

Iceland in Autumn - Glaciers, Icebergs & Waterfalls

Naturetrek Tour Report

10 -16 September 2017



Harbour Seals at Ice Lagoon



Harbour Seal at Jokulsarlon

Report and images by Andrew Bray



Naturetrek Mingleddown Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour participants: Andrew Bray (leader) with 12 Naturetrek Clients.

Summary

It was a very successful week in Southern Iceland with gorgeous sunshine. We completed the “Golden Circle” including a visit to the Secret Lagoon. We headed along the south coast via Dyrholaey to Skaftafell. Whilst there, we visited the Ice Lagoon and then drove back to the Reykjanes Peninsula. We saw waterfalls, glaciers, icebergs plus fantastic scenery and the power of nature. We also saw some iconic birds such as Harlequin Duck, Scaup and Glaucous Gull. We saw whales in Flaxafloi Bay and stood where the European and American plates are pulling away from each other. We enjoyed the company and the week came to an end too soon. Iceland is an island of fire and ice.

Day 1

Sunday 10th September

Heathrow - Keflavik - Hotel Gullfoss

After a slight delay in take-off, the flight passed quickly and then we joined the throng at Keflavik Airport which was very busy with people everywhere. Andrew collected the small coach and then picked up the clients standing outside the doors in the wind! We then drove along the Reykjanes Peninsula to Selfoss. On way we had a quick stop at Hlíðarvatn Lagoon for Tufted Duck. By the river there were Ringed Plover and Dunlin. There were also lots of Whooper Swans on the entire route. There was evidence of lots of old volcanic activity to start with along coast. We also saw the old road that Andrew had rallied on his previous visits! It was a long drive to the Gullfoss Hotel past Geysir where Strokkur blasted off as we passed. It was much greener inland and there were lots of Icelandic ponies grazing in the fields. We had a nice meal before settling down in comfy rooms, only to be roused early on with a brief glimpse of the Northern Lights.

Day 2

Monday 11th September

Gullfoss - Geysir - Kerið - Ulfljotsvatn - Þingvellir

Today we took in the sights of the Golden Circle and we were fortunate to have lovely weather. We started at Gullfoss in bright sunshine and a strong wind. Here the waterfall cascades down a fault in the rock over two stages. The flow was very strong upstream and we were advised not to enter the river. This is the iconic waterfall of Iceland and it did not disappoint, with the spray being whisked by the wind to the steps leading down to the second stage. It was a short drive to Geysir which gives its name to this phenomenon, and we saw Strokkur explode in a steam of hot water. It goes off about every five minutes as the conditions are right. Geysir does not explode any more as the conditions have changed. It is a powerful vent of water up to 10 metres high that captures the imagination.

We bought lunch at N1 Garage at Reykholt which we ate at the Kerið crater. There was Atlantic Char in small lake in bottom. We then drove to hydroelectric power station, where we found two Barrow's Goldeneye on the small lake between the stations on the River Sog at Ulfljotsvatn. At the top station we visited the exhibition and then drove round on the dirt road to find two Great Northern Divers in full summer plumage. Our next stop was Þingvellir and the birth of the Icelandic Parliament in 860AD. We stopped to look at the information boards with maps and notes on the area, and then we took the road to Þingvellir. We parked in the bus slot and walked to the rock where the speaker of the Alþing would recite the laws and new laws were made. Vikings would travel

for days each year to meet at the *Alþing* to settle grievances and make laws. On the way back, we stopped to look at White-fronted Geese and Merlin. In the evening six of us went for a swim in the Secret Lagoon at Flúðir then back for dinner and a good showing of Northern Lights.

Day 3

Tuesday 12th September

Skálholt - Seljalandsfoss - Skógarfoss - Vik - Skaftafell

Today was cloudy and rainy for the long drive. We had to stop at the N1 garage in Reykholt for a stop/tail bulb. It was not long before we arrived at Skálholt Church. This is the place where Christianity established itself especially in the Middle Ages. It was here during the reformation that the Catholic bishop was executed and replaced with a Church of Iceland bishop. There was an archaeological site by the church where the old buildings from its heyday stood. The new church was finished in 1963 and the stained-glass windows were a gift from Denmark. We then left the Golden Circle and stopped at Hella for coffee. A flock of Whimbrel flew over and Starling was common. Not that far down the road was the Seljalandsfoss, though it was raining. We did not take a detour as Eyjafjallajökull was covered in low cloud. This is the volcano with a small glacier on the top that devastated air movement over the Atlantic in 2010.

We were heading for Skógarfoss which was bathed in sun. This is, again, a very nice waterfall but no-one fancied the walk up 657 steps to look down! Lunch was calling and we retired to the cafe where most of us had a warming and refreshing soup. We then drove along dramatic scenery with cliffs after massive flat plains. We stopped at Dyrhólaey where the cliffs form fantastic sea arches and we saw a Red-throated Diver, plus Grey Seals. There was one remaining Guillemot at sea! The small twisted sea arch was out of bounds to walk across. It was then a long drive across the plains of Eldhraun and Skeiðarársandur where the Vatnajökull comes down and makes a very wet area. Just before the hotel there are some twisted metal girders that were monument to bridge near Skaftafell that was damaged in floods. En route there were five Merlin flying past and in front of the bus. There was lots of rain on way but was clearing up in evening. The aurora forecast went from strong to weak in a matter of minutes despite a clear sky that night.

Day 4

Wednesday 13th September

Jökulsárlón - Skaftafell National Park

We started our day at the Iceberg Lagoon at Jökulsárlón. There were Snow Bunting in car park that were picking insects off the cars. In the Lagoon the tide was coming in and icebergs were soon sent back. There were lots of Common Gulls as well as many Common Seals. We saw two Glaucous Gulls and Kittiwake. We went out in a DUKW to look at the stunning icebergs that were blue and white in colour with the odd one black from the volcanic deposits. We drove a bit further around to look at Eider and Long-tailed Duck. We then headed to the beach as the tide was now going out. There were some small icebergs on beach of black sand. Small icebergs met the current and came to a standstill. We bought lunch at N1 opposite the hotel as the cafe was full with two coach loads of people. It meant that we ate our lunch in the sunshine at Svinafellsjökull glacier edge. There was a plaque to two German climbers that went missing on the glacier; a finger of the main one. You can see where it has retreated 30 metres a year in recent times as there was water behind the moraine.

We then drove a few minutes more to Skaftafell National Park and walked up the main path to Svartifoss. On the way some saw Snipe and some Twayblade that had recently turned. At the waterfall, only a few went down to see the basalt columns. The rest looked from an advantage point. It was only six of us that walked up the steps and path to the Sjórnarsker view point where we could see Iceland's highest mountain Hvannadalshnúkur covered in snow and ice at 2110 metres. The remaining group walked back down the opposite side of the valley and joined the main track at Magnúsarfoss. It was back to the hotel and a cloudy night.

Day 5

Thursday 14th September

Vik – Reynisfjara – Hlíðarvatn - Grindavík

Our first stop was at Laufskálavardá to see the hundreds of pinnacles where travellers add a stone for good luck. The wind blew so hard that Andrew had to lean against the door to keep it open for everyone to get off and back on the coach! Our next stop was coffee at Vik in the Ice Store, with a supermarket and clothes area with various goodies as well as a café. Afterwards we travelled to one of Iceland's most beloved black beaches, Reynisfjara, with smooth pebbles and black sand and guarded by two rock-stack trolls: Reynisdrangar. There were lots of warnings about the sea current; it was too cold for a dip anyway! There were fantastic basalt columns on the cliff at a beach called Stuolabog i Reynisfjoru, and caves. There was still a Puffin and Guillemot out at sea, as well as lots of Fulmars and passing Gannets. We had lunch at the Cafe Heimamenn, at the two-house settlement of Skardshild.

It was then a long drive to Selfoss where we turned off Route 1, and our next stop was at Ölfusa where there were some Red-breasted Mergansers and an adult Glaucous Gull. The next inlet was Hlíðarvatn where there were lots of Tufted Duck plus a few Scaup. On the river there was Ringed Plover and Greenland Dunlin (*arctica* race). The bonus was 11 Harlequin Duck that swam down the rapids and stayed close to us on an Island in the river. We then pushed on to Grindavík and stopped at the port where some small boys were fishing and showed us some of the discards they were using and what they had caught. There were lots of Greater Black-backed Gulls on the sea wall and an adult Glaucous Gull on the harbour wall. It was a short drive to the hotel which is not far from the Blue Lagoon and the big geo-thermal power plant.

Day 6

Friday 15th September

Reykjavik – Flaxafloi Bay

Once again, the weather held good for us as we spent the day at Reykjavik. We found a place to park and walked to Tjornin Lake, by the town hall. There were many ducks on the water, including Scaup, Wigeon and Gadwall besides lots of Mallard. There were also Greylag Geese and Whooper Swans. We then walked up the hill through old buildings to the Hallgrimskirkja that was finished in 1964. The organ inside was very impressive. This church was modelled on the basalt columns and the founder of Vinland (an area near Boston, USA) dominates the front; a present from the USA on the 1000th anniversary of the Alþing. It was then back down the hill to the old port and Cafe Haiti for lunch.

After a quick charge to the bus for some coats and bags, we were soon boarding the Elday; the biggest ship in the company. We then left the port with Elding Whale Tours and it took about 40 minutes of sailing in a straight line before we saw our first Minke Whale. We think there were three of them that afternoon. Megan, the marine

biologist, kept up a running commentary for the tour. The sea was not too choppy but the swell had the boat rocking when we were stationary. The trip out to Faxaflói Bay did not end on time as we stayed out to see a Humpbacked Whale further out. I trust most of us took a picture of a tail fluke. Fortunately, no-one was sick on board, though the sea-sickness pills helped. There were lots of Fulmar and Gannets. Also, at entrance to the harbour there were two Purple Sandpiper and a Black Guillemot in harbour itself. We drove back to hotel as it was getting late, and the evening traffic was not too bad. We enjoyed our final dinner together and then, at 11.30 pm, we had the phone call to say that the aurora showing well. It was a fantastic way to spend our last night in Iceland.

Day 7

Saturday 16th September

Gunnehver – Reykjanesvitti – Njarðvík – Keflavik Airport

What a miserable day with rain and strong winds. Our first stop was at the port of Grindavík where we found one Iceland Gull and many Great Black-backed and Herring Gulls. The rain lashed down, so we pushed on and our next stop was at Gunnehver. Here the ground was hot to touch and steam rose from around the area. The best sight was the exploding water and mud out of one hole. Fortunately, there is a walkway and path to keep the unwary from straying. Back on the bus, we headed off to Reykjanesvitti. Here is a statue commemorating the Great Auk. The last one was killed in June 1844 for a Danish Natural History collection. The cloud and the rain obscured all view! We eventually went to the Bridge between continents. The bridge recognises that the North American and European plates are pulling apart by 2cm per year. The next stop was the bakers in Njarðvík for cake and coffee. There was just time to look at the birds on the coast nearby before driving to the airport, for flights home.

Our enjoyable tour of southern Iceland was finished. We had seen waterfalls, geo-thermal activity, glaciers and icebergs. We had visited the 'Golden Circle', driven along the flood plains of the south, seen whales in Faxaflói Bay and watched the Northern Lights. We had seen some excellent birds as well. Everywhere we went the scenery was spectacular. It was an unforgettable trip in very good company.

Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek e-mailing list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers. Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk to sign up.

Naturetrek Facebook

We are delighted to launch the Naturetrek Facebook page so that participants of Naturetrek tours can remain in touch after the holiday and share photos, comments and future travel plans.

Setting up a personal profile at www.facebook.com is quick, free and easy. The [Naturetrek Facebook page](#) is now live; do please pay us a visit!

Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	September						
			10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>			1	1		5	
2	Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>		2					
3	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	
4	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
5	Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>					25		
6	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
7	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>			2				
8	Greater White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>		14	✓				
9	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>			12			2	✓
10	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
11	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>			2			1	
12	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>							3
13	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		3					
14	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		5					
15	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓			✓		
16	Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>					3	5	
17	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>				16	8	16	
18	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>					11		
19	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>				5			
20	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>		2					
21	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		8			8		
22	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>			14		✓	✓	
23	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>			1				1
24	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		1	2			5	
25	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	1						
26	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		1	5	1			
27	Rock Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus muta</i>	1						
28	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>					1	2	✓
29	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	✓				✓		
30	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>			12		✓		
31	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>						1	
32	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>					2		
33	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	✓				✓		
34	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>						2	
35	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>			✓				
36	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>			2				
37	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>				1	1		
38	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>			1	1	1		
39	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
40	Common (Mew) Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>				✓	✓		
41	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>				3			
42	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>			✓	✓	✓		✓
43	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>				2	4	4	15
44	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>						1	1
45	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>			1	1	✓	✓	✓
46	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓	✓		4		1
47	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>			1	2	1	8	

	Common name	Scientific name	September							
			10	11	12	13	14	15	16	
48	Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>							1	
49	Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>					1			
50	Feral Pigeon / Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>			✓		✓			
51	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
52	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		2	4	2	6			
53	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		1	1	1	2			
54	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		1						
55	Redwing	<i>Turdus illacus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
56	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>			1		✓	✓	✓	
57	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
58	Common Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>				4				
59	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>				10				

Other Taxa

Atlantic Grey Seal, *Halichoerus grypus*
 Minke Whale, *Balaenoptera acutorostrata*
 Buff-tailed Bumblebee, *Bombus terrestris*
 Lion's Mane Jellyfish, *Cyanea capillata*
 Twayblade, *Neottia ovata*

Harbour (Common) Seal, *Phoca vitulina*
 Humpback Whale, *Megaptera novaeangliae*
 Arctic Char, *Salvelinus alpinus*
 Moon Jellyfish, *Aurelia aurita*
 Grass-of-Parnassus, *Parnassia palustris*