

Iceland's Westfjords – In Search of the Arctic Fox

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly to Reykjavik, Transfer Snæfellsnes
Day 2	Snæfellsnes Peninsula
Day 3	Ferry to Brjánslækur via Flatey, transfer to Ísafjörður
Day 4	Excursions around Ísafjörður
Day 5	Hornstrandir Nature Reserve
Day 6	Whale-watch from Hólmavík
Day 7	Fly London (via Reykjavik)

Departs

May / June

Focus

Mammals, Birds, Scenery

Grading

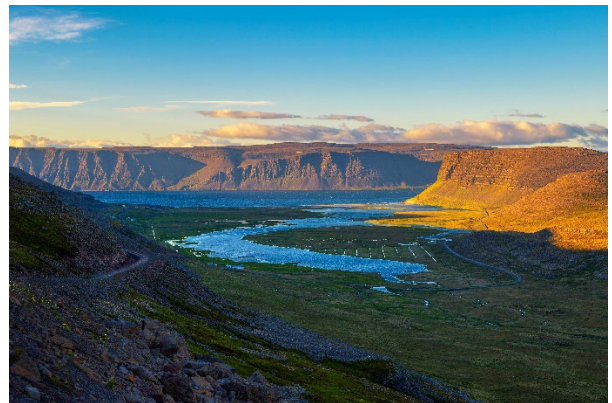
B – Day walks on unmarked trails

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code ISL08) or brochure

Highlights

- Four nights in Iceland's spectacular Westfjords
- Good chance of Arctic Fox in Hornstrandir
- Huge auk colonies including Brúnnich's Guillemot
- Humpback Whale, Minke Whale, White-beaked Dolphin & Harbour Porpoise all possible from Hólmavík
- Led by an expert naturalist Tour Leader



From top: Arctic Fox, Westfjords landscape, Brúnnich's Guillemot (Shutterstock)



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Introduction

Iceland's western coastline is the country's most inaccessible region, however arguably its most beautiful. The Westfjords region occupies approximately one fifth of Iceland's total landmass, however, is home to just over 7,000 people, making it the most sparsely populated region in the country. It is for this reason that the wildlife of the Westfjords thrives, calling home to the largest population of Arctic Fox in the country, concentrated within the Hornstrandir Nature Reserve in the North. Accessible only by boat, and with no permanent human settlement since the 1950's, the reserve was set up in 1975 to enforce the protection and conservation of Iceland's only terrestrial mammal. Due to lack of persecution, individuals here are more approachable than anywhere else in Iceland, and we'll head out in dedication in search of these beautiful creatures.

During our time here we will also enjoy Iceland's many other creatures, including Humpback Whale, Minke Whale, Harbour Porpoise and White-beaked Dolphins from a dedicated cetacean-watching boat trip, as well as a variety of seabirds, waders and waterfowl, all in bright breeding plumage, all set within the spectacular scenery of Iceland's Westfjords.

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 Reykjavik, drive Snæfellsnes

We depart from London Heathrow for our three-hour flight to Keflavík, Iceland's main international gateway. From here we head west to our base for the next two nights on the Snæfellsnes peninsula, a journey of around three hours. We will watch as the scenery becomes more dramatic, crossing tidal flats and marshland, framed by dramatic mountain peaks. Our hotel here is a charming, family-run stay, situated on the peninsula's southern shores.

Day 2

Snæfellsnes Peninsula

We shall spend today exploring the spectacular Snæfellsnes Peninsula. Close to our hotel lies Ytri Tunga, a coastal inlet with several rocky beaches. Grey and Common Seals frequent the outcrops here and visits in the early morning or late evening light will provide excellent photographic opportunities for Common Eider, Arctic Terns, gulls including Glaucous, Iceland, Great Black-backed and Kittiwake, and breeding-plumaged waders including Sanderling, Dunlin, Turnstone, Purple Sandpiper, Redshank and Knot. Arctic Fox are occasionally seen here, so we shall keep our eyes peeled for our first glimpses of Iceland's only native land mammal!

We will visit the westernmost point of the peninsula to enjoy the sights and sounds of one of Iceland's larger seabird colonies. Our journey will take us along the southern coast road where we will visit Arnarstapi, and round the edge of the large shield volcano, Snæfellsjökull – the doorway



White-tailed Eagle

into the planet's interior chosen by author 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 Gyrfalcon, whilst roadside pools often hold Red-necked Phalaropes. The seabird cliffs, a short walk from the road, are home to Common Guillemot, Razorbill and, most sought after for UK birdwatchers, the high-arctic Brunnich's Guillemot. Kittiwakes and Fulmars add their notes to

the cacophony of cliff-side sound. Offshore, Gannets and Arctic Skuas are frequently seen, 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).

Day 3

Snæfellsnes to Ísafjörður

Today we must move on from Snæfellsnes to our base for the next four nights, the village of Ísafjörður in the northern Westfjords. Our day will be largely spent travelling, as we begin by taking a ferry from the town of Stykkishólmur to Brjánslækur, via the island of Flatey – a journey of approximately two and a half hours. The crossing provides some excellent wildlife viewing opportunities, and we shall look out for Northern Fulmar, Puffin, Common Eider and Black Guillemot, as well as White-beaked Dolphin and Harbour Porpoise. Should time between ferries allow, we will make a brief landing on Flatey, one of Iceland's most famous nature reserves, and will look out for some of the breeding birds here, including Snow Bunting and Red-necked Phalarope, and if lucky, Grey Phalarope.

Our ferry will take us to harbour port of Brjánslækur, where we will head west to the cliffs of Látrabjarg. Much of this journey will be along an unmade road, providing us with our first taste of the Westfjords remote nature!

Standing at over 400 metres tall, Látrabjarg forms the largest seabird colony in the North Atlantic in both size and population. Between April and August of each year, ten different species of seabird return to these cliffs to breed, with the total population often exceeding one million birds. The birds stratify themselves amongst the cliff-face, with Razorbills breeding close to the water's edge, whilst Northern Gannet, Black, Common and Brunnich's Guillemot, Northern Fulmar, and Kittiwake breed further up the cliffside. Puffins nest in



Atlantic Puffin

Puffins nest in

the grassy outcrops at the top of the cliffs and can be very approachable. We shall keep an eye out for predating Great and Arctic Skua, as well as White-tailed Eagle, as we watch parents skilfully leave and return to their nests to provision their young.

From here, we shall head north to our accommodation in Ísafjörður, a journey of around three hours through spectacular scenery. We shall hope to arrive at our accommodation by the evening. We will be based in Ísafjörður for the next four nights.

Day 4

Ísafjörður & Surroundings



Harlequin Duck

Today will be spent exploring the many inlets and fjords that characterise this region, in search of Iceland's breeding birdlife. Marshland habitat may reveal Golden Plover, Snipe, Dunlin and Purple Sandpiper, whilst freshwater ponds contain Great Northern and Red-throated Diver, Eurasian Teal, Whooper Swan and Red-breasted Merganser. Sea ducks such as Harlequin Duck, Long-tailed Duck and Common Eider are ubiquitous on the open water, as well as

resting auks including Puffin, Black Guillemot and Common Guillemot.

In the afternoon we shall pass through the small fishing village of Súðavík, home to the Arctic Fox Centre. The museum was founded by conservationists and Arctic Fox researchers, Páll Hersteinsson and Ester Rut, who helped pioneer both research into Arctic Fox behaviour, as well as the education of local residents to reduce the ongoing persecution of the species.

The museum now focusses primarily on education of the life history, biology and ongoing conservation efforts of Arctic Fox, as well as participating in and promoting research programs on Icelandic arctic fox populations, in collaboration with various academic institutions and research organisations. We will also be sure to stop at Dynjandavegur – a cascading waterfall consisting of six different rapids, stretching from mountain to sea.

Day 5

Hornstrandir

This morning, we will board a small passenger ferry over to Hornstrandir Nature Reserve. Sparsely populated even during its prime, the area has been declared uninhabited since the 1950's and declared a reserve in 1973. Hunting is banned here, which has allowed the local wildlife to thrive, and the reserve now supports the highest population density of Arctic Foxes in Iceland.

A significant proportion of the foxes here have a different colour pattern to those of other Arctic regions, such as Svalbard, and is known as a 'dark', or 'blue' morph. This colouring is unique to milder coastal regions, and individuals retain this dark colouration year-round. By late June, females will begin to wean their young, and pups will start to leave the dens under close supervision from

their parents. Their curious and somewhat tame nature shall hopefully provide for some exceptional encounters!

Our ferry will land into the village of Hesteyri, where we shall have around six hours on Hornstrandir to explore and search for Arctic Fox. Hornstrandir also calls home to over 30 species of breeding bird and we shall keep an eye out for some of Iceland's few passerines, including Redwing, European Starling, Northern Wheatear, White Wagtail and Meadow Pipit.



Arctic Fox

Day 6

Ísafjörður & Hólmavík

Today we shall head to the eastern corners of the Westfjords, heading towards the village of Hólmavík in Steingrímsfjörður. The waters here attract large number of spawning Capelin in the summer – a small baitfish in the smelt family. This glut of food rarely goes unnoticed in the animal kingdom, and large numbers of Humpback Whales will follow into the bay to feed during the summer months. We will head out on a dedicated whale-watching trip to see these magnificent creatures as they feed, and the sheltered nature of the bay means trips are rarely called off due to poor weather conditions. White-beaked Dolphin, Harbour Porpoise, Long-finned Pilot Whale, and Minke Whale are also possible, and whilst scanning for whales we will enjoy numerous Puffins, Fulmars, Arctic Terns and Kittiwakes.

Day 7

Ísafjörður & Hólmavík

Today, we must sadly say goodbye to Iceland's remarkable Westfjords, as we fly home from Ísafjörður to London (via Reykjavík).



Humpback Whale (Dave Jackson)

Tour grading

This tour is graded 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. Footpaths across the westfjords are significantly less maintained than the rest of Iceland, and walking, especially around Hornstrandir, may be uneven underfoot. 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 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 climate in the Westfjords is milder than other areas of Iceland yet can attract wetter conditions.

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 Sel-Hotel Mývatn. Iceland is an expensive country, however, and you should allow around £60 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 Langaholt on the Snaefellses Peninsula lets guests help themselves to unlimited tea and coffee (at any hour!) in the restaurant. All the hotels have hairdryers and telephones in the rooms.

Breakfasts are usually from a buffet: several sorts of bread, cold meats, cheese, wonderful, pickled fish, cereal 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 under cover elsewhere should the weather dictate otherwise.

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, 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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