

Iceland in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly to Akureyri (via Reykjavík). Transfer Mývatn.
Day 2/3	Excursions around Mývatn & Krafla.
Day 4	Mývatn to Stykkisholmur.
Day 5/6	Stykkisholmur.
Day 7/8	'Golden Circle' and Thingvellir National Park.
Day 9	Reykjanes Peninsula; fly London.

Departs

May / June

Focus

Birds, whales and geothermal activity

Grading

A traditional birdwatching tour, Grade A/B

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code ISL01) or brochure

Highlights

- Harlequin Duck & Barrow's Goldeneye on Lake Mývatn
- White-tailed Eagle, Slavonian Grebe, Ptarmigan & Gyr Falcon
- Stand astride the Mid-Atlantic Ridge
- Visit Geysir, & Gullfoss ('Golden Falls'), Iceland's most beautiful waterfall
- Minke Whale & dolphins, plus Glaucous & Iceland Gulls on boat trip
- Seabird colonies include Brunnich's Guillemot & 5 species of auk
- Grey & Common Seals
- Led by an expert naturalist guide



From top: Whimbrel, Lake Mývatn, Atlantic Puffin
Images by Paul Stanbury



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Introduction

Iceland lies at an avian crossroads: the meeting place of Palearctic and Nearctic faunal regions. Here we find the most westerly breeding grounds of both Wigeon and Pied Wagtail, and the most easterly breeding populations of Great Northern Diver, Harlequin Duck and Barrow's Goldeneye. Many species are very much tamer here than elsewhere in Europe and, although the variety of birds is limited, the sheer quality of Iceland's northern specialities has long attracted visiting ornithologists. Mammals, though few, are of interest and include Arctic Fox, Grey Seal and an exciting variety of cetaceans such as Humpback Whale, White-beaked Dolphin and Orca.

Slightly smaller than England, slightly larger than Scotland, Iceland holds a population of just 320,000 people. When you consider that over half of these live in the south-west corner of the country, you get some idea of the population density! Nearly all of Iceland lies south of the Arctic Circle — just! However, the whole country is still far enough north for us to benefit from as much daylight as we could wish for during the time of our visit.

Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Fly Akureyri, overnight Mývatn

We depart from London for our three hour flight to Keflavík, Iceland's main international gateway. From here we will transfer to the domestic airport in Reykjavík for the short flight to Akureyri, in the north of Iceland.

The direct drive from Akureyri to our accommodation should only take around ninety minutes, but it will still be quite late (around 2100 hours) by the time we arrive at the Hotel Mývatn, our base for the first 3 nights of the tour. Our hotel is set on the banks of Lake Mývatn, and from here we will enjoy the birdlife of the lake and the geothermal features and landscapes of nearby Krafla. It also has the added bonus of being surrounded by breeding waders and on the flight path of the local Gyr Falcons!

Day 2 – 3

Mývatn

We now have two full days to explore Lake Mývatn and the surrounding area. Around Mývatn we will be looking especially for Barrow's Goldeneye, Harlequin Duck, Great Northern Diver and Red-necked Phalarope. Other species of waterfowl we usually see here include Whooper Swan, Common Scoter, Long-tailed Duck, Scaup, Tufted Duck, Pochard, Wigeon and Red-breasted Merganser. We will also keep one eye in the air for Gyr Falcon and Merlin. Redwing, Wheatear, White Wagtail and Raven may be seen - these four species comprising nearly half of all the species of passerines found in Iceland! Waders of the area include Redshank, Whimbrel, Snipe, Dunlin and Golden Plover. We

will also fit in a visit to the dramatic geothermal activity of Námafjall which includes high-pressure sulphurous steam vents and boiling mud pools.

- Mývatn means "midge lake" -vatn is the Icelandic for lake. The "midges" are mostly non-biting chironomid flies. On this holiday they are rarely a problem. Their zone of activity does not extend far from the lake and, as far as possible, we make sure our day there is cool or windy, when the flies are not active.

On the south side of the lake we explore the pseudo-craters of Skútustaðir and compare them with the 'genuine' craters nearby. Red-necked Phalarope and Slavonian Grebe are often seen here and this is yet another good place to look for Gyr Falcon. We will also see the first of many sturdy Icelandic horses and the local sheep, the latter exhibiting an extraordinary degree of road sense compared with their cousins further south in Europe! We will also visit the weird lava shapes of Dimmuborgir; if it has been an early spring this is an excellent area for wild flowers. Those of us wishing to enjoy a longer walk may continue on to climb a remarkable tefra ring crater called Hverfjall.

We will also visit the coastal town of Húsavík during our time staying at Mývatn. En-route we will have more opportunities to look for more Ptarmigan and in pools by the road we should find breeding Teal and other ducks. At Húsavík itself we head straight for the harbour. It is possible to see eight species of gull in Iceland and here we will be seeking the Iceland Gull and its big cousin, the Burgomaster, now usually masquerading as the Glaucous Gull -



Iceland Gulls do not, curiously, breed in their eponymous land, they only winter there, and head further north to breed. At an outflow by the harbour there are usually Fulmar fighting over some mysterious delicacy and the ubiquitous Eider are, as always, in evidence.

After lunch we board a whale-watching vessel for a three-hour trip to the west side of the bay. We have always seen Minke Whale and usually at least one species of dolphin on this trip. Humpback Whales have also been seen on occasion. Seabirds are plentiful and include Puffin, Black Guillemot and Common Guillemot. If the road is open we will return to Mývatn via Dettifoss, Europe's largest waterfall and the Jökulsá Canyon (Iceland's Grand Canyon). The sheer volume of water thundering over Dettifoss is breathtaking. Over 200 tons of water per second roars over the falls, meltwater from the ice caps far to the south. This is without doubt one of Europe's great natural wonders and a highlight of the tour for many.

For those that wish to, there will be the opportunity one evening to visit the Mývatn Nature Baths, and enjoy a soothing bathe in some of Iceland's beautifully warm thermal waters. The Nature Baths are smaller and much quieter than Iceland's more famous Blue Lagoon, but offer bathers a similarly

relaxing experience! Please note that the entrance fee (approx. £20) is not included in the cost of the tour.

Day 4

Myvatn to Stykkishólmur

Today we leave Mývatn and journey west to the dramatic landscapes of the Snæfellsnes Peninsula, enjoying some of Iceland's finest scenery including craggy mountains, tumbling rivers and 'recent' lava flows en-route. We will also drive down the 'Haunted Valley' where a series of over-enthusiastic revenge killings resulted in the outlawing of Eric the Red! Today is our longest day of driving and we expect the journey to Stykkishólmur to take us at least 6 hours, but we will break the drive with stop along the way, and will be on the lookout for Pink-footed Geese as we pass through their breeding grounds in the high-glacial valleys. Other birdlife to look out for during the day includes Red-throated Diver, Whimbrel, Snipe, Black-tailed Godwit and Short-eared Owl. We'll also be keeping our eyes peeled for lingering Sanderling and Knot in their summer plumage as we drive past estuaries and along the coast. Previous groups have even been lucky enough to spot the elusive Arctic Fox from the road, the only truly indigenous land mammal of Iceland. It will be early evening before we arrive at our comfortable hotel in the small town of Stykkishólmur, on the north side of the Snæfellsnes Peninsula, our base for the next 3 nights of the tour.

Day 5 – 6

Snæfellsnes Peninsula



Black Guillemot (by Alan Bevis)

For the next two days we will explore the beautiful Snæfellsnes Peninsula, including a trip to the western-most point to enjoy the sights and sounds of one of Iceland's larger seabird colonies. Our journey will take us along the northern side of the peninsula and round the edge of the large shield volcano, Snæfellsjökull, the doorway into the planet's interior chosen by Jules Verne for his book 'Journey to the Centre of the Earth'. En route we should keep a careful eye open for White-tailed Eagle and Gyr Falcon, whilst roadside pools often hold Red-necked Phalaropes. The seabird cliffs, a short walk from the road, are home to five species of auk: Common Guillemot, Black Guillemot, Razorbill, Puffin, and the most sought after for UK birdwatchers, the high arctic Brünnich's Guillemot. Kittiwakes and Fulmars add their notes to the cacophony of cliff-side sound. Offshore, Gannets and Arctic Skuas are frequently seen, and, and we will also take time to scan the sea carefully, as for the fortunate there is always the chance of seeing a passing pod of Orcas (Killer Whales).

During our stay in Stykkishólmur we will also arrange a boat trip out of Stykkishólmur, through the volcanic islands of Breiðafjörður, to the tiny island of Flatey. Here, as well as nesting Arctic Terns and smart Snow Buntings, we will search for the handsome Grey Phalarope, plus the more abundant Red-necked Phalarope.

Day 7

Stykkisholmur to Gullfoss

This morning we will leave Stykkishólmur and drive east and south to Borgarfjörður where we should see Shelduck, a more recent coloniser of Iceland, and look for a variety of waders. We continue our journey further inland, taking our time to enjoy the scenery and the opportunity to stretch our legs as we pass through the beautiful Thingvellir National Park. We aim to arrive at Hotel Gullfoss in the late afternoon, where we will be well situated for the final leg of our tour.

Day 8

Gullfoss

We will spend our final full day visiting some of the most celebrated landscapes in southern Iceland, the so-called 'Golden Circle'. Our first stop, Thingvellir, is not only the site of the world's first parliament, the 'Althing', but is of great interest to the geologist for it sits astride the mid-Atlantic Ridge, the great cleft in the Earth's crust that separates the Eurasian tectonic plate from the North American plate. The junction is marked by two series of conspicuous parallel fault lines and shear basalt cliffs separated by a wide sunken valley a kilometre or two in width. This is one of those places in the world where the geology textbooks come alive and visitors can witness at first hand the amazing geological processes that have shaped the world we recognise today.

After visiting the 'Althing', we will take a stroll by Thingvallavatn, where pure glacial waters from the Langjökull Glacier travel some 40 kilometres, through bedrock, before emerging here to form Iceland's largest freshwater lake. The mournful calls of Great Northern Divers are usually heard echoing across the silvery water, whilst nearby we will go in search of Barrow's Goldeneye on the River Sog.

Continuing on, we will visit Gullfoss or the 'Golden Falls', a spectacular double cascade of melt water, popularly considered to be the most beautiful waterfall in Iceland. Then to Geysir, home to the original 'geysir' (which is now sadly dormant), and other more active geothermal spoutings including Strokkur which reliably erupts every 5 minutes or so. During this drive we should see plenty of Black-tailed Godwits, Whimbrel and perhaps Pink-footed Goose, although the latter will depend to some extent on whether or not they have moved onto their remote breeding grounds in the interior. After a full day exploring this beautiful landscape we return to Hotel Gullfoss for our final night in Iceland.



Strokkur (by Kerrie Porteous)

Day 9

Reykjanes Peninsula, Fly London

This morning we must make our way slowly back towards Keflavik. En route, however, we should have time to explore a little of the rugged Reykjanes Peninsula, visiting Grindavik harbour and perhaps the hot springs at Gunnuhver, before returning to Keflavik Airport in time for our mid-afternoon flight back to London Heathrow.

Tour grading

This tour is graded A/B. We will travel to each site by minibus, then take leisurely (usually fairly short) walks to explore the area, generally over easy terrain, although the volcanic nature of Iceland does mean that some paths can be rough in places. The holiday is therefore suitable for anyone who enjoys gentle walks in the countryside and is of an 'average' level of fitness.



Gullfoss (by Kerrie Porteous)

Weather

We have made many previous May/June trips to Iceland. In one, the locals were in shirt-sleeves; in the second, there was still a fair amount of snow cover on the hills in the north. So come prepared for a cool trip and hope that it may be mild and sunny! The north of Iceland is quite dry, Mývatn typically getting about 40cm of rain annually. However the south-west does tend to be wetter.

Food & accommodation included in the price

Accommodation with breakfast and lunch are included throughout the trip, evening meals are not included. In the evening, in north Iceland, we usually enjoy our hosts' excellent food at the Hotel Mývatn. A choice of venue for evening meals are usually available elsewhere. Iceland is an expensive country, however, and you should allow around £30 per day for a main evening meal and a drink (excluding starter and desert!).

Accommodation is in comfortable hotels throughout; all rooms have private facilities. All of the hotels have free Wi-Fi access. Hotel Mývatn and Hotel Gullfoss have tea and coffee making facilities in the rooms, whilst Hotel Stykkisholmur lets guests help themselves to unlimited tea and coffee (at any hour!) in the restaurant. All of the hotels have hairdryers and telephones in the rooms.

Daily routine

Pre-breakfast enthusiasts have plenty of daylight if they wish to be out early! Breakfasts are usually from a buffet: several sorts of bread, cold meats, cheese, wonderful pickled fish, and fruit. Lunch usually takes the form of a picnic at a beautiful spot, nearly always by water. We aim to eat outdoors if it is mild, in the coach or under cover elsewhere should the weather dictate otherwise. Mid-morning and mid-afternoon we usually have brief stops at a roadhouses or cafes.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking

form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

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