

Go Slow in Iceland

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly to Akureyri (via Reykjavík). Transfer Mývatn.
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- Day 2/7** Excursions around Mývatn, Húsavík & Krafla.
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- Day 8** Transfer Akureyri, fly to London (via Reykjavik)
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Departs

May / June

Focus

Birds and general natural history.

Grading

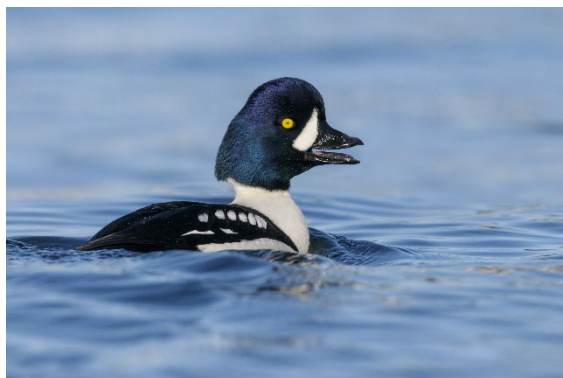
A traditional birdwatching tour, Grade A

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code ISL0XXX) or brochure

Highlights

- 7 nights at a modern, family run hotel in one of Iceland's premier birdwatching locations
- Harlequin Duck & Barrow's Goldeneye on Lake Mývatn
- White-tailed Eagle, Slavonian Grebe, Ptarmigan & Gyrfalcon all possible
- Great Northern and Red-throated Divers
- Visit Godafoss and Dettifoss, two of Iceland's most beautiful waterfalls
- Humpback and Minke Whales, White-beaked Dolphins, plus Glaucous & Iceland Gulls on boat trip
- Puffins, Fulmars, Black Guillemot & Common Guillemot
- Led by expert naturalist guides



From top: Barrow's Goldeneye, Lake Mývatn, Red-throated Diver (Shutterstock)



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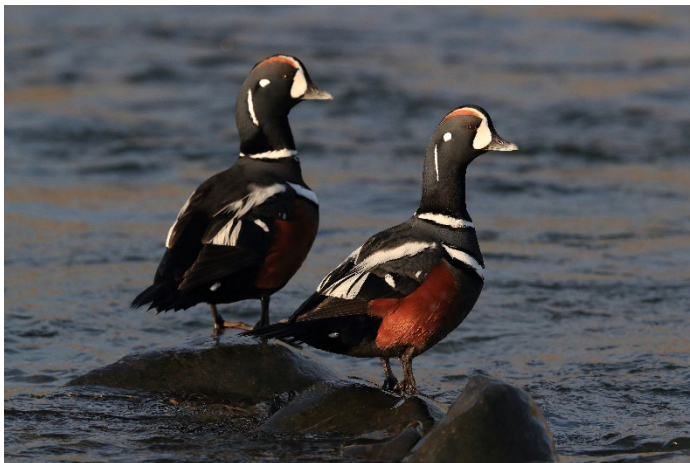
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Introduction

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 Eurasian Wigeon and White Wagtail, and the most easterly breeding populations of Great Northern Diver, Harlequin Duck and Barrow's Goldeneye. Many species are more approachable here than elsewhere in Europe and, although the variety of birds is limited, the sheer quality of Iceland's northern specialities in their striking breeding plumages 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.



Harlequin Ducks

Slightly smaller than England, slightly larger than Scotland, Iceland holds a population of just under 400,000 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 Sel Hotel Mývatn, our base for our holiday. Our hotel is set on the shores 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 Gyrfalcons.

Day 2 – 7

Mývatn

We now have six full days to fully explore Lake Mývatn and the surrounding area. Lake Mývatn is arguably Iceland's premier birdwatching site, being home to a staggering variety of waders and waterfowl during the summer months. Mývatn lies just one degree south of the Arctic Circle, providing us with a near 24-hour daylight to explore should we wish.

We will be looking especially for Barrow's Goldeneye, Harlequin Duck, Great Northern Diver and Red-necked Phalarope, whilst other species of waterfowl usually seen include Whooper Swan, Common Scoter, Long-tailed Duck, Scaup, Tufted Duck, Pochard, Eurasian Wigeon and Red-breasted Merganser. We will also keep one eye in the air for Gyrfalcon, with several pairs nesting locally, whilst Merlin may also be seen. Redwing, Wheatear, White Wagtail and Raven are also likely - 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.



Gyrfalcon

We'll spend time exploring the south side of the lake, characterised by the unique pseudo-craters of Skútustaðir. These craters, which on Earth are only found in Iceland, can also be found on the surface of Mars. Red-necked Phalarope and Slavonian Grebe are often seen here nesting close to the paths between the craters and the lake, and this is yet another good place to look for Gyrfalcon. 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!

Mývatn's eastern shores are also very productive. One morning we will head to Höfði, where small patches of woodland meet some of Mývatn's striking geological features. Common Teal, Redwing and Redpoll are regularly seen here, whilst lakeshore clearings provide impressive views across the surrounding landscape. We will

also visit the unique and unusual lava shapes of Dimmuborgir; if it has been an early spring this is an excellent area for wildflowers. Roughly translating to 'Black Fortress', the lava field was formed approximately 2,300 years ago when Mývatn was still underwater. Ptarmigan are regularly observed here and, if lucky, we may see a pair of duelling males! Those of us wishing to enjoy a longer walk may continue on to climb a remarkable tephra ring crater called Hverfjall.

We will also explore the coastal town of Húsavík. 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 Glaucous Gull. Iceland Gulls do not, curiously, breed in their eponymous land, they only winter there, heading further north to breed. At an outflow by the harbour there are usually Fulmars fighting over some mysterious delicacy and the ubiquitous Eiders are, as always, in evidence. From Húsavík we will board a whale-watching vessel for a three-hour trip to the west side of the bay. Minke Whale and Humpback Whales are frequently seen and, usually, White-beaked Dolphin. Seabirds are plentiful and the trip will include a pass-by of a nearby auk colony, home to over 100,000 breeding Atlantic Puffins! Other auks may also be seen, including both Black and Common Guillemots. Brännich's Guillemots are also found on occasion, while we'll be sure to also scan the waters for diving Northern Gannets.



Humpback Whale, Húsavík

Close to Húsavík sits the museum of Grenjaðarstaður. Iceland's historic architecture was characterised by houses made of turf and lava, with Grenjaðarstaður being one of the finest preserved examples. Turf houses have not been lived in by Icelandic people since the 1960s, however the homes are a symbol of rural Icelandic culture and lifestyle. Over 200 artefacts are stored at Grenjaðarstaður displaying traditional Icelandic livelihoods and we'll be sure to spend time understanding the local history and its close ties to nature.

Iceland's fascinating geology will certainly not be ignored and one day we'll head to Dettifoss – Europe's largest waterfall – and to 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.

North of Dettifoss lies the horseshoe-shaped canyon of Asbyrgi, which was formed by a cataclysmic glacial flood. As well as being an interesting geological formation, Asbyrgi is also excellent habitat for Iceland's few passerines and here we'll be sure to look out for Redpoll, as well as the Icelandic subspecies of Eurasian Wren. We will also include a visit to the dramatic geothermal activity of Námafjall, an area of boiling mud pools and steaming fumaroles, coloured by the yellows and oranges of sulphurous compounds.

For those that wish to, there will be an opportunity one day to visit the Mývatn Nature Baths to 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. £40) is not included in the cost of the holiday.

Day 8

Sadly, we must make our way back to Akureyri for our return flight to Heathrow (with a short transfer between airports in Reykjavik). En route to Akureyri we will make a stop at Godafoss, to drink in Iceland's spectacular scenery for one final time. Godafoss translates to 'Waterfall of the Gods' and is considered to be one of Iceland's most beautiful waterfalls. Godafoss holds a significant place in the country's history – it is here where the lawgiver, upon returning to his farm after pronouncing that Iceland should become a Christian country, threw idols of the Norse gods into the waterfall.

Tour Grading

This tour is graded A. 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.

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

All meals (excluding drinks) are included in the cost of this holiday. We'll be based at the charming family-run Sel Hotel in Mývatn. All rooms have private facilities, kettles, hairdryers and Wi-Fi, and we shall enjoy our hosts' excellent food each evening.

Daily routine

Pre-breakfast enthusiasts have plenty of daylight if they wish to be out early! Breakfasts are usually from a buffet of 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, or in a café or undercover elsewhere should the weather dictate otherwise. Mid-morning and mid-afternoon we usually have brief stops at 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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Great Northern Diver (Shutterstock)