

Iceland in Autumn - Glaciers, Icebergs & Waterfalls

Naturetrek Tour Report

17 - 23 September 2017



Svartifoss Waterfall



Iceberg Lagoon Jökulsárlón



Iceberg Lagoon Jökulsárlón



Skógarfoss Waterfall

Report and images by Andrew Bray



Naturetrek

Mingledown 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 13 Naturetrek Clients.

Summary

We had a lovely time in Southern Iceland despite the autumnal weather. We completed the “Golden Circle” of Gullfoss, Geysir and Þingvellir as well as other sights, including Great Northern Diver and Red-breasted Merganser in large numbers. We travelled along the south coast via Dyrhólaey to the Ice Lagoon and then back to the Reykjanes Peninsula. We saw waterfalls, glaciers, icebergs plus fantastic scenery and the power of nature, learning about the geology we saw. We also saw some fantastic birds such as Harlequin Duck, Scaup and Glaucous Gull. We saw dolphins in Flaxafloi Bay. We enjoyed each other’s company and too soon we had to depart for UK

Day 1

Sunday 17th September

Heathrow - Keflavik - Hotel Gullfoss

We met up at Keflavik Airport and got dressed up for the strong winds and rain as we loaded the bus. We then drove to Grindavík and turned east with little to see except the low cloud which obscured the Reykjanes Peninsula. Our first stop was at Hlíðarvatn, where the tide was right in and we saw 12 Harlequin Duck and some Eider. As we approached Selfoss, there were more Whooper Swans resting in the fields after the two at Hlíðarvatn. We stopped in Gullfoss for a comfort break, and then pushed on to the hotel. After dinner, Andrew briefed the group on the next day and answered any questions.

Day 2

Monday 18th September

Gullfoss - Geysir - Kerið - Ulfljotsvatn - Þingvellir

The weather started out ok as we visited Gullfoss and Geysir. Gullfoss was magnificent as it thundered over the two falls of 11 metres and 21 metres. During the first half of the 20th century and some years into the late 20th century, there was much speculation about using Gullfoss to generate electricity. During this period, the waterfall was rented indirectly by its owners, Tómas Tómasson and Halldór Halldórsson, to foreign investors. However, the investors' attempts were unsuccessful, partly due to lack of money. The waterfall was later sold to the state of Iceland, and is now protected. Sigríður Tómasdóttir, the daughter of Tómas Tómasson, was determined to preserve the waterfall's condition and is regarded as Iceland’s first conservationist.

It was only a short distance to Geysir which gave its name to the phenomenon. Strokkur erupted three times in succession, then the next was pathetic. It made up for it on the next explosion, sending steam metres into the air as it really let rip. At Reykholt we bought some lunch to eat at the Kerið Crater. We ended up in the bus as the rain started to fall quite heavily on our arrival. On Ulfljotsvatn, there were five Great Northern Divers and 36 Mergansers. Fortunately, the rain had eased off, and we visited the power exhibition in the hydro power plant. Our next stop was Þingvellir, where it hammered down with rain once again. One coach drove into the car park stopped and then continued driving. A good job that most had remembered their waterproof trousers! It was at Þingvellir where the Vikings held their first parliament in 860AD. At the Alþing they would convene to make laws that governed their behaviour. The speaker would stand on the rock and recite a third of the laws each year. It was a very soggy bus that headed back to the hotel that night.

Day 3

Tuesday 19th September

Seljalandsfoss - Skógarfoss - Vik - Skaftafell

We drove past Skálholt, the main centre of Christianity as it was tipping down with rain. We stopped at Hella for coffee after the long drive. Our first main stop was at Seljalandsfoss where the sun came out and people were able to walk behind the waterfall as it cascades down 65 metres. It was then a short drive to Skógarfoss, which is thought by some to be Iceland's most beautiful waterfall, that is 60 metres high and 25 metres wide. Some even took the 657 steps to the top viewing platform to look down on the falls. We had lunch in the hotel café with lots of others. The intermittent rain stopped and we were able to appreciate the beauty of Dyrhólaey with its sea arches and huge cliffs. Out to sea there were lots of Eider, and a lone Red-necked Phalarope in winter plumage was seen. Amongst the large flocks of Eider, we found two Black Guillemot on the sea. We then had coffee in Vik at the Ice store. We stopped at Laufskálavardá to see the hundreds of pinnacles where travellers add a stone for good luck. This is part of the lava ridge which was formed. All around are the results of the Laki eruptions in 1783, where magma was thrown out along a fissure of small craters that was thought to be 25 kilometres long. It was 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.

Day 4

Wednesday 20th September

Jökulsárlón - Skaftafell National Park

We conducted an early morning walk to Svinafellsjökull to look at the ice retreating 32 metres a year. We then drove to the Ice Lagoon with a stop at Hoy to look at the grass-roofed church through the rain-covered windows of the bus. It was really heavy rain at Jökulsárlón and very strong winds. There were only a few Black-headed Gulls and Common Gulls around; even the Snow Buntings were missing from the car park. After delays, we gave up with any possibility of a trip that morning and headed for lunch opposite the hotel. Unfortunately, it was packed, so went to Svinafellsjökull to have a look at the finger glacier. It was at this glacier that two German climbers disappeared in 2007 and are remembered by a brass plaque from their families. This time we managed to have lunch in the cafe opposite the hotel.

We then drove on to Skaftafell National Park, with intermittent rain as we walked up to Svartifoss. At the top, quite a few of us descended to the bottom of the falls to look at the basalt columns that surround the waterfall. On the trip we saw a Wren, a Merlin and a flock of 20 Redpoll. It was then back to the hotel, where some people stayed while others drove to Jökulsárlón to take a trip in the DUKW (amphibious vehicle). A rainbow appeared, and we could see! The Bond film 'Die Another Day' was made here and they froze lagoon by putting a dam in to prevent the salt water coming in. They wrote off eight Aston Martins hitting the icebergs frozen in the lagoon!

Day 5

Thursday 21st September

Vik – Reynisfjara – Hlíðarvatn - Grindavík

Today was going to be a long day with travel. We stopped at Vik for coffee; however, the cafes do not open until 11am. Fortunately, those that needed refreshment were able to blag their way in! At Reynisfjara it had stopped

raining and there were lots of Fulmar. Andrew also found a lone Puffin but it too headed out to sea. It stopped raining long enough to walk to caves and back along the black beach. There were good views of the two rock-stack trolls called Reynisdrangar. We then drove on to Hvolsvöllur where the Nils Saga was based. The sagas are of Iceland's history that was told by word of mouth before they were written down. In that telling, over the centuries, there may have been some embellishment of the stories! We had lunch in N1 garage cafe that was very spacious. We then drove to Selfoss where bus was fixed at depot. The mechanic replaced the relay switch on the indicators that had been playing up over the last few days. We also stopped at the local Chemist for a few medicines. We took the route to Ölüfsa where there was a mix of gulls on display on the sand bars showing near the exit to the lagoon. At Hlíðarvatn, the Harlequin Duck (eight) were still showing in same place as when we stopped on the outward leg of our journey and, in one, the male plumage was coming through. There was also flock of six Scaup and large numbers of Tufted Duck on the lake near the bridge. Our next stop was at Grindavík Harbour, where an adult Glaucous Gull gave a slow fly past. We dropped off Ewen and Amanda at the Blue Lagoon, then headed to the Northern Lights hotel. Sadly, there was no call that night.

Day 6

Friday 22nd September

Reykjavik – Flaxafloi Bay

Once again, the weather was not good as we spent the day at Reykjavik. We found a place to park and walked to Tjornin Lake by the Civic Hall. There were many ducks on the water, including Scaup and Wigeon, besides lots of Mallard. There were also Greylag Geese and Whooper Swans. We walked up the hill through old buildings to Hallgrímskirkja that was finished in 1964. The organ inside was very impressive with 5275 pipes that have to be cleaned. This church was modelled on the basalt columns and the founder of Vinland (Boston area of USA) dominates the front; a present from the USA on the thousandth anniversary of the Alþing. It was then back down the hill to the old port and Cafe Haiti for lunch.

We were soon boarding the Elday; the biggest ship in the company. We then left the port with Elding Whale Tours, and it took a very long time of sailing before we headed for two other ships that had found some White-beaked Dolphins. The trip out to Faxafloi Bay did not end on time as it took time to find the Dolphins. Fortunately, no-one was sick on board though the sea-sickness pills helped. There were lots of Fulmar and Gannets. In the harbour there were lots of Eider and just outside there were three Iceland Gulls. We drove back to hotel as it was getting late and the evening traffic was frightful at one junction but not too bad overall. The majority saw a very brief Northern Light display that evening, which was better seen with a camera!

Day 7

Saturday 23rd September

Gunnehver – Reykjanesvitti – Njarðvík – Keflavik Airport

What a miserable day with rain and strong winds. Our first stop was at the port of Grindavíg where we found a large flock of Golden Plover and a lone Purple Sandpiper. There were Eider and gulls in the port area. 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. There was so much steam that it obscured the sights, but not a flock of Golden Plover. Fortunately, there is a walkway and path to keep the unwary from straying. Today was the only day that we had seen any waders! They must have all been on their way south! 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 most of the views; however, there were very large rafts of Eider close to the shore! We went to the Bridge between continents, and it was a quick visit as the rain was lashing down. This bridge recognises that the North American and European plates are pulling apart by 2cm per year and links the divide. It is symbolic bridge, built where there are two small cliffs that denote the edges of the continents. The next stop was the bakers in Njarðvík for cake and coffee. There was time to look at the birds on the coast with a large flock of Wigeon nearby before driving to the airport for flights back 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 dolphins in Flaxafloi Bay and watched the Northern Lights, albeit briefly. We had seen some excellent birds as well. Despite the weather, everywhere we went the scenery was spectacular. It was an unforgettable trip in very good company.

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Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	September						
			17	18	19	20	21	22	23
1	Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>		5	3				
2	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>			✓		✓	✓	
3	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
4	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>			✓		✓	✓	
5	Greater White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>			10				
6	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>						10	✓
7	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
8	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>					✓		
9	Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>					6	8	
10	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	26		51			40	✓
11	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>	12					8	
12	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		43			2		
13	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>						✓	
14	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			16			1	
15	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>			1	1			
16	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>							✓
17	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>							1
18	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>			3				
19	Red-necked Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus lobatus</i>			1				
20	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>				1			
21	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
22	Common (Mew) Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>				✓	✓		
23	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>			1				
24	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>					✓	✓	✓
25	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>					2	20	
26	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>						3	
27	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		2	4	✓	✓	✓	✓
28	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>					1	✓	
29	Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>					1		
30	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>			2				
31	Feral Pigeon / Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>					1	✓	
32	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	2	3					
33	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>			2	2			
34	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>				1			
35	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		2					
36	Redwing	<i>Turdus illacus</i>	9	✓	✓	✓	✓		
37	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>					✓	✓	
38	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	1	
39	Common Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>				20			

Other Taxa

Common Seal, *Phoca vitulina*

Lion's Mane Jellyfish, *Cyanea capillata*

White-beaked Dolphin, *Lagenorhynchus albirostris*

Twayblade, *Neottia ovata*