Iceland in Autumn

Naturetrek Tour Report

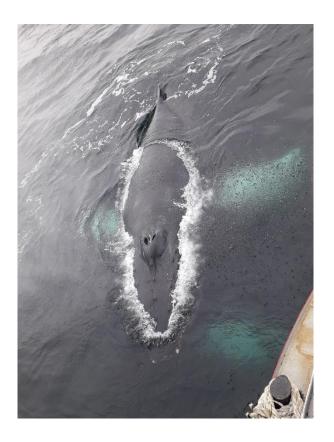
5th - 11th September 2021



Northern Lights, by David Phillips



Common Seal, by Mike Crewe



Humpback Whale, by David Phillips



Jökulsárlón, by David Phillips

GU34 3HJ

UK

Report and images compiled by David Phillips and Mike Crewe



Naturetrek Mingledown Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour participants - David Phillips and Mike Crewe (Leaders) with eight Naturetrek clients.

Day 1

Sunday 5th September

Flight to Reykjavik

Our group, plus two UK guides, flew from London Heathrow to Keflavik (Reykjavik's International Airport) and arrived on time, a little after 3pm. Once the guides had collected the two minibuses we drove past the outskirts of Reykjavik and on through Thingvellir National Park to the first night's accommodation – Hotel Gullfoss. We arrived at 6:40pm in time for dinner.

Day 2

Monday 6th September

Golden Circle

After breakfast Mike led a short botanical walk in the car park of the hotel. Although many flowering plants had gone over by this point there were still a number of interesting plants to see such as Northern Green Orchid and Frog Orchid. The low-lying Crowberry and Bog Bilberry were covered in berries that we could eat.

A few miles along the road from the hotel we visited one of the main sites of Iceland's 'Golden Circle' - the powerful and spectacular waterfall of Gullfoss where the river Hvítá plunges over two drops and enters a canyon. The group viewed the falls from the top of the canyon and also walked along the trail, through the spray, to the brink of the falls.

At Geysir the group had time to watch several eruptions of the Strokkur geyser, which erupts to a height of about ten metres every five to ten minutes, and see the colourful pools and hot springs. A few members of the group took the trail to the top of a hill overlooking the geothermal site and the neighbouring valley. Here there were many Autumn Gentians on the cusp of opening.

Unfortunately, as we left Geysir, the rain started to fall so we stopped for lunch at a café in the village of Laugarvatn and waited for the rain to pass.

At the heart of Thingvellir National Park is the historic site of Iceland's parliament which lies at the foot of rifting tectonic plates, and we walked between the plates to a viewing platform with an expansive panorama across the lake of Thingvallavatn on which we could see a distant diver, so we made our way back to the vehicles and from there could see through the telescope that it was a juvenile Red-throated Diver. From the bridge over the river we could see several large Brown Trout and then, as we drove out of the car park, an adult Red-throated Diver joined the juvenile and we stopped to watch from the vehicles.

Our final stop of the afternoon was along the Sog River by the hydroelectric power station at the southern end of the lake where the river exits the lake. Here we saw an adult and juvenile Great Northern Diver. Iceland is the only country in Europe where these magnificent birds breed, and it was wonderful to see the adult still in its fine breeding plumage.

The Gullfoss Hotel lies close to the deep canyon of the Hvítá river and, returning to the hotel, several from the group took a walk along the canyon almost as far as the Gullfoss falls. It felt autumnal with great numbers of

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mushrooms growing along the track and berries on the low bushes. On a small pool a pair of Whooper Swans looked serene in the evening light.

Day 3

Tuesday 7th September

Drive along South Coast

The day dawned bright, and we headed south through rich, green arable lands to pick up the road along the South Coast. Once on Route 1, the main road around Iceland, the drive passed two impressive waterfalls and we stopped at both. At the first, Seljalandsfoss, it is possible to walk behind the falls and also to a separate fall accessible through a narrow gap in the cliffs. From the car park we watched parachutists jumping from a plane and landing nearby. Fulmars wheeled around the towering cliffs.

The second waterfall, Skogafoss, is broader and more spectacular. The spray from the falls produced rainbows that made the scene very photogenic. Some members of the group climbed the steps at the side of the falls and found lovely scenery at the top.

Further along the road we stopped at a pull in with views from the mountains to the coast. A couple of Great Skuas flew along the river and a flock of 50 Golden Plovers passed over.

Next stop was the town of Vik, the southernmost town in Iceland, where we purchased bread, cheese, slices of ham and sweet goodies from a local supermarket and set up our picnic on the black sandy beach watching Common Seals in the surf. The sun shone and it felt almost warm!

Driving east from Vik we stopped near a couple of ponds with a number of Red-breasted Mergansers and Tufted Ducks. It was a delight to see a single Barrow's Goldeneye, a species that breeds in North America and Iceland and is a target for birding trips to Iceland. Further east we drove over the vast glacial flood plains of Skeiðarásandur to Skaftafell. The flood plains are a result of melt water from Europe's largest glacier Vatnajökull which takes up 8% of the country's landmass.

The Skaftafell Hotel, our base for two nights, was in a spectacular position with views of the mountains and Vatnajökull icecap. A group of us took a short walk from the hotel to a viewpoint on the terminal moraine of the Svínafellsjökull Glacier, one of the tongues of ice descending from the icecap. This trail passed through lupin covered low hills where we saw lots of Redwings, one of which perched at the side of the track providing us with great views. We noted that the track would be a great place to see the skies, and hopefully northern lights, away from the lights of the hotel.

After dinner, and as the setting sun illuminated the top of the icecap and the skies became a deeper blue, we headed back out to try our luck with the northern lights. Within minutes the first indication of a low arc appeared in the northern sky and soon the sky started to fill with multiple arcs of green light that started to sway and dance. The skies in the north-east and north-west were particularly active. Some members of the group tried to capture the lights with cameras set up on tripods, others managed to achieve a surprising degree of success with just their smartphones.

Day 4

Wednesday 8th September

Jokulsarlon

Following the clear night, the day started cool with a thin layer of ice that had to be cleared from the windscreen before we set off towards the glacial lagoon of Jökulsárlón. On arrival at the lagoon's carpark a small flock of Snow Buntings were searching for food around the cars. Making our way to the river flowing from the lagoon, we looked across at the great chunks of floating ice with Kittiwakes and Black-headed Gulls standing on them. In the water we watched Harbour (Common) Seals and a single Harlequin Duck was sat at the side.

Soon it was time to board the amphibious vessel for our tour around the lagoon. It was interesting to see the icebergs and glacier from the water and hear commentary from the onboard guide.

After buying lunch at the café and sitting at picnic tables in the warm sunshine to eat it, we drove across the suspension bridge and parked up at the other side. The short walk under the bridge to the black sandy beach took us along the outpouring of water and ice from the lagoon.

Many of the icebergs come ashore and are a spectacular and very photogenic sight in the strong sunshine. Whilst some icebergs were snow white, others showed varying shades of blue; yet more showed narrow black stripes from the dust of past volcanic eruptions.

We then drove back to the hotel and after a short break we reconvened to drive the short distance to Skaftafell National Park. We walked up the hill to Magnúsurfoss and then onto Svartifoss, a beautiful waterfall that cascades over a cliff of basalt in hexagonal columns.

On return to the bottom we stopped in the visitor centre and were advised that our route back to Reykjavik might close the following day due to rising water in the rivers flowing out from the Vatnajökull icecap. Such floods can sometimes take out bridges and roads and the authorities monitor the water levels very closely. Fortunately, the road did not close the following day and hinder our route back to the capital.

After dinner that evening the skies were clear and some of the group walked up the path to see if the northern lights might put on a show for us again. Despite a few wisps of auroral light near the northern horizon, the display was very low level and certainly didn't match the previous night's show.

Day 5

Thursday 9th September

Drive along South coast

The morning was bright and clear once again and the drive back along the ring road, although long, had many interesting places to stop. The first point was the lava field at Skaftáreldhraun, where the lava flow from the Laki eruptions in 1783/4 are thought to have been responsible for the poor harvests across Europe and led to the French Revolution. Much of the lava is now coated with Woolly Fringemoss, one of the first plants to grow on lava.

Just before Vik we stopped again at the lakes where we had seen Barrow's Goldeneye on the way east. We did not pick up the bird this time but there were a good number of Tufted Ducks, Red-breasted Mergansers, two Whooper Swans and a couple of Great Skuas.

At Vik we bought provisions at the supermarket and took a detour to see the view from the church on the hill above the town before driving on to the cliffs at Dyrhólaey for our picnic lunch. Several Wheatears flitted around the cliffs and looking out to sea we could see many Eiders, Fulmars and a pair of Slavonian Grebes. The expansive views along the black beaches and north to the icecap of Mýrdalsjökull were glorious under blue skies.

At Hvollsvollur we stopped for coffee and then left the ring road at Selfoss to pick up the road along the south side of the Reykjanes Peninsula. At the estuary of the Ölfusá we stopped at a viewpoint from which we picked up a pair of Red-necked Phalarope which are rare breeders in Iceland.

The fishing harbour Grindavik is always a good place to see what birds there might be around and from the dockside we had a fine, close view of an adult Glaucous Gull and a more distant Black Guillemot. Also in the harbour there were Eiders and the flat growing Oyster Plant was of botanical interest.

After a day of good weather and wonderful scenery along the south coast we finally reached our base at the Northern Lights Inn and settled in for two nights.

Day 6

Friday 10th September

Volcano and Reykjavik (Whale Watching)

In the morning several members of the group visited the new volcano, near the town of Grindavik, that had started to erupt six months earlier. The volcano is reached from a car park east of the town and, half-an-hour's walk along a track brought the group to the impressive sight of the lava front. For several months lava had been filling the Nátthagi valley and a bank had been constructed to stop it from flowing down to the road. The lava was no longer incandescent but black and with steam rising. The crater of the volcano had been quiet for the preceding week but soon after our return it became active once again with lava pouring from new fissures high up in the valley.

After the group returned from the volcano, we all set off for the capital where we had a whale watching excursion planned for the afternoon. Lunch of fish and chips was enjoyed at the harbourside before we walked around the quay to our boat. The weather had deteriorated, and it started to rain, but we stood up on the high deck as the boat left harbour and headed into the bay.

From the experience of previous days, the boat operators knew the whereabouts of some of the cetaceans in the bay and the captain made for a point 11km off the tip of the Reykjavik peninsula. On the way out the weather improved, and our first sightings were of a Northern Minke Whale and a pod of Harbour Porpoise. Our attention soon turned to a pair of Humpback Whales, one of which was repeatedly tail slapping the water, perhaps a dozen times. This was a remarkable sight but, soon after we stopped, the whales approached us and for more than an hour repeatedly circled round, dived below and surfaced next to our boat. Superb views were enjoyed by us all and looking down into the clear waters we could see the whole of the whales' bodies in one view and appreciate the size of the animals. The excursion was only supposed to last three hours so the captain eventually had to call in another vessel to encourage the whales away from our boat and enable him to edge away. On the return we again saw Northern Minke Whale and a pod of 40+ Harbour Porpoise.

A few members of the group were keen to see the city so we took a walk from the harbour to the Harpa Concert Hall and on into the centre towards the church of Hallgrimur (Hallgrimskirkja). This remarkable church, set on a hill overlooking the city, is for many the symbol of the city. Walking down Skólavörðustígur (the Street of the

Galleries) we reached the historic centre and visited the city pond (Tjornin) before going into the city hall to see the huge relief map of the country that took four men four years to produce.

Day 7

Saturday 11th September

Flight Home

A very early start today, but just a short drive to the International Airport for our flight to London.

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Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	September 2021					21
			5	6	7	8	9	10
1	Red-throated Diver	Gavia stellata		2		√	2	
2	Great Northern Diver	Gavia immer		2				
3	Slavonian Grebe	Podiceps auritus					2	
4	Fulmar	Fulmarus glacialis			√	√	√	√
5	Northern Gannet	Morus bassanus			3			√
6	Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo						2
7	European Shag	Phalacrocorax aristotelis					3	1
8	Whooper Swan	Cygnus cygnus	√	√	√	√	√	√
9	Pink-footed Goose	Anser brachyrhynchus		√	√			
10	Greylag Goose	Anser anser	✓	√	√		√	√
11	Barnacle Goose	Branta leucopsis				√		
12	Northern Shoveler	Spatula clypeata			3			
13	Wigeon	Mareca penelope			6			√
14	Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos		√				√
15	Tufted Duck	Aythya fuligula			√		√	
16	Eider	Somateria mollissima	√			2	√	√
17	Harlequin Duck	Histrionicus histrionacus				1		
18	Barrow's Goldeneye	Bucephala islandica			1			
19	Red-breasted Merganser	Mergus serrator		10	√	3	√	√
20	Merlin	Falco columbarius			1	1	1	
21	Oystercatcher	Haematopus ostralegus			1		√	
22	Golden Plover	Pluvialis apricaria			√	√	√	√
23	Whimbrel	Numenius phaeopus			13			
24	Redshank	Tringa totanus				2	√	
25	Snipe	Gallinago gallinago			Н			
26	Grey Phalarope	Phalaropus fulicarius					2	
27	Great Skua	Stercorarius skua			√		√	
28	Arctic Skua	Stercorarius parasiticus					1	√
29	Black-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus		√	√	√	√	√
30	Common Gull	Larus canus		√	√		√	
31	Kittiwake	Rissa tridactyla				√	√	✓
32	Herring Gull	Larus argentatus	√		√	√	√	√
33	Glaucous Gull	Larus hyperboreus				2	√	√
34	Great Black-backed Gull	Larus marinus		√		√	√	✓
35	Lesser Black-backed Gull	Larus fuscus	√	√	√	√	√	√

	Common name	Scientific name		S	eptem	ber 202	21	
			5	6	7	8	9	10
36	Arctic Tern	Sterna paradisea				4	√	
37	Black Guillemot	Cepphus grylle					1	2
38	Feral Pigeon / Rock Dove	Columba livia					√	√
39	Meadow Pipit	Anthus pratensis		√	√	√	√	
40	White Wagtail	Motacilla alba		√	√	√	√	
41	Northern Wheatear	Oenanthe oenanthe					√	
42	Redwing	Turdus illacus	✓	√	√	√	√	✓
43	Starling	Sturnus vulgaris	✓	√			√	✓
44	Raven	Corvus corax	✓	√	√	√	√	✓
45	Common Redpoll	Carduelis flammea				√		
46	Snow Bunting	Plectrophenax nivalis				√		Н

Mammals

	Common name	Scientific name	September 20				21		
			5	6	7	8	9	10	
1	Atlantic Grey Seal	Halichoerus grypus					1	1	
2	Common Seal	Phoca vitulina			✓	10+	✓		
3	Minke Whale	Balaenoptera acutorostrata						1	
4	Humpback Whale	Megaptera novaeangliae						3	
5	Harbour Porpoise	Phocoena phocoena						√	

Plants

				S	eptem	ber 202	21	
	Common Name	Scientific Name	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	Lesser Clubmoss	Cologinalla pologinaidas						
<u> </u>		Selaginella selaginoides		√				√
2	Marsh Horsetail	Equisetum palustre			✓			
3	Shady Horsetail	Equisetum pratense		✓	✓	✓		
4	Field Horsetail	Equisetum arvense		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Brittle Bladder Fern	Cystopteris fragilis		✓	✓			
6	Common Juniper	Juniperus communis		✓				
7	Scottish Asphodel	Tofieldia pusilla		✓	✓			
8	Slender-leaved Pondweed	Stuckenia filiformis					✓	
9	Common Twayblade	Neottia ovata				√		
10	Northern Green Orchid	Platanthera hyperborea		✓	✓			
11	Frog Orchid	Dactylorhiza viridis		✓	✓	√		
12	Three-leaved Rush	Oreojuncus trifidus						✓
13	Toad Rush	Juncus bufonius		✓	✓			

				S	eptem	ber 202	21	
	Common Name	Scientific Name	5	6	7	8	9	10
14	Jointed Rush	Juncus articulatus		✓				
15	Heath Wood-rush	Luzula multiflora		✓	✓	✓		
16	Common Cottongrass	Eriophorum angustifolium	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
17	Few-flowered Spike-rush	Eleocharis quinqueflora		✓			✓	
18	Common Sedge	Carex nigra		✓				
19	Sweet Vernal-grass	Anthoxanthum odoratum				✓		
20	Common Bent	Agrostis capillaris			✓	✓		
21	Creeping Bent	Agrostis stolonifera		√	√	✓	✓	✓
22	Narrow Small-reed	Calamagrostis stricta	√					
23	Annual Meadow-grass	Poa annua			√	√	✓	√
24	Glaucous Meadow-grass	Poa glauca		√	√	√		
25	Timothy	Phleum pratense	✓	√	√	√	√	√
26	Wavy Hair-grass	Avenella flexuosa					✓	
27	Tufted Hair-grass	Deschampsia cespitosa	✓	√	✓	√	√	√
28	Yorkshire-fog	Holcus lanatus		√	✓	✓	✓	✓
29	Viviparous Sheep's Fescue	Festuca vivipara	✓	✓		√		✓
30	Lyme-grass	Leymus arenarius	✓	√	✓		√	√
31	Common Couch	Elytrigia repens		√	√		√	
32	Sea Barley	Hordeum marinum ssp. gussoneanum			✓			
33	Iceland Poppy	Papaver nudicaule	√					
34	Marsh-marigold	Caltha palustris		√	√			
35	Meadow Buttercup	Ranunculus acris		√	√	√	√	
36	Red Currant	Ribes rubrum		√				
37	Marsh Saxifrage	Saxifraga hirculus				√		
38	Tufted Saxifrage	Saxifraga cespitosa				√		
39	Hairy Stonecrop	Sedum villosum		√				
40	Roseroot	Rhodiola rosea		√	√	√		
41	Alternate Water-milfoil	Myriophyllum alterniflorum		-	-		√	
42	Nootka Lupin	Lupinus nootkatensis	√		√	√	√	
43	Common Kidney Vetch	Anthyllis vulneraria			•		V	_
44	Tufted Vetch	Vicia cracca	√		√			\ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \
45	Sea Pea	Lathyrus japonicus	V		√		√	
46	White Clover	Trifolium repens	√	√	√	√	✓ ✓	
47	Alsike Clover	Trifolium hybridum	V	V	√	\ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \	\ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \	
48	Red Clover	Trifolium pratense	√	√	V		/	
49	Meadowsweet	Filipendula ulmaria	V		,			
	Mountain Avens	Dryas octopetala		√	√	,	✓	√
50	Stone Bramble	Rubus saxatilis		√	✓	√		
51			,	√		√	,	
52	Common Rowan	Sorbus aucuparia	√	√		√	√	<u>.</u>
53	Silverweed	Argentina anserina		√	√	√	✓	√
54	Alpine Cinquefoil	Potentilla crantzii		✓	✓	✓		
55	Marsh Cinquefoil	Comarum palustre		✓				

				S	eptem	ber 202	21	
	Common Name	Scientific Name	5	6	7	8	9	10
57	Water Avens	Geum rivale		✓	✓			
58	Alpine Lady's Mantle	Alchemilla alpina	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
59	Downy Birch	Betula pubescens	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
60	Dwarf Birch	Betula nana		✓	√			
61	Grass-of-Parnassus	Parnassia palustris		✓		✓	✓	✓
62	European Aspen	Populus tremula				✓		
63	Western Balsam Poplar	Populus trichocarpa	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
64	Dwarf Willow	Salix herbacea		✓			✓	✓
65	Arctic Willow	Salix arctica		✓				
66	Woolly Willow	Salix lanata	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
67	Tea-leaved Willow	Salix phylicifolia		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
68	Alaska Willow	Salix alaxensis	✓	✓				✓
69	Sitka Willow	Salix sitchensis		✓	✓			
70	Goat Willow	Salix caprea	√					✓
71	Wood Cranesbill	Geranium sylvaticum		✓	√	√		
72	Rosebay Willowherb	Epilobium angustifolium		√	√		√	√
73	Arctic River Beauty	Epilobium latifolium			√	√		
74	Fringed Willowherb	Epilobium ciliatum			√			
75	Arctic Sea Rocket	Cakile arctica					√	
76	Northern Rock-cress	Arabidopsis petraea					√	
77	Shepherd's-purse	Capsella bursa-pastoris					•	√
78	Common Winter-cress	Barbarea vulgaris		√				-
79	Common Thrift	Armeria maritima		√	√	/	√	
80	Alpine Bistort	Bistorta vivipara		√	√	√	V	√
81	Iceland-purslane	Koenigia islandica		√	V	\ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \		
82	Mountain Sorrel	Oxyria digyna			,			
83		Rumex acetosella		✓	√	,		
	Sheep's Sorrel				√	✓	√	-
84	Common Sorrel	Rumex acetosa		√	√		√	
85 86	Northern Dock Common Knotgrass	Rumex longifolius Polygonum aviculare	✓	√	√	√	√	✓
	Corn Spurrey	Spergula arvensis		√				
87	• •			√				
88	Procumbent Pearlwort	Sagina procumbens		✓		√	√	√
89	Sea Sandwort	Honckenya peploides			√	✓	✓	✓
90	Common Chickweed	Stellaria media		✓		√		✓
91	Common Mouse-ear	Cerastium fontanum		✓		✓		
92	Sea Campion	Silene uniflora		✓		✓	✓	✓
93	Moss Campion	Silene acaulis		✓				✓
94	Babington's Orache	Atriplex glabriuscula					✓	
95	Common Heather	Calluna vulgaris	√	√	√	√	√	
96	Bearberry	Arctostaphylos uva-ursi		√	√	√	√	
97	Bog Bilberry	Vaccinium uliginosum	√	√	√	√	√	
98	Mountain Crowberry	Empetrum hermaphroditum	√	√	√	√	√	
99	Common Crowberry	Empetrum nigrum		√	√			√
100	Northern Bedstraw	Galium boreale	√	√	√	√		-

			September 202					
	Common Name	Scientific Name	5	6	7	8	9	10
101	Lady's Bedstraw	Galium verum		√		√	✓	
102	Norman's Bedstraw	Galium normanii		√		√		
103	Autumn Gentian	Gentianella amarella		√			√	
104	Oysterplant	Mertensia maritima					√	
105	Field Forget-me-not	Myosotis arvensis		√	√	√	√	
106	Greater Plantain	Plantago major		√	√		√	
107	Sea Plantain	Plantago maritima		√	√		√	√
108	Heath Speedwell	Veronica officinalis				√		
109	Common Butterwort	Pinguicula vulgaris		√		√		
110	Common Selfheal	Prunella vulgaris		√				
111	Wild Thyme	Thymus praecox ssp. arcticus		√	√	√	√	√
112	Upland Eyebright	Euphrasia wettsteinii		√	√	√	√	√
113	Alpine Bartsia	Bartsia alpina		√	√	√		
114	Lesser Yellow Rattle	Rhinanthus minor		√	√	√	√	
115	Common Harebell	Campanula rotundifolia			√	√		
116	Creeping Thistle	Cirsium arvense	√				√	√
117	Autumn Hawkbit	Scorzoneroides autumnalis		√	√	√	√	√
118	Common Colt's-foot	Tussilago farfara	√	√			√	√
119	Common Groundsel	Senecio vulgaris		√	√	√	√	√
120	Beach Ragwort	Jacobaea pseudoarnica			√			
121	Pineappleweed	Matricaria discoidea		√	√	√		
122	European Yarrow	Achillea millefolium	√	√	√	√	√	√
123	Sea Mayweed	Tripleurospermum maritimum			✓		✓	
124	Devil's-bit Scabious	Succisa pratensis			✓		√	
125	Sweet Cicely	Myrrhis odorata			√		√	
126	Cow Parsley	Anthriscus sylvestris		√			√	
127	Northern Angelica	Angelica archangelica	✓	√	√	√	√	
128	Common Angelica	Angelica sylvestris		√	√		√	