

Iceland in Autumn – Glaciers, Icebergs & Waterfalls

Naturetrek Tour report

23 – 29 September 2012



Humpback Whale



Jokulsarlon Glacier Lagoon



Northern Lights



2012 Naturetrek Group Photo

Report & images compiled by Malcolm Stott



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Day 1

Sunday 23rd September

Keflavik – Hengill (84km)

Weather details: Low cloud and light drizzle temp 6°C

The plane descended through a thick layer of greyness into Keflavik International Airport. Once through passport control and baggage reclaim Malcolm was on hand to greet us. We were soon on board the bus travelling along the Reykjanes Peninsula. We took the new city ring-road, avoiding the capital, and headed out into the countryside. Turning off the main 'A road' we generally followed the geothermal pipeline towards its source, the new power-plant that now supplies Reykjavik, and our hotel at the foot of the defunct volcano Hengill. We quickly settled into our cosy rooms, shortly afterwards Malcolm held a briefing session and gave guidance on how best to optimise any opportunities of capturing images of the northern lights. Locally caught Arctic Char provided a delicious meal before we ventured outside to see if there would be any chance of the northern lights being activity tonight. By 10pm the sky was obscured by low cloud and quite understandably some of the group were beginning to feel a little weary, so we decided to retire for the evening.

Day 2

Monday 24th September

Golden Circle (228km)

Weather details: Generally overcast with cloud lifting late evening, temp 9°C

Today was a day of 'doing' the iconic landscapes that makes Iceland so different from elsewhere, and so we joined other tourists on the 'Golden Circle'. We started at Þingvellir, perhaps the most celebrated of all landscapes, being the sight of the first ever parliament and birth place of Christianity in Iceland. After visiting the Interpretive Centre we walked to the viewing platform where we tried to comprehend the enormity of the geological fault that stretched 2km towards the Eurasian Tectonic Plate which is growing at an amazing rate of 2cm/year! A walk down the fissure to visit the 'Alþing' followed, while Malcolm relocated the bus to a lower car park.

We searched the lake-shore and found 3 Great-northern Divers (loons) and good numbers of Red-breasted Mergansers. At another location Malcolm slowly ‘walked’ 3 Harlequin Ducks to where we were stood, cameras poised. The ducks duly obliged and gave some extremely close views of these much sort-after ducks.

After a late morning coffee stop we travelled onto Geysir where Malcolm prepared an al fresco picnic lunch before we visited Gullfoss, the ‘Golden Waterfall’. The falls were magnificent and we had plenty of time to walk down to the bottom, getting wet in the process! We retraced our journey back to Geysir and visited Strokkur, the only accessible Geysir in Iceland that remains active. We stood by the hole of boiling water and with eager anticipation waiting for it to erupt in a huge column of vaporous steam, and we were not disappointed!

After coffee it was time to head back towards Selfoss. Just before arriving at the town we visited the ‘scoria crater’ at Kerið before being treated to the warm hospitality at Siggí and Irma’s home. We called briefly to drop-off a package, fix Annette’s camera, and were made very welcome with coffee and traditional Icelandic pancakes. By now it was almost 7pm and we were due for dinner at the Meman, a highly recommended Thai restaurant– the food was excellent and very reasonably priced. We drove back to the hotel via a quiet track over the heath with little visible light pollution, should the northern lights happen to put in an appearance. Although it was a cloudy night, by the time we reached the hotel some stars were visible through the translucent wisps of clouds and our expectations of a display this evening were running high. After the bird log we eagerly ventured outside into the cold night air. Malcolm took a test shot with his camera and aurora light filled the dark sky with pale green sheets of light. Unfortunately the clouds thickened before any substantial aurora activity was evident, so we decided to retire in the hope of better conditions tomorrow evening.

Day 3

Tuesday 25th September

Drive to Skaftafell (310 km)

Weather details; Very sunny with temp 10°C

At 01:45am Malcolm checked to see if the sky had cleared, it had and the light show was indeed in full-swing, so he dashed round the hotel corridors, knocking on doors to alert the sleeping occupants of the event that was unfolding outside. It took two or three knocks to wake everyone before the group gathered outside in the chilling night-air to experience their first aurora. The green ethereal glow in the night sky was very vivid and although wisps of light waved through the constellations, it never materialised into anything very spectacular. It was, if nothing else an ideal opportunity to appreciate the phenomena, try-out our camera techniques and hone our night-time photographic skills. After an hour the aurora suddenly vanished as if someone had cruelly flicked a switch, so we returned to our warm bed for the rest of the night content that we had witnessed something special!

Beautiful sunshine and clear blue skies greeted us this morning. The mist around the lake made a very atmospheric scene. Luggage packed and loaded on the bus we departed Hengill after breakfast for the long drive to Skaftafell. Once on our way we stopped to photograph the little church at Nesjar and search for Barrow’s Goldeneye along the River Sog. Sadly we didn’t find any and perhaps what was even more surprising, was the general lack of wildfowl that is normally present by the power-station. We did, however, manage to locate a single female Scaup. On joining the main arterial ring-road we headed southeast, stopping at Hella for coffee, while Malcolm visited the supermarket to purchase provisions for lunch.

The light quality this morning was excellent and we made the most of any photographic opportunity. First we stopped briefly to capture the 3 volcanos of Hekla, Eyjafallajökull and Katla before arriving at Seljalandsfoss – a beautiful waterfall with a path behind that enticed one through its cascading curtain of waters. There were many Fulmars flying in front of the cliffs at either side, some still had well-grown young on the ledges. A little way down the road we had our second waterfall, Skógafoss, where a film crew were busy creating another Icelandic epic. The thunderous falls provided an idyllic back-drop to our picnic lunch today.

At the small hamlet of Kirkjubæjarklaustur we visited Stjornarfoss, an unusual waterfall behind the town. It was here that we had really good views of a Merlin perched precariously at the top of a conifer tree and we had time for afternoon tea. The very photogenic Icelandic horse was next on the list of ‘must-have’ images today. Malcolm stopped the bus beneath some interesting rock formations where a small group of horses were encouraged to pose for the cameras in return for a fee of bread!

The final waterfall of the day was at Krossarfoss, followed shortly-after by a beautiful cascading river, before we crossed the Skeiðararsandur. In the distance Hvannadalsungha towered majestically above the glistening white glacier of Vatnajökull and in the low evening-light it was a spectacular sight. The occasion of seeing Iceland’s tallest mountain without a cloud in the sky was too good an opportunity to miss and so we felt compelled to stop and take a distant photograph. Closer to the hotel its reflection cast a perfect image in a shallow lagoon, so we climbed out of the bus for another and last photo-opportunity of the day.

Once we had check-in at the hotel there was time to relax and unwind from the long drive before heading down to the restaurant for dinner. After supper of Icelandic lamb, that was delicious, we retired upstairs to the bar to complete the daily birdlog before watching a video on the science, myths and legends that surround the Aurora Borealis. Our enthusiasm fired-up, if it was ever-needed, we disappeared to our rooms to collect extra warm clothes before going outside to see if we could capture the real thing! We gathered in the darkness at the rear of the hotel and waited patiently for the light show to begin. Again, as in previous nights some aurora light was present, but it was weak and the cloud cover gradually increased denying us the opportunity to see any lights this evening.

Day 4

Wednesday 26th September

Jokulsarlon & Skaftafell National Park (229km)

Weather details; Very sunny, temp 10°C

The drive to Jökulsárlon this morning was spectacular; glacier snouts linking sky and earth, as though to douse the flaming carpets of fiery red *vaccinium* and the burnished yellows of *salix* that enlivened the landscape. Our first stop was at the little turf-covered church in Hoff where we searched for one of Iceland’s rarest breeding birds, the humble House Sparrow! Continuing our journey through some of Iceland’s finest and, perhaps most dramatic scenery we eventually arrived at the glacial lake with its extraordinary ice-sculptures. The glorious weather certainly tempted the birds of prey out of hiding, Merlins were everywhere and a Gyr Falcon flew over-head as we waited to board the amphibious-craft. After a wonderful time cruising amongst the ice-sculptures and learning about how they are formed and what makes them blue, we followed the ice-bergs on foot to their eternal destiny and photographed the ones stranded on the beach.

After a brief stop by another glacial lagoon, where the silence was only punctuated as another ice-berg was born, we moved onto Kviajökull for lunch. The glacier provided a stunning back-drop to our picnic, and for some, the two Gyr Falcons were just the ‘cherry on top of the cake’ today! More Merlins were seen, perched by the road, as we drove onto the Skaftafell National Park. First we all visited the spectacular waterfall, Svartifoss, the inspiration for the design of the new church in Reykjavik. We soaked-up the atmosphere of this remarkable area on our leisurely stroll back through the scrublands down to the visitor centre, where Malcolm had arranged for a video showing the devastating glacial eruption that brought such turmoil to this corner of Iceland in 1996. On our way back to the hotel there was enough time to visit the impressive glacier snout at Svinajökull before arriving at the hotel for an early supper.

After the birdlog we returned to our rooms, collected extra warm clothes and camera equipment before heading out into the night sky in search of the northern lights. To optimise our chances of finding clear skies this evening we opted to return to Jökulsárlon for the second time today. During the drive the sky looked very promising, with only wisps of cloud evident. On arrival at the lake we parked on the car-park overlooking the ice-sculptures and waited in the warmth of the bus for ‘things’ to happen. The moon was full and bright and provided sufficient light to ‘pick-out’ the glacier and the ice-bergs that would enhance our experience should the northern lights make an appearance this evening. Although the sky was clear with hints of aurora activity, it eventually started to cloud over just as the aurora began to increase in intensity. We had a difficult decision to make, to stay and chance our luck that the cloud would disperse or drive back to Skaftafell in the hope the sky would be clear! We chose the latter option and within a couple of kilometres of the hotel the sky suddenly erupted with an amazing display of vivid green, fringed by pinks and yellows that danced and separated into two drifting shafts of colourful curtains - wow - this is exactly what we had been dreaming for! Wasting little time we pulled into a lay-by and rushed off the bus to get better views. The display was quite spectacular although it seemed to be over in no time at all, so taking advantage of a calm period we boarded the bus and travelled the short distance to the hotel.

As we walked behind the hotel the whole sky erupted once more in vivid green curtains with pink and yellow fringes. For the next half-an-hour or so the sky was awash with soft-blue and pale green auroral light, it was amazing! Sadly, the show came to an abrupt end when low cloud eventually obscured the velvet sky for the second time this evening! Reluctant to leave, just in case the cloud dispersed, we eventually drifted back to the warmth of the hotel contentedly with a good experience of the aurora tonight, but one couldn’t help feeling a little cheated that it didn’t last a wee while longer!

Day 5

Thursday 27th September

Reykjanes ‘Northern Lights Inn’ (384km)

Weather details; Wet/windy with temp 7°C

Sadly, it was time to leave Skaftafell after breakfast this morning on our drive back to Keflavik. On reaching Vik we had plenty of time to stretch our legs, have coffee and even so a little retail therapy before driving further west. It was difficult to find somewhere sheltered from the wind and rain for lunch today, but we did eventually manage a degree of shelter in some woodland on the banks of the River Sog at Selfoss. And after a rather hasty lunch we went in search of hot coffee at the market garden town of Hveragerði. Before arriving at the cosy Northern Light Inn we called-in for a sneak preview at the Blue Lagoon and it really was blue!

At the hotel we had time to relax, before a wonderful supper. We all gathered in the observatory and completed the birdlog while waiting to see if there would be any prospect of seeing the northern lights tonight. Sadly the low cloud didn't clear so we all retired early full of anticipation of the pelagic cruise the next day.

Day 6

Friday 28th September

Pelagic & Reykjavik (139km)

Weather details; Overcast am, bright pm, windy throughout. Temp 6°C

Wild Atlantic surf pounded the Reykjanes coastline this morning as we travelled into the capital and whale watching was beginning to look rather doubtful! After a brief city tour we called at the old harbour to enquire about the whale-watching cruise only to be told it was too rough to sail out of Reykjavik, so the ship had been relocated in Grindavik and it would be sailing later. After 2-hours of retail theory or simply enjoying some relaxed birdwatching by the city's lake we departed the vibrant capital and headed back along the peninsula to Grindavik for lunch before sailing. While Malcolm prepared a very breezy picnic served out of the boot of the bus, the main focus was on the many 'white-winged' gulls assembled in the harbour and without too much difficulty we managed to have some good views of both Glaucous and Iceland Gulls.

Once on board the ship we donned our thermal suits and braved the elements on the upper decks. The sailing was mostly quiet for the first hour with only the odd Gannets passing by, then suddenly a White-beaked Dolphin appeared from nowhere, passing very close to the ship with few noticing except for some eagle-eyed members of the Naturetrek group! We had been cruising for over 2 hours and seen little in the way of cetaceans but as we were about to return to Grindavik a Humpback Whale was spotted. The captain managed to manoeuvre the ship close to the whale, at one stage it passed within a few metres of its bow, and everyone had good views of this most energetic of all whales. So, with the sun-shining and the wind to our stern we could relax and enjoy the ride back into harbour.

Returning to the hotel the bathers dashed inside to collect their swimming costumes before driving the short distance to the Blue Lagoon to soak in its reputedly therapeutic water rich in minerals. The aqua-blue, silicon saturated water was an amazing experience and enjoyed by all who participated. After dinner we gathered in the observation room for the bird log and to wait to see if the northern lights would appear on our last evening. Although the sky was clear and the constellations shone brightly, our expectations ran high, only to be disappointed later by the lack of auroral activity tonight.

Day 7

Saturday 29th September

Grindavik & return flight UK (31km)

Weather details; Overcast with temp 8°C

Luggage packed and accounts settled we left the Northern Lights Inn this morning to visit some local landscape features special to Iceland. First we visited the surreal landscape at Gunnuhver with its bubbling mud pots and steaming fumaroles before we continued past the lighthouse down to the coast. Here we paid homage to the Great Auk, its image immortalised in bronze, poignantly facing the island of Eldey, its last-known nesting site before its extinction in 1897.

On the sea we saw rafts of male Eider Duck, in various stages of eclipse plumage, and further out Gannets flew-by. The coastal scenery was very beautiful with the white Atlantic surf pounding the black lava rocks. We briefly stopped at the latest generation of power-plants, but it was closed. Bridging two continents was next, and we walked the short distance from the Eurasian Tectonic Plate over onto the American Tectonic Plate before our time in Iceland quickly ran-out and it was time for one last coffee in Keflavik before heading off to the airport.

The flight back to the UK was uneventful and we landed at Heathrow on schedule. Baggage reclaimed and we bade our farewells before merging into the crowds for our homeward journeys. I hope you can now share a little of my enthusiasm for this amazing land, and may you return again one day...

Aurora Borealis

There are many charming myths and folk-lore legends surrounding the Northern Lights phenomenon, many claiming them to be Spirits of ancestors or messages from the heavens. The scientific explanation, as is so often the case, is far less mysterious and enchanting but enlightening and interesting nonetheless. The aurora borealis are named after the Latin phrase meaning 'northern dawn' and are caused by solar winds interacting with the Earth's ionosphere.

Most of the winds, consisting of charged solar particles sent Earthwards by solar flares or explosions simply pass the Earth by and disappear into space, but some do enter the atmosphere at its weaker polar-points colliding with atoms and molecules which absorb the particles energy. In order to return to their 'normal' state these atoms and molecules emit photons, or light particles, giving us the phenomenon of the Northern Lights.

The aurora is best seen in between now and March, far away from artificial light, beneath the aurora oval which usually circles the Earth between 60° – 70° of latitude which makes Iceland an ideal location to witness this wondrous phenomenon. The intensity of luminescence is inextricably linked to sun-spot activity that has a natural rhythm. The best time to witness the Northern Lights is, therefore, at the height of the 11 year solar-cycle, which happens to be 2012/13.

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Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	September						
			23	24	25	26	27	28	29
1	Great-northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>		3	1				
2	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmaris glacialis</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Northern Gannet	<i>Sula bassana</i>						15	60
4	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>				1		1	24
5	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>							3
6	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			1				
7	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus Cygnus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>			100's	100's	12		
9	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>		30	✓	60	7	✓	
10	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>		3			2		
11	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas Penelope</i>						1	
12	Eurasian Teal	<i>Ansa crecca crecca</i>			1		3		
13	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
14	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	12		✓			20	
15	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>				1		✓	✓
16	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		1					
17	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		20	40		20	6	4
18	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>				4			
19	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>						1	
20	Gyr Falcon	<i>Falco</i>				3			
21	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		3	3	4	1		
22	Eurasian Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>			1000's	1000's	✓	✓	15
23	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa tetanus</i>						4	
24	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>			2	1	3		
25	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
26	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>						12	
27	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	✓	✓	✓	1	✓	✓	
28	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>				1		✓	✓
29	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>						16	1
30	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>						5	
31	Greater Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>						10	4
32	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus graellsii</i>			1		1	2	2
33	Feral Pigeon/Rock Dove	<i>Columbia livia</i>			4		6	✓	
34	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		2		4	6		
35	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
36	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		2		4		1	
37	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenathe</i>		2					
38	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulas</i>		1					
39	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
40	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
41	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>				1			
42	Common Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>		5			50		
43	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>				1		3	
Mammals									
1	Humpbacked Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>						1	
2	Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>				3			
3	White-beaked Dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus albirostris</i>						1	

Vascular plants

- * European species found only in Iceland
- RN Species with very restricted distribution in Britain, largely montane
- N Species that occur very largely in northern Britain or in mountains.

Clubmosses, horsetails and ferns

- N Fir Clubmoss *Huperzia selago*

Conifers

- N Juniper *Juniperus communis* ssp *alpine*

Buttercups

- Meadow Buttercup *Ranunculus acris*
- Creeping buttercup *R. Repens*

Birches

- Downy Birch *Betula pubescens*
- N Dwarf Birch *B. nana*

Chickweeds,ampions etc

- RN Arctic Sandwort *Arenaria norvegica*
- RN Sea Champion *Silene uniflora*

Bistorts, docks etc

- N Alpine Bistort *Persicaria vivipara*
- Sheep Sorrel *Rumex acetosella*
- N Mountain Sorrel *Oxyria digyna*

Thrifts

- Thrift *Armeria maritime*

Willowherb

- * Arctic River-beauty *Epilobium latifolium*
- Rosebay Willowherb *Epilobium angustifolium*
- Alpine Willowherb *E. anagallidifolium*

Willows and poplars

- N Dwarf Willow *Salix herbacea*
- RN Woolley Willow *S. lanata*
- N Tea-leaved Willow *S. phyllinifolia*

Cresses

- N Northern Rockcress *Cardaminopsis petraea*
- N Hoary Whitowgrass *Draba incana*
- Shepherd's Purse *Capsella bursa-pastoris*
- N Sea Rocket *Cakile arctica*

Heathers

- N Bearberry *Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*
- Heather *Calluna vulgaris*
- N Bog Bilberry *Vaccinium uliginosum*
- Bilberry *V. Myrtillus*
- N Crowberry *Empetrum heraphroditum/ nigrum*

Stonecrops

- N Roseroot *Sedum rosea*
- English Stonecrop *S. anglicum*

Saxifrage

- RN Purple Saxifrage *Saxifraga oppositifolia* - only seen at Svinafell

Parnassus

- Grass of Parnassus *Parnassus palustris* - only seen at Svinafell

Rose family

- Meadowsweet *Filipendula ulmaria*
 N Alpine Cinquefoil *Potentilla crantzii*
 Water Avens *Geum rivale*
 Alpine Lady's-mantle *Alchemilla alpine*
 Lady's-mantle *A. filicaulis*
 Mountain Ash *Sorbus aucuparia*

Clovers and vetches

- Red Clover *Trifolium pratense*
 White clover *T. repens* - introduced leys

Geranium

- Wood Cranesbill *Geranium sylvaticum* - widespread
 Herb Robert *G. Robertianum* - common

Carrot family

- Cow Parsley *Anthriscus sylvestris* - introduced (potential conservation threat?)
 Pignut *Conopodium majus*
 Sweet Cicely *Myrrhis odorata* - frequent around farms; introduced
 Garden Angelica *Angelica archangelica* - abundant

Bogbean family

- Bogbean *Menyanthes trifoliata* - widespread in pools

Borage family

- Field Forget-me-not *Myosotis arvensis*

Deadnettle and mint family

- Wild Thyme *Thymus polytrichus* (praecox) - widespread & abundant
 White Dead-nettle *Laminum album*

Mare's-tail

- Mare's-tail *Hippuris vulgaris* - widespread

Plantains

- Sea Plantain *Plantago maritime* - widespread

Figwort family

- Northern Yellow Rattle *Rhinanthus groelandicus* - common, especially in damp flushes

Bedstraws

- N Northern Bedstraw *Galium boreale* - widespread
 Lady's Bedstraw *G. verum* - widespread

Valerians

- Common Valerian *Valeriana officinalis* - widespread

Bellflowers

- Harebell *Campanula rotundifolia* - widespread

Daisy family

- Autumn Hawkbit *Leontodon autumnalis* - common (not to be mistaken for Cat's ear
Hypochoeris radicata)
 N Dandelion *Taraxacum spectabile* group - several species
 Hawkweed *Hieracium* spp. - widespread

Rush family

- N Three-leaved Rush *Juncus trifidus* - widespread on heaths
 Heath Woodrush *Luizula multiflora* - widespread

Sedge family

- Common Cottongrass *Eriophorum angustifolium* - widespread
 Bottle Sedge *C. rostrata* - common

Grasses

- Arctic Fesuce *Festuca richardsonii* - widespread & abundant

Lily family

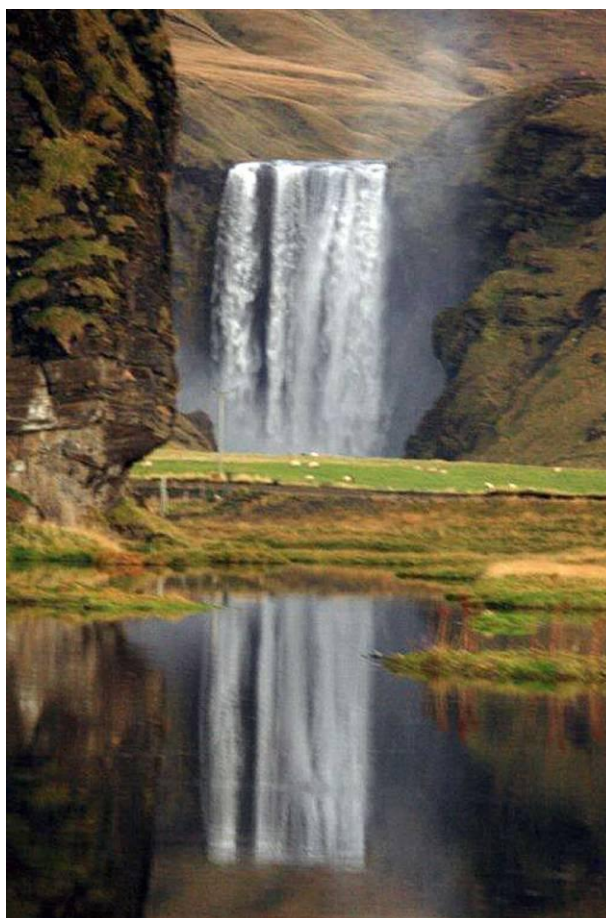
- N Scottish Asphodel *Tofieldia pusilla* - widespread & frequent
 Bog Asphodel *Narthecium ossifragum*

Summary

Species recorded (not necessarily inclusive)	66
European species found only in Iceland	1
Rare in Britain with a northern distribution	4
Northern or montane distribution in Britain	18

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Skogafoss Waterfall