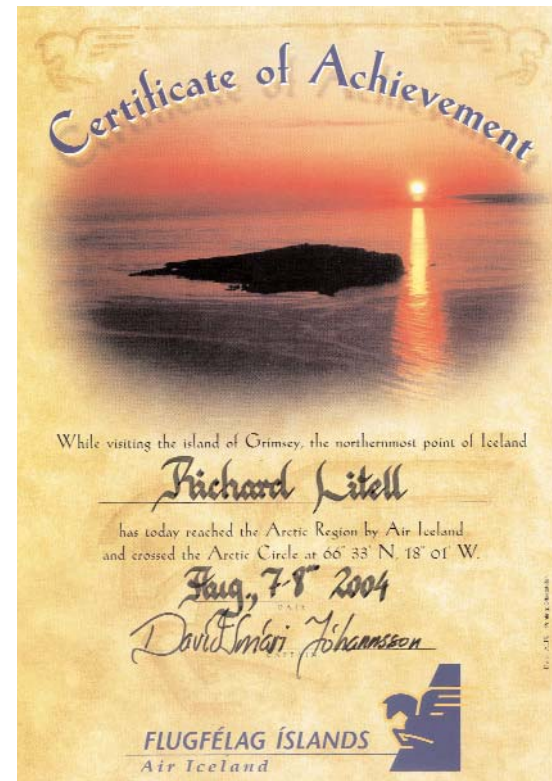
There is no doubt that fishing dominates the island. The harbor can accommodate some 20 boats. They are relatively small, from five to 50 tons, and their principal catch is cod, mainly taken on baited hooks. The banks surrounding the island are especially rich.



The natural urge on arriving on the island is to get out and walk. However pleasant and rewarding this may be in the balmy weather of mid-summer, there are some precautions to take. One is to beware of the Arctic terns. If you wander too far away from the inhabited areas you will find yourself flailing your arms like a whirligig in an effort to keep these fearless avian dive-bombers from injuring your skull. They are extremely territorial despite having more territory than any other bird. They migrate as far south as the Antarctic in winter.

**T**HE OTHER ADMONITION IS NOT TO WANDER too close to the cliff edges regardless of how anxious you are to spot those avian clowns of the North Atlantic—the puffins. They are as fascinating and endearing as their southern hemisphere counterparts—the penguins. Found from Maine to Brittany and as far north as Svalbard, the majority of them breed in Iceland in burrowed holes in cliff sides and sloping grass tufts.

The biggest holiday on Grímsey occurs on November 11, the birthday of the 19th-century American scholar, linguist, diplomat, world traveler, Cornell professor and chess master Daniel Willard Fiske, as fascinating a little known figure as you can imagine. What connected Fiske to Grímsey?



**As if accustomed** to being photographed, these five puffins (facing page) line up for a “family” portrait. Instead of a boarding pass when leaving Grímsey, Air Iceland requires only that you show your Certificate of Achievement, which is signed moments before takeoff.

Two pertinent passions—Scandinavian languages and chess. As a young man he spent two years at the University of Uppsala, Sweden. Back in the States he amassed the country's most formidable collection of Icelandic books. In 1879 he visited Iceland but not Grímsey, although he was fully aware of the island's unusual prowess in chess. A benevolent man once described by his friend Mark Twain as “as dear and sweet a soul as I have ever known,” he did not forget the island. He sent attractive chess sets to everyone on the island. Later he sent firewood and in 1901 underwrote all costs for the island's first library. When he died he had three heirs: the Psi Upsilon fraternity, the Cornell University Library, and Grímsey.

As you will have gathered, there is nothing grim about Grímsey. The island is believed to have gotten its name from a 10th-century Viking named Grimur Sigurdsson. As we took off for the mainland we were given a special treat. Because there was a Japanese film crew aboard, the pilot circled the entire island at low altitude giving us an idea of how the 60 species of birds view Grímsey.

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