

Iceland in Autumn - Glaciers, Icebergs & Waterfalls

Naturetrek Tour Report

24 – 30 September 2015



Strokkur about to blow (by Brian West)



Icebergs on the beach at Jokulsarlon (by Marcus John)



Picnic spot at Fjallsarlon (by Brian West)

Report compiled by Marcus John
Images courtesy of Brian West & Marcus John



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Tour Participants: our participants: Marcus John (leader) with a group of Naturetrek clients

Introduction

This autumn tour to Iceland combined stunning landscapes, extraordinary geological phenomena and a range of interesting birdlife; we also witnessed the Northern Lights on our very first night. We spent our first full day around the 'Golden circle' close to Reykjavik, taking a less-travelled route in order to find the special birds that inhabit the lakes and rivers. Next, we drove along the scenic south coast to reach Skaftafell National Park, calling in at the towering waterfalls of Seljalandsfoss and Skogafoss. Perhaps the highlight of the tour was our visit to the awe-inspiring Jokulsarlon glacier lagoon, where white and blue icebergs break off the glacier and float out past a black sand beach. We returned to the Reykjanes peninsular in order to visit the capital city and take a whale-watching trip into Faxafloi bay. Although the weather was mixed during our stay, we enjoyed some lovely sunshine at Jokulsarlon and on our whale-watching trip.

Day 1

Thursday 24th September

Keflavik airport – Hveragerdi – Hotel Gullfoss

After flying from the UK, there was a slight delay in group members meeting at Keflavik airport before we set off in our bright green bus for the drive across the lava flows of the Reykjanes peninsula to our first stop in Hveragerdi, the hot springs capital of Iceland. After a welcome coffee stop, we continued past Selfoss and across relatively fertile land until we reached the rugged country where Hotel Gullfoss is situated. Roadside birds included our first families of migrating Whooper Swans, as well as flocks of Pink-footed and Greylag Geese. A Merlin was seen briefly when it flew right across the road!

After a good dinner, we met together to discuss the week ahead. The Aurora Borealis can be impressive even as early as September in Iceland, and so around 10pm we walked outside to check for any signs in the darkening sky. There was a faint greenish-white glow towards the north. After some time, this gradually coalesced into a shimmering arc of light that occasionally formed into a moving curtain. The spectacle lasted for almost an hour and left a lasting impression on those of us who witnessed it.

Day 2

Friday 25th September

Gullfoss – Geysir - Ulfssfljotsvatn - Thingvallavatn – Thingvellir

After an excellent buffet breakfast, we set off to visit Iceland's biggest waterfall, the famous Gullfoss. It was an amazing sight, where a huge volume of water thunders over two wide falls. Next, we drove back past our hotel to the famous Geysir, which of course gave its name to the geothermal phenomenon of eruptive hot springs. Geysir itself is rarely active and it is the nearby Strokkur that gushes up to 30 metres every few minutes, providing an unforgettable spectacle. We stayed long enough to witness several eruptions and to explore the other springs and pools that are scattered around the site. After this, we had lunch at Fridheimar in Reykholt. This is a uniquely Icelandic food experience, where fresh tomato soup and home-made bread are served in the middle of a huge greenhouse!

Thingvellir lies on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge and was the site of Iceland's ancient parliament, the Althing. Over many centuries, chieftains and their followers travelled from across the country to meet once a year, to read the

law and settle disputes. To reach it, we took the minor road to the west of Thingvallavatn, which is Iceland's largest lake. We first stopped to scan a large flock of Tufted Ducks by the hydro-electric station on the River Sog. Looking up river, we found a group of seven Barrow's Goldeneye, a species of diving duck that is found nowhere else in Europe.

Next, we visited a picturesque church overlooking the smaller lake of Ulfsfljotsvatn, where we admired a Great Northern Diver in stunning breeding plumage. During the drive along the lakes, we saw another four Great Northern Divers, along with a total of 55 Red-breasted Mergansers.

Arriving at Thingvellir in the late afternoon, we had time for a short walk along the Almannagja, the largest of the fissures and canyons that mark the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. It was here that the law-giver read the law to the assembled Althing; everyone appreciated its unique atmosphere. Looking into the wide valley below, we could see a small group of ducks swimming in the stream that flowed into Thingvallavatn. We walked down to find seven Harlequin Ducks feeding in crystal clear water directly below a footbridge; another really special bird that breeds nowhere else in Europe! It was getting late and time to return to the hotel, across the unspoilt landscape of Thingvellir National Park.

Day 3

Saturday 26th September

Seljalandsfoss – Skogar – Kirkjubaejarklaustur – Hotel Skaftafell

Our route took us back down to the coast and then east along the ring road for almost 300 kilometres. It was a dry morning and we found several flocks of migrating birds as we drove across the grasslands near Selfoss. We saw hundreds more Golden Plover as well as Pink-footed and Greylag Geese. Better still, we found flocks of Greenland White-fronted Geese, which pass through Iceland every autumn on their way to their British wintering grounds.

Our first stop was the beautiful Seljalandsfoss waterfall. Some of us chose to walk along the path behind the waterfall, which offers a very unusual view! As we continued on our journey east, the weather closed in and it was raining hard by the time we reached Skogar. We ate our packed lunch in the Folk Museum and spent an hour or so with a guide before visiting the traditional houses that have been reconstructed in the grounds. We gained a real insight into the challenges faced by previous generations of Icelanders; learning about their fortitude and innovative use of natural resources was quite humbling.

The heavy rain and strong winds prevented us from appreciating the scenery and slowed our journey, so we stopped for a coffee break in Kirkjubaejarklaustur. Nonetheless, we arrived in good time for a superb dinner at the Skaftafell Hotel, which lies just below the Svinafellsjokull glacier.

Day 4

Sunday 27th September

Jokulsarlon – Fjallsarlon – Hof – Skaftafell National Park

The morning was bright and clear as we drove for a little under an hour to reach the iceberg lagoon of Jokulsarlon. It is an extraordinary sight; a lagoon at the foot of a large glacier, filled with dozens of icebergs. We walked along the shore in brilliant sunshine before boarding a large amphibious vehicle and setting out across the

lagoon. The icebergs showed an amazing variety of sizes, shapes and colours. Returning to dry land, we walked down both sides of the fast-flowing channel through which the icebergs eventually make their way to the sea. A few had become stranded on the black sand beach, creating a unique photographic opportunity. Several Common Seals were feeding in amongst the icebergs, often surfacing close to shore. Fulmars flew overhead and we saw our first Eider Ducks.

We went to nearby Fjallsarlon, where another glacier has created a similar lagoon. Though on a smaller scale than Jokulsarlon, the glacier is much closer and there are fewer visitors. It was the ideal place to enjoy our packed lunch, with a glorious view of the sunlit glacier!

On our return journey, we visited the picturesque turf-roofed church in the little village of Hof. This sits in a sheltered grassy hollow, surrounded by mature Rowan trees. There were lots of Redwings busy feeding on the red berries, allowing us to get very close views. From here, we continued on to Skaftafell National Park, where we enjoyed a bracing walk up to Svartifoss, a waterfall famous for its array of black, basalt columns. The park contains extensive Downy Birch woodland, unusual in Iceland and home to yet more Redwings.

As we arrived back at our hotel, heavy rain began to fall, which soon turned to hailstones; quite a contrast to the brilliant sunshine earlier in the day!

Day 5

Monday 28th September

Svinafellsjokull - Vik - Reynisfjara - Northern Light Hotel – Grindavik

Most of us met early and walked up to the snout of Svinafellsjokull in clear morning light. It was fascinating to approach right up to a glacier and to see the impact of its erosive power. Immediately after breakfast, we departed for the long drive back west. The weather was windy and wet so we journeyed straight on to the excellent coffee shop in Vik.

We did not let the weather prevent us from visiting the black sands of Reynisfjara, which lie just beyond Vik. This beautiful beach stretched for hundreds of metres and featured big caves and a cliff of regular basalt columns, resembling a rocky step pyramid. At one end of the beach stand the Reynisdrangar, spectacularly shaped basalt stacks. Icelandic folklore has it that two trolls attempting to drag a ship onto the shore were turned to stone as daylight broke.

After a brief look at the impressive Skogafoss waterfall, we stopped for an excellent lunch at Gamla Fjosid, otherwise known as the Old Cowhouse. Suitably refreshed, we continued on to Selfoss and then along the scenic coast of the Reykjanes peninsula. Birds seen on the journey included hundreds each of Whooper Swan, Greylag Goose, Fulmar and Golden Plover.

We arrived at the Northern Lights Inn with time to spare for those who had booked the Blue Lagoon. The rest of us visited the harbour in nearby Grindavik. At the end of a busy day, everyone enjoyed an excellent dinner in the smart hotel dining room.

Day 6

Tuesday 29th September

Reykjavik – Keflavik - Faxafloi bay

After breakfast, we set off for a leisurely morning in Reykjavik, where some chose to visit the famous church Hallgrímskirkja, whilst others looked for birds on Tjornin, the small lake in the middle of the city. Here we enjoyed close views of several species, including our only Scaup of the trip.

We enjoyed a tasty lunch at the excellent Café Haiti in the old harbour, before driving all the way out to Keflavik because the weather prevented our departure from Reykjavik. After some confusion, we finally boarded our ship for an afternoon in Faxafloi bay. This wide bay has an abundant fish population, which in turn attracts good numbers of cetaceans. The clouds cleared as we headed out into open water and we had good light in which to watch a range of seabirds. After an hour or so we sighted our first Minke Whale, which surfaced close to the ship. There were further sightings of Minke Whale, sometimes very close, but the choppy sea made viewing difficult. We also saw at least two pods of Harbour Porpoise; this shy species is rarely demonstrative and we had typical views of dark dorsal fins as they swam past.

Although cetaceans were not easy to find, the bright, sunny conditions were ideal for watching birds and we saw hundreds of Gannets; it was particularly impressive to watch them plunge-diving for fish. Amongst hundreds of gulls we found about 50 Kittiwakes and half a dozen Glaucous Gulls. It was great to see a range of auks including Razorbill, Guillemot and Puffin.

Day 7

Wednesday 30th September

Gunnhver – Sandvik – Njardvik – Keflavik airport

We made the most of our last morning in Iceland, visiting sites across the Reykjanes peninsular. The hot springs at Gunnhver created a strange, encrusted landscape and an unforgettable smell! Close by was the dramatic, rugged headland at Reykjanesta, where huge Atlantic rollers broke on the black volcanic rocks. From here we could see the small island of Eldey, the last known breeding site of the Great Auk. We also visited Sandvik, where a footbridge spans a fissure that marks the divide between the North American and European tectonic plates – literally crossing continents!

Our last birding destination was the coast at Sandgerdi, which turned out to be very productive. There were huge numbers of gulls and amongst them we found several Glaucous and Iceland Gulls, in a range of plumages. Waders were harder to find but we did see Oystercatcher and Redshank. Best of all, a large female Merlin flew through, causing general panic and affording really close views. From here it was a short drive into Njardvik for our final coffee and cakes at the excellent Kaffitar coffee shop. We arrived at the airport with plenty of time to eat our packed lunch before going through departures for our return flight to Heathrow.

We had enjoyed our last morning and it was a great way to complete our tour of this unique country. From the waterfalls and geysers of the Golden circle, to the glaciers and icebergs of the south-east and back again to Reykjavik and Faxafloi bay, our journey had been unforgettable. As a group, we had greatly enjoyed each other's company, which helped to make the whole week so enjoyable.

Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	September							
			24	25	26	27	28	29	30	
1	Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>		5						
2	Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>				20	1000+	100		
3	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	✓	40	300	20	300	20	✓	
4	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>	✓		180					
5	Greater White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>			190					
6	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓		100	100	200	100		
7	Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>				50	18			
8	Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>		1		2		6		
9	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		30	30	20	50	50	✓	
10	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		120				10		
11	Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>						1		
12	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>				2	50	100	✓	
13	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>		7						
14	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>		7						
15	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		55				3		
16	European Storm Petrel	<i>Hydrobates pelagicus</i>					1			
17	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>					10	250		
18	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		3		6	2	5		
19	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>					2			
20	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>	1			1				1
21	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>								✓
22	Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>			200	20	300			
23	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>								✓
24	Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>								✓
25	Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>					1			
26	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
27	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
28	Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>						50		
29	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
30	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>						6	8	
31	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>								4
32	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
33	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>						✓	✓	
34	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>						✓		
35	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>						✓		
36	Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>						✓		
37	Feral Pigeon / Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>						✓		
38	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		3	1					
39	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		H		H				
40	Redwing	<i>Turdus illacus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
41	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓				✓	✓		
42	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		15	30	20	10	3	✓	
43	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>						5		
44	Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammæa</i>		20	1	6				
45	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>				1				

	Common name	Scientific name	September						
			24	25	26	27	28	29	30

Mammals

1	Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>				7			
2	Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>						3	
3	Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>						2	
4	American Mink	<i>Neovison vison</i>			1				

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