

# Iceland in Autumn – Glaciers, Icebergs & Waterfalls

Naturetrek Tour Report

7th – 13th September 2025

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Geysir



Skogafoss



Seltun



Svartifoss

Tour report and photos by Neil Murphy

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Tour participants: David Phillips and Neil Murphy (leaders) with 14 Naturetrek clients.

## Summary

Mid-September brought a broad range of Icelandic weather with a mix of dry, sunny, wet & windy and even the first dusting of winter snow on the higher ground as we witnessed some of Iceland's most awe-inspiring landscapes. We were fortunate enough to witness nature at its finest, with spectacular waterfalls, beautiful rainbows, incredible glaciers and amazing geothermal landscapes. The beauty of Iceland truly revealed itself in the changing light and weather conditions, and we experienced this first-hand on our journey through southern Iceland.

The tour began with a visit to the iconic Golden Circle, where we explored three of Iceland's most famous landmarks: Gullfoss waterfall, the geothermal wonder of Geysir, and Thingvellir National Park. Walking between the North American and Eurasian tectonic plates at Thingvellir was an incredible experience, knowing we were straddling two continents at once and also the site of the first Icelandic parliament - The Althing.

On a calm, sunny day we were treated to an unforgettable whale-watching trip in Faxaflói Bay where the serene beauty of Iceland's waters was punctuated by the appearance of marine giants; Minke and Humpback Whales graced us with their presence during the 3-hour trip.

Iceland's natural beauty is both humbling and exhilarating, from the awe-inspiring glaciers and lagoons to the rich wildlife that inhabits its shores. Despite the wind and chill, the landscape, wildlife, and once-in-a-lifetime experiences made this a holiday to remember.



Svartifoss

## Day 1

## Sunday 7th September

### Heathrow – Keflavik – Gullfoss

Rain showers, fresh SW wind 8 - 6°C

Fourteen eager guests and two guides convened at Heathrow Airport, ready for our journey to Keflavik airport, Iceland. Upon arrival, the group collected the two minibuses and embarked on a very wet two-hour drive to the Hotel Gullfoss, located near the stunning Gullfoss waterfall, aptly translated to “Golden Falls.”

During the journey, the group spotted various birds, including Whooper Swans, Common Eider, European Golden Plover and Common Snipe.

Reaching the hotel at 18:30, we enjoyed a late dinner, but the rain persisted putting pay to any chance of seeing the Northern Lights.

## Day 2

## Monday 8th September

### Gullfoss - Geysir - Faxafoss - Thingvellir

Dry, fresh breeze 8 - 15°C

Following breakfast, we made a short drive to Gullfoss waterfall. The falls were breath-taking in the morning light, even in dull overcast conditions the power of the volume of water was incredible. The group spent about an hour exploring the area, taking photographs and enjoying the views, first from the lower platforms and then looking down on the falls from above.

Next, we headed to the Geysir Geothermal Area, renowned for its geothermal activity. Here, we observed Strokkur, an active geyser that erupts approximately every five minutes. The eruptions varied in force and height, with some reaching up to 10 metres. The group enjoyed several eruptions, attempting to time photographs and videos as the geyser exhibited false signs before erupting. Although the original Geysir is currently dormant, it may become active again in the future.

After the Geysir visit, we stopped at a local supermarket to pick up lunch. We ate outside in a suntrap which was particularly warm as coats came off and sun cream went on.

Following lunch, we proceeded to Thingvellir (Þingvellir) National Park, a site of significant cultural and geological importance. Thingvellir is located on the rift between the North American and European tectonic plates, which are drifting apart at a rate of approximately 1 – 2cm per year. The landscape is characterised by a series of fissures, with the Great Rift serving as the water course for the Öxará (river) before it flows into Thingvallavatn, the largest lake in Iceland. The cliffs of the Great Rift formed an amphitheatre that hosted the first Icelandic parliament (The Althing) in 930 AD. We enjoyed a walk around the area and the first of many rainbows of the week.



Next, we made a brief stop at the Sog River Hydro-Electric Power Station, where we had great views of two Great Northern Diver as they dived for fish.

Throughout the day, we observed various bird species, including Pink-footed Goose, Whooper Swan, Common Merganser, Red-breasted Merganser, Great Northern Diver, Northern Raven and Common (Icelandic) Redpoll.



Icelandic Redwing



Golden Plover

## Day 3

**Tuesday 9th September**

Gullfoss - Skogafoss - Vík – Fossalar – Eldhraun - Skaftafell

Dry, breezy 8°C – 12°C

After breakfast, we embarked on the scenic drive to Skaftafell, with several stops planned along the way. Our first destination was the magnificent 62m high Skógafoss waterfall, famous for its breath-taking rainbows and the presence of many breeding Northern Fulmars.

Next, we arrived at Vík, Iceland's rainiest location. The group enjoyed a breezy but dry picnic lunch from a local supermarket on the black volcanic sand beach, whilst watching Harbour & Grey Seals and a Glaucous Gull. Just before we were due to leave the group found a Franklin's Gull from North America feeding just offshore – the 8th record for Iceland!

After lunch, we drove a short distance to the Hotel Katla pools where we enjoyed fine views of an adult Red-throated Diver and full-grown chick and a family party of Whooper Swans.

We then made a brief stop at a picturesque viewpoint at Fossálar where this beautiful small waterfall cascades over rocks, framed by towering inland cliffs. Heading on, our next stop was Eldhraun Lava Field, located in the Moss Heath Reserve. This area features lava boulders covered in Woolly Fringe Moss, giving it a lunar-like appearance. It has historical significance as it was used for training Apollo 11 astronauts due to its otherworldly landscape. Additionally, this is the largest lava flow in the world, formed during the Laki eruption (1783–1784), which caused crop failures and famine across Europe and perhaps contributed towards the French Revolution.

The next stop was the Skeiðará Bridge Monument. The twisted girders of this former bridge, which were washed away in a massive flood caused by the 1996 volcanic eruption of the Vatnajökull volcano, stands as a poignant reminder of Iceland's raw natural power. Finally, we arrived at the Hotel Skaftafell and after checking-in, we enjoyed a short walk to a viewpoint of the Svinafellsjökull glacier, the second largest in Europe. Unfortunately overcast skies hid the northern lights from us again.

Other birds seen during the day included Pale-bellied Brent & Pink-footed Geese, European Golden Plover and Northern Wheatear (Greenland race).

## Day 4

Wednesday 10th September

### Skaftafell - Jökulsárlón - Vatnajökull National Park

Wild, wet and windy 5 - 12°C

Today we headed to the stunning Jökulsárlón iceberg lagoon, around 45 minutes away. However our first stop was the nearby Diamond Beach where icebergs from the lagoon flow out to sea and then get washed up by the tide on the black volcanic sand beach. Here they slowly melt into an array of amazing shapes, looking every bit like giant diamonds! Our next adventure was an amphibious boat trip among the icebergs in the lagoon. This was a breathtaking sight as we slowly weaved our way around an array of incredible icebergs in various sizes, shapes, and colours, captivated everyone on board. Black-legged Kittiwakes were perched on some of the icebergs whilst five Snow Buntings entertained visitors in the car park and were happy to pose for photos. By now it was lunchtime, and the weather had taken a serious turn for the worst, so we popped into a nearby cafe for soup. With no sign of any improvement in the forecast, we decided to head back to the hotel for a quick freshen up and warm up before heading out towards Svartifoss waterfall later in the afternoon if there was a suitable break in the weather.

Luckily by 3pm we had a brief break in the weather so headed five minutes from the hotel to Vatnajökull National Park, where a 1.6km walk leads from the visitor centre, via Hundafoss waterfall, to the beautiful Svartifoss waterfall. While not the largest waterfall, it is flanked by stunning basalt columns, which inspired the design of Reykjavik's iconic Hallgrímskirkja Lutheran church.

The miserable weather continued into the night so once again no Aurora was visible. Wildlife seen today included Harbour Seal, Purple Sandpiper, Glaucous Gull, Merlin and the Icelandic race of Redwing.



Snow Bunting



Iceberg

## Day 5

## Thursday 11th September

Skaftafell - Eyjafjallajökull - Drifandi - Seljalandsfoss - Gljufrabui - Kriunes Hotel

Wet & windy morning, dry & calm afternoon 8 -14°C

After breakfast, we began our journey heading back west, making several planned stops along the way. The picnic lunch was bought in Vik and the next stop was the Eyjafjallajökull volcano viewpoint. This volcano shot to fame in 2010 when after over 180 years of dormancy it erupted for three months, causing a 5km high ash cloud and widespread flight cancellations across Europe. An early lunch was taken here as some of the group read the information boards, some birded and other sampled the sweet treats from the cafe.

We then embarked on a quick trio of waterfalls. First was Drifandi, followed by Seljalandsfoss and then the nearby Gljufrabui. Seljalandsfoss is popular with tourists as it's possible to walk behind the falls as most of the group did, getting fairly wet. A short walk from there leads to the hidden wonder that is Gljufrabui, but to view this you have to squeeze through a cavern where you end up at the base of the waterfall & get seriously wet – however the breezy walk back to the minibus dried most of us off!

We then moved on to the stunning Kriunes Hotel, overlooking the beautiful lake Ellidavatn, for our final two nights in Iceland.

Some of the group went out after dinner as the skies were relatively clear but again the luck was against us for the northern lights.

Bird sightings included Barnacle Goose, Glaucous Gull, Great Northern Diver, Northern Fulmar and Merlin.

## Day 6

## Friday 12th September

Reykjavik

Dry, calm & sunny 8 -12°C

The day began with a scan over the serene lake Ellidavatn, accompanied by the haunting calls of the Great Northern Diver and we also enjoyed Whooper Swans and Common (Icelandic) Redpoll.

After a hearty breakfast, we set off to Reykjavik. Our first stop was the Bakkajörtur lagoon where we enjoyed great views of Common Ringed Plover, Dunlin, European Golden Plover and a Ruff, quite a scarce bird in Iceland. Amongst the throng of gulls we quickly identified many fine adult Glaucous and Iceland Gulls and a Long-tailed Duck was also seen. We then headed to the harbour where a local Icelandic birder had told us to park by the car-wash for the best views of the birds in the bay. He wasn't wrong and we were soon enjoying great views of Common Eider, Black Guillemot and European Shag as we searched the bay full of birds. We quickly located one of the prize birds and a real Icelandic star, a female Harlequin perched on some rocks allowing everyone good 'scope views. The second star bird was trickier to find, but eventually appeared close offshore, a White-winged Scoter from North America. It must have been constantly diving for food, but now it settled down to rest and

preen and gave us fantastic views. After everyone had had their fills we made our way around to the inner harbour, via the supermarket, to where we would board our whale watching boat. Here we ate our picnic in the sunshine as Purple Sandpipers roosted nearby and Glaucous Gulls flew overhead.

At 1pm we boarded the boat for a three-hour whale watching trip around the Faxaflói Bay. The weather throughout the trip was extremely pleasant, with clear blue skies and a very gentle breeze. We were soon seeing plenty of Northern Fulmars and plunge-diving Northern Gannets, whilst a small pod of Harbour Porpoise put in a brief appearance. Black-legged Kittiwake, Common Guillemots and Razorbills were added to the bird list, and both Grey and Harbour Seals were seen. We were fortunate to spot up to four Minke Whales, providing everyone with great views. These tend to be quite shy and only surface briefly, so on seeing a larger, more distant blow, we decided to investigate further. We were soon in the presence of two Humpback Whales which were far easier to predict where they would surface as you look for the 'bubble-circle' that they create to trap fish before swallowing them. Two more Humpbacks were then spotted nearby, so we left the original two and headed to the new ones, passing another en route! Five Humpback Whales in one small bay, incredible! The two new Humpbacks gave incredible views as they surfaced right beside the boat, even swimming underneath it at one point. Many photos were taken and our boat guide said that if we uploaded our photos to [happywhale.com](http://happywhale.com), we could identify that individual and see where else in the Atlantic it has been seen during its lifetime. All too soon this amazing encounter was over, and we left the whales to feed in peace and headed back to the harbour.

On disembarking, we had a brief walk through Reyjavík city centre admiring the oldest house, Hallgrímskirkja Lutheran church, parliament and city hall overlooking Tjörninn Lake full of Whooper Swans. Next, we visited the beautiful, complex, glass Harpa Concert Hall, a wonder of modern architecture whose appearance constantly changes with the light and weather, just like Iceland.

After our final dinner in Iceland, we tried again for the northern lights, but the hills were shrouded in cloud, so no chance. In the morning, we noticed that there was the first dusting of winter snow on the mountains.

## Day 7

**Saturday 13th September**

Lake Ellidavatn – Lake Kleifarvatn – Seltún – Grindavík - Keflavík

Dry, sunny, breezy 8-15°C

We had a slightly later start this morning, savouring our last moments in Kriunes Hotel and enjoying 10 Great Northern Divers on lake Ellidavatn. After loading the buses for the final time, we set off briefly pausing at lake Kleifarvatn before arriving at the hot sulphur springs at Seltún. This fascinating location was alive with bubbling springs and mud pools that expelled steam and sulphur, creating a vibrant palette of yellow and orange against the backdrop of brick red rocks and the clear blue sky.

Since our flight wasn't until late afternoon, we decided to visit Grindavík which was cut off last year by a lava flow from the nearby erupting Geldingadalir volcano. The town is now quite eerie as the whole population of 4,000 were evacuated and only 800 have been allowed to return, the other areas were too badly damaged or unsafe to return to. We took lunch in the harbourside cafe and as such did our bit to support this struggling community. As we left Grindavík and headed towards Keflavík, we had to detour onto the new road which bypasses the lava flow

as the old road was totally engulfed. We had a brief stop here beside the lava which gave us an up close and personal view of the raw power of the forces which have shaped Iceland over thousands of years. It was now time to head to the airport for our flight home, but as we departed, we couldn't help but reflect on the incredible experiences and sights, sounds and smells that we had enjoyed throughout our journey in this incredible country.



Humpback Whale



White-winged Scoter

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## Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

I=Introduced		September 2025						
Common name	Scientific name	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Pale-bellied Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla hrota</i>			12			10	
Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>					10		
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓			✓	✓	✓
Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>		15	200				
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	4	30	30	30	40	12	8
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>					2	20	2
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>			25		100	3	130
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	12					350	
Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>						1	
White-winged Scoter	<i>Melanitta deglandi</i>						1	
Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>						1	
Common Merganser	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		1					
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		15				13	
Rock Dove - I	<i>Columba livia</i>			2		✓	✓	
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>						12	
European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	30		250			75	
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>						1	
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa icelandica</i>		1					
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>						30	
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>						1	
Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>				2		6	
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	1				16	1	
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>						4	
Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>						1	
Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>				✓		✓	
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Franklin's Gull	<i>Leucophaeus pipixcan</i>			1				
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>			1		✓	✓	
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	
Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>			2	1	6	25	6
Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>						6	
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>						4	
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>						15	
Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>						2	
Red-throated Loon	<i>Gavia stellata</i>			4				
Common Loon	<i>Gavia immer</i>		8		2	8	7	10
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>				8		✓	
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			1				
European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>						✓	
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>						1	1
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>				1	1		

I=Introduced		September 2025						
Common name	Scientific name	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>						2	2
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes icelandicus</i>		1	1		1		
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓				✓	✓	
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus coburni</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe leucorhoa</i>			2				
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea rostrata</i>		4		1		30	1
Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>				5			

## Mammals

		September 2025						
Common name	Scientific name	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>			1			1	
Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>			1	2		1	
Common Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>						4	
Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>						5	
Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>						6	

## Plants

Common name	Scientific name
Autumnal Hawksbit	<i>Scorzoneroides autumnalis</i>
Beach Lovage	<i>Ligusticum scoticum</i>
Beach Ragwort	<i>Senecio maritimus</i>
Bearberry	<i>Arctostaphylos uva-ursi</i>
Bell Heather	<i>Erica cinerea</i>
Bladder Campion	<i>Silene vulgaris</i>
Bog Blueberry	<i>Vaccinium uliginosum</i>
Butterwort	<i>Pinguicula vulgaris</i>
Creeping Thyme	<i>Thymus serpyllum</i>
Crowberry	<i>Empetrum nigrum</i>
Eyebright	<i>Euphrasia arctica</i> subsp. <i>Borealis</i>
Field Gentian	<i>Gentianella campestris</i>
Harebell	<i>Campanula rotundifolia</i>
Irish Saxifrage	<i>Saxifraga rosacea</i>
Lady's Bedstraw	<i>Galium verum</i>
Lady's Mantle	<i>Alchemilla mollis</i>
Lesser London Pride	<i>Saxifraga cuneifolia</i>
Lupin	<i>Lupinus</i> sp.
Meadowsweet	<i>Filipendula ulmaria</i>
Red Clover	<i>Trifolium pratense</i>
Sneezewort	<i>Achillea ptarmica</i>
Thrift	<i>Armeria maritima</i>
Water Avens	<i>Geum rivale</i>
White Clover	<i>Trifolium repens</i>
Wild Strawberry	<i>Fragaria vesca</i>

Common name	Scientific name
Wood Cranesbill	<i>Geranium sylvaticum</i>
Yarrow	<i>Achillea millefolium</i>
Yellow Rattle	<i>Rhinanthus minor</i> agg.