

Iceland in Autumn – Glaciers, Icebergs & Waterfalls

Naturetrek Tour Report

10th – 16th September 2022



Skogafoss by Lynda Mudle-Smith



Northern Lights by David Jackson



Snow Bunting by David Jackson



Fossálar Waterfall by David Jackson

Tour report by David Jackson



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Tour participants – Dave Jackson and Bob Gill (Leaders) with 10 Naturetrek clients.

Summary

It was hard to believe this had only been a seven day trip with all the places and wildlife we'd seen. We visited the Golden Circle, several waterfalls, one resplendent with a double rainbow, a volcanic crater, took a craft out among the icebergs and walked between ice blocks on Diamond Beach. We had very close views of Snow Buntings, Golden Plovers and Glaucous Gulls and watched Minke Whales, White-beaked Dolphins and Harbour Porpoises from a boat out in Reykjavik harbour.

The windscreen wipers were used only on the first and last days with lots of sunshine in between although the wind did get up in exposed places.

Day 1

Saturday 10th September

Light to heavy rain, 11°C.

The afternoon flights from Heathrow and Manchester arrived within half an hour of each other and we all met up in the arrivals hall with luggage collected although three flights arriving around the same time meant a lengthy delay to collect the hire vehicles. We eventually got our keys, located our minibuses, loaded luggage and set off on our 2.5 hour journey to our first hotel, passing the Blue Lagoon and along the south coast where paths could be seen leading up to the new volcano that had first erupted in March 2021 and again in early August 2022 but was now dormant.

We drove through a barren landscape of moss-covered lava fields with increasing rain on our journey to our first hotel. Roadside birds included Whooper Swans, Pink-footed Geese, Northern Ravens and a probable Merlin zipped between the vehicles low over the road. We arrived at Gullfoss just before 8pm and after a quick check-in we went straight to dinner. Local salmon and Arctic char were favourite choices throughout the week.

Day 2 September

Sunday

11th

Windy early decreasing later, 10 - 18°C.

There were no takers for an early morning walk so we met for a buffet breakfast at 7.30 before driving the 3km to Gullfoss Waterfall, initially viewing from the top tier and later making our way to the lower level where we thought it might be more sheltered - it wasn't! Some of the group had seen a fast flying raptor that could only have been a Gyr but there were no further signs in the strong wind.

Gullfoss, meaning Golden Waterfall, is situated in a deep canyon of the Hvítá River and comprises two fast flowing, wide drops, falling 32m in all. In good morning light the falls were absolutely spectacular and with three viewpoints each offering a different perspective the opportunities for photography were superb.

Having dragged ourselves away from the falls we made the short drive to the geothermal area known as Geysir. The famous Giant Geysir is currently dormant but its smaller but still spectacular neighbour a mere 50m away, Strokkur, still erupts every 10 minutes or so and can reach a height of up to 40m although more usually 10-20m. Redwings were plentiful, Redpolls, Ravens and Meadow Pipits were seen in flight while a White Wagtail picked around the pools.

After experiencing supermarket shopping Icelandic style in Laugarvatn we drove a few kilometres to a picnic area to eat our lunch, with moss-covered larva all around us and the view of Þingvellirvatn in the distance. We could feel our lungs being cleansed by the cool, clear air.

A further 15km on we arrived at Þingvellir National Park, the site of Iceland's first parliament, the Alþingi. It is located directly on the mid-Atlantic ridge, where a series of stunning fissures cut through the valley floor and served as the meeting place for the island's early occupants. Early in the summer, large groups of Vikings would travel for days to come together and decide the rules that would control life on the entire island. We were able to walk between the tectonic plates and along the river below with its picturesque church built in 1859 and birdlife including Greylag Geese, Redwings and a very close Common Snipe although the expected divers were nowhere to be seen.

Leaving Þingvellir we followed the lake south to the River Sog Hydro-electric Plant where we watched a Great Northern Diver work its way slowly up river. The last of the summer flies did their best to annoy us but their numbers were few and ineffective; they were no match for us hardy souls!

Our final stop of the day was at the Kerið Crater. The crater is 55m deep, 270m wide and is approximately 6,500 years old, while the lake is 7 – 14m deep. While walking around the rim two Ptarmigan were seen flying across the rocky inner slope before disappearing into the vegetation.

We paid another visit to Gullfoss for another view of the waterfall in low evening light before returning to the hotel for dinner and a slight showing from the Northern Lights afterwards. Nothing spectacular but the app showed only a 2% chance of a sighting so we were happy with the views and photos obtained.

Day 3

Monday 12th September

Cool with sun, 10 - 13°C

After breakfast we checked out of the Gullfoss Hotel for the 300km drive to Skaftafell stopping by the wide river at Laugarás where a ferry towed by horses used to be the only way of crossing until the bridge was built in 1958.

From the road we were seeing glacier tongues and waterfalls and we stopped at Seljalandsfoss, a single 60m drop with a path behind the falls. Some of the group elected to walk behind the falls while the rest made do with photographs. Feeling cold and wet from the spray we decided to drive past the nearby Skogafoss, a good decision as it turned out as the falls would look spectacular on our return journey.

We stopped at Vik for provisions and visited the black sand beach at Reynisfjara where we ate our lunch in the shelter of the vehicles before exploring the caves which were buzzing with people, most taking selfies oblivious

to the Ravens and Fulmars on the cliffs above. A Great Skua harried the Herring Gulls out at sea as we gathered to continue our eastward journey.

Heading off again we passed roadside pools with Greater Scaup, Tufted Duck, Whooper Swans, Pink-footed and Greylag Geese. A final roadside stop by a cascading river gave us excellent photographic opportunities plus a White Wagtail and numerous Arctic plants including gentians and cotton grass but no Harlequin Ducks.

We finally arrived at our destination, the Skaftafell Hotel, nestled under Vatnajökull, the largest glacier in Europe covering almost 8% of Iceland's landmass. There was just enough time to get settled in, take a short walk behind the hotel and head for yet another fine Icelandic dinner.

Day 4

Tuesday 13th September

Cloud with sun breaking through, 4 - 14°C.

We started with a pre-breakfast walk behind the hotel towards the glacier. A short, steep climb up a stony knoll gave us good views over the deeply crevassed edge of the glacier and the small pools created by the ice melt. Meadow Pipits and Redwings were plentiful and a Ptarmigan was seen flying away.

After breakfast we headed east to Jökulsárlón Iceberg Lagoon where the retreating glacier had carved out a deep lake up to 200m deep with an outlet to the salty sea making the icebergs melt. Drifting lazily around the lagoon were countless icebergs of varying sizes eventually being picked up by the current before being dispatched on their journey to the sea.

We pulled in to a small car park a few hundred metres from the main one up to a viewpoint overlooking the lagoon. Oohs!, Aahs! and Wows! Could be heard as the spectacular icebergs came into view; absolutely breath-taking! Icebergs in shades of blue and white, many streaked with the volcanic ash picked up during their thousands of years life as part of the glacier just drifting and glinting in the bright morning sun. The backdrop to this was the glacier itself, huge, foreboding and slowly melting.

A few ducks were noted on the lagoon and these turned out to be the much hoped for Harlequin Ducks, two pairs with Common Eiders. A Northern Wheatear was making good use of the boulders surrounding the lagoon. Tearing ourselves away we headed for the main car park where a White Wagtail and Snow Bunting were seeking morsels around the parked cars.

Before we boarded the old amphibious vehicle, a relic from the Vietnam war, for a trip around the lagoon we scanned the water picking up a small raft of auks at a distance. Aboard the amphibian craft we navigated around the lagoon getting up close and personal to the icebergs seeing Great Black-backed, Lesser Black-backed, Herring, Black-headed, two Glaucous Gulls and many Kittiwakes. At one point all the gulls took to the air as an impressive Gyr Falcon flew through. Back on shore further scanning gained us an Iceland Gull perched on an iceberg and 'scope views identified the auks as Razorbills as they formed a tight raft on the water. Back at the buses three Snow Buntings preened and posed for photos at very close range.

We then drove across the road down a track parallel to the outflow from the lagoon to Diamond Beach where icebergs, stranded on the beach by the tide, sparkled in the sun like diamonds giving fantastic photo opportunities. As the tide came in icebergs started moving down the outflow tumbling and turning in the rising current, while Harbour Seals swam down with them.

Before leaving Jökulsárlón we returned to the first viewpoint, just to take in that view for a final time. The Eiders were still showing and more Harbour Seals were starting to appear among the icebergs.

Driving back to Skaftafell, and after a brief stop at the hotel while the leaders went to refuel the vehicles, we headed to a small car park near the crater. A few walked some distance eventually reaching a hidden iceberg lagoon, nowhere near the size or scope of Jökulsárlón but exciting nonetheless, plus we were really close to the face of the glacier - spectacular! After a really full but fantastic day it was time to return to the hotel for dinner.

Day 5

Wednesday 14th September

Sunny, 11 - 14°C.

Our pre-breakfast walk was back up the hill towards the glacier for a final view, and plenty of Redwings were flitting around the scrub and Nootka Lupins. After breakfast we repacked the buses for our long journey back towards Keflavik.

We planned to have a picnic lunch at Vik which gave us time for a couple of impromptu stops on the way. Not long after starting out our first stop was at the Gígjukvísl Bridge Memorial consisting of two large twisted steel girders resembling a crashed aircraft, all that remained of a large bridge washed away by floods following an eruption below Vatnajökull in 1996.

Further stops were made to photograph a large, moss covered lava field and some photogenic Icelandic horses. At Vik we bought our picnic lunch from the supermarket before walking down to the Black Sands Beach to enjoy it. A Red-throated Diver showed well on the sea before being joined by a second bird.

Our next stop was at Skogafoss that we'd driven past on the way to Skaftafell. Another stunning waterfall with a 60m single drop, 25m wide and made all the more impressive by the irradient rainbow and glorious blue sky. Fulmars flew back and forth across the face of the falls. It is interesting to note that the cliffs that the waterfall tumbles over and which stretch all along this stretch of the road were once the coastline but are now 5km from the sea.

Before reaching the hotel we made our final stop at Krýsuvík Sulphur Springs, a colourful geothermal area of bubbling mud pools and hot springs made all the more "enjoyable" by the intense aroma of sulphur. Raven, Meadow Pipit and a Merlin were spotted as we absorbed the surroundings.

After a long day we finally arrived at the Northern Light Hotel where, just as we finished our main courses at dinner, the shout went up that the Northern Lights were showing and what a great display they gave. All the hotel guests were out with their cameras and phones trying to capture the green lightshow dancing all around us. At one point they seemed to be on all sides of the hotel - spectacular!

Day 6

Thursday 15th September

Sun 11 - 14°C

After a hearty breakfast we boarded the buses to head for Iceland's capital, Reykjavik for our scheduled whale watching trip. Arriving early, we walked up to Town Lake where we saw Whooper Swans, Gadwall, Mallard, Tufted Duck and Wigeon. Redwings were taking advantage of the Rowan berries, feeding up before migrating south. We continued our walk to Hallgrímskirkja, Reykjavik's famous Lutheran church only completed in 1986. It was designed to represent the landscape of Iceland, in particular the waterfall Svartifoss. The church is fronted by a statue of the Norse explorer, Leif Erikson, thought to be the first European to set foot in North America.

We picked up our picnic lunch on the way to the harbour where we paused for photos on Rainbow Street, a sign of joy and support for diversity, before boarding the boat for our 13:00 sailing. Eiders swam in the harbour and, as we headed out into the bay gulls started to appear - Great Black-backed, Lesser Black-backed, Herring, Black-headed and Kittiwakes. Fulmars skimmed the surface, Shags and Cormorants swam or flew past and Manx Shearwaters also skimmed the waves, wing tips almost touching the water. Common and Black Guillemots hurried to get out of the way of the boat and Gannets took advantage of the fish-rich waters.

Our first Cetaceans were a small pod of Harbour Porpoise, typically going about their business and taking no notice of the boat. A small pod of White-beaked Dolphins appeared in front of the boat and they appeared nervous as they had a calf with them so after getting everyone a sighting we left them to their journey. Our final showing came in the form of some Minke Whales, up to four adults and a calf, which we spent some time with getting photos and really just enjoying being in the company of these five metre long gentle giants. Time flew by and it was time to return to harbour bringing an end a really exciting and enjoyable trip.

Back on the buses we drove the short distance to Seltjarnarnes and Grotta, a mix of coastal lagoon and freshwater pools. From the car park we saw three Ringed Plovers, Eiders flew past as did Cormorant, five Red-breasted Mergansers flew over and Oystercatchers squabbled on the shore. On the coastal lagoon a good flock of Golden Plover posed for close photos and were joined by Ruddy Turnstones and a few Dunlin. Red-throated Diver and Glaucous Gull made up the supporting cast. It was our last full day in Iceland and time to head back to the hotel for our final dinner but not before stopping briefly at the Sun Voyager, a gleaming stainless steel sculpture on Reykjavik's waterfront that resembles a Viking longboat meant to depict a dream boat and an ode to the sun.

We opted for an earlier dinner to avoid a repeat of the previous night when we ran towards the doors like shoppers on the first day of the January sales when word came of the northern lights showing. The skies were clear and hopes were high for a repeat but it wasn't to be so we assembled in the comfortable lounge where we caught up on the last two days' checklists.

Day 7

Friday 16th September

Cool, 1 - 10°C

Two of our group had an early start and one leader's alarm was set to taxi them to the airport in good time after defrosting the vehicle and the hotel obliged by providing an early breakfast.

The rest of us enjoyed a leisurely breakfast as we had an afternoon flight and a few hours to spare. We packed our luggage into the vans and drove down to Grindavik harbour where a line-up of juvenile and adult Great Black-backed, Lesser Black-backed, Herring and Glaucous Gulls allowed close approach. Plumages, eye and bill colour were compared to show that gull identification can be straight forward given good views, close scrutiny and obliging birds! We then drove down to the Reykjanes Lighthouse and the Great Auk memorial, a bronze statue created by sculptor Todd McGrain as part of his Lost Bird Project of extinct birds, a solemn experience.

We dropped one lucky member of the group back at the hotel for another night's stay before making our way to the airport for our flight home.

It had been an incredible holiday with so many sites visited with spectacular landscapes and mostly good weather. "Was that only yesterday?" Became a regular question, with many of the group vowing to come back to see more of what Iceland can offer – and maybe the volcano will have woken up by then?

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Species lists

I=Introduced		September 2022						
Common name	Scientific name	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Birds								
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>					2		
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>						2	
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>						✓	
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>						✓	
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>						8	
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>			✓			✓	
Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>			✓		✓		
Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>					4		
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>				✓		✓	
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>						2	
Rock Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus muta</i>		2		2			
Rock Dove - I	<i>Columba livia</i>			✓				
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>						✓	✓
European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>			3			40	
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>						3	
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>						✓	
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>						3	
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		1		3			
Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>			✓	✓		✓	✓
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	1	1	✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>				✓		✓	✓
Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>				3		6	✓
Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>				1	1		
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>				1		2	
Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>			1				
Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>						✓	
Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>						LO	
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>					8		
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>					2	1	
Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>		1					
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Manx Shearwater	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>							
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>						✓	✓
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>					✓	✓	
European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelsis</i>					✓		1
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>	?			1	1		
Gyr Falcon	<i>Falco rusticolus</i>		?			1		
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

I=Introduced		September 2022						
Common name	Scientific name	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>				1			
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>		✓					
Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	5	✓	✓
Mammals								
Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>				✓			
Common Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>						5	
White-beaked Dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus albirostris</i>						6	
Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>						6	



Whooper Swan by Lynda Mudle-Smith