

Iceland - Killer Whales & Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour Report

7 - 11 February 2013



Killer Whales



Northern Lights above Stykkisholmur



King Eider with Common Eider at Grundarfjörður



White-beaked Dolphins

Report and cover images by Peter Dunn



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Day 1

Thursday 7th February

Heathrow – Northern Light Inn

Weather details: Occasional snow flurries and clear skies, before cloud building after dark.

The group arrived in Keflavik just behind time and met Peter in the arrivals area. We also had Malcolm with us for the night as he had just finished another Naturetrek tour and was staying at our hotel before his next on Friday. We packed the coach and headed for the Northern Lights Inn, where half the group decided to visit the Blue Lagoon before dinner, and we met up with Bob and Judith who had arrived the previous day.

After a delicious supper, Peter outlined the itinerary for the next few days and then took those who wanted, out to practise the art of night photography. The results were quite artistic, soft orange glow on the clouds from Reykjavik and the power station contrasting with the black and white of the snow coloured hill. We felt we were ready to tackle the lights should they appear but with total cloud cover limiting any chance of this tonight, we retired in the knowledge that we would be called from our rooms by the night watchman should anything happen.

Day 2

Friday 8th February

Northern Light Inn – Stykkisholmur

Weather details; Gusty winds and rain, becoming stronger in the afternoon. Mild

It was fairly windy with rain shower when we left the Northern Light Inn with the intentions to circumnavigate the Snæfellsnes Peninsula. At Hvalfjörður, it seemed as if we were following in the footsteps of Jules Verne in his 'classic' novel, 'Journey to the Centre of the World': the 6km long tunnel disappeared deep into the bowels of the earth. A brief stop to take some photos was called for at the other side.

We stopped for a comfort break at Borganes and then continued along the southern edge of the peninsula at a very scenic picnic site to have our packed lunches. The fresh untouched snow around the fir trees was beautiful. We travelled through ancient lava fields softened by the blanket of snow and we were buffeted by strong winds before arriving at Hellissandur and a welcome coffee and comfort stop. At Ólafsvik we stopped briefly in driving rain but using the van as a shield we were able to see some nice Harlequin Duck in the surf close to many Eider, and Purple Sandpipers flitted from rock to rock looking for shelter from the wind. We continued our journey until we arrived at Grundarfjörður, the small fishing community from where we would be taking our boat trips, and spotted two Black Guillemots in the harbour. As we arrived at Urthvalafjörður there was a strong, unpleasant smell of rotten fish in the air and driving onto the shore we could see (and smell) some of the millions of Herring that had perished here because of the depletion of oxygen in the water. Hundreds of Iceland and Glaucous Gulls were feeding on the remains.

We pressed on to the hotel at Stykkisholmur where we were allocated our rooms with time to relax or explore the town before dinner. After dinner we completed our daily logs with the few species we had seen en route, hoping for the wind to die down to enable us to go out on the boat tomorrow. Cloud cover was thick so chances of the Northern Lights tonight meant we kept watch from the hotel.

Day 3

Saturday 9th February

Snæfellsnes Peninsula

Weather details; the wind had dropped and the morning was dry, showers pm

News from the boat company was that the trip would go at 1am, so after a leisurely breakfast we set off at first light – 09.30am (!), to explore the coast before we got to Grundarfjörður. First we drove past Stykkisholmur Harbour with its customary Common Eider and then out over the volcanic lava fields along the north coast to an inlet called Hraunfjörður, where eagles had been seen in the past. After a search Peter found a juvenile sat on a hillside which was viewed through the telescope. The area also had plenty of Oystercatcher and Purple Sandpipers, and 3-4 Common (Harbour) Seals in their usual ‘banana pose’. The eagle eventually flew and circled the area where all the dead herring had washed up so we headed for there and had two stops along the coast line to witness this spectacle and all the Glaucous and Iceland Gulls feeding. Checking out into Urthvalafjörður we saw the unmistakable fins of Killer Whales and with the telescope we could see up to eight animals together including a long finned male. With hopes high we headed for lunch...

We arrived in Grundarfjörður where we made use of the facilities before having lunch and a short walk around the town, only to be told that the sailing would be 1.30pm. However we were told of a King Eider sighted a few days ago so went in search that but only found the flocks of Common Eider. Eventually we were suited up into the one piece thermal suits supplied by the boat company and boarded the boat for a journey out into the fjord. We found plenty of birds in Grundarfjörður (fjord) but no orca and eventually headed to the fjord where we had seen them from the shore. We moved into huge flocks of feeding Gannets, Fulmars and white-winged gulls feeding on Herring and then we spotted the huge fins! We spent at least 40 minutes watching a party of about 25 animals hunting, ‘logging’ and generally lazing about, all round the boat. It was a fantastic sight and well worth braving the showers of rain and spray to get there. Eventually we had to leave but not before hot chocolate and Icelandic doughnuts.

We arrived back into harbour around 5pm and after a short comfort stop headed back to Stykkisholmur for a fine dinner. With a cloudy night, we all opted to watch from our north facing rooms with a promise of phone calls all round if anything started.

Day 4

Sunday 10th February

Snæfellsnes Peninsula

Weather details; Calmer winds, dry for most of the day and cloud clearing

The good forecast dictated that we would be on the 10am sailing to look for Orcas again, so after breakfast we set off at 9am, still in the dark, heading for the village of Grundafjörður. Suited and booted we boarded the good ship Laki and sailed out of calm waters. As we left Grundafjörður (fjord) some curved dorsal fins indicated the presence of a pod of White-beaked Dolphins. About five individuals stayed around the boat for about ten minutes before we continued on heading for Urithvalafjörður, where we came across the Orca again but their numbers had increased to about 40, including a well-known male with a bent fin. We were entertained by these animals feeding, 'logging' and we also heard their calls on the hydrophone, making it a fantastic experience. What could be better – especially when the hot chocolate and doughnuts appeared! We had been so engrossed with these animals that we arrived back at the harbour a little late so opted to have our packed lunch there.

Peter also decided to check the Eider flock again during lunch and sitting right in the middle was the beautiful male King Eider. Everyone was summoned to see this scarce Icelandic visitor. We also saw a nice male Long-tailed Duck in the inner harbour. After lunch Peter headed west but straight into a rain storm so we retraced our steps and stopped at Hraunfjörður to look for eagles and Peter found the first adult bird with its full white tail soaring above the hillside. However Janet went one better and found another five individuals soaring around - a fitting end to a fantastic wildlife day.

That evening we celebrated Sally's forthcoming birthday with a cake after dinner and she made a wish for the aurora lights. Although it had been raining, Peter took a few hardy souls 5 km out of town to check. In the darkness some camera images started to show green light radiating up from the horizon. For the next hour these lights moved about the sky, barely visible to the naked eye but very clear on digital images. The sky started to clear and thousands of stars became visible but low lying fog threatened to spoil the evening. We decided to return to the hotel to check from the back and warn the others but there was too much light pollution there, so Peter decided to take them all back out of town. This was the right move as now fingers of light were moving about the sky and a huge crescent appeared. With the camera, green lights were bordered by purple lights and it was all very spectacular! It started to fade again so we returned back to the hotel. Thinking that was the end, we congratulated ourselves on a successful tour and went to bed. However the lights had other ideas and at 3am, Lucy witnessed a huge display above the hotel and most were contacted by phone to put their heads out of the window to see light shooting up from the hotel roof!

Day 5

Monday 11th February

Stykkisholmur - Keflavik Airport

Weather details; Partly cloudy with slight winds, some squally showers, temp 1°C

We left Stykkisholmur in the dark and made our way south, stopping at Borgarnes for coffee and then passing through the Hvalfjörður tunnel. We made a brief comfort stop at the Northern Lights Inn and then onto the Guinevere hot spring and geothermal area at Reykjanesviti. Here we witnessed not only the strong sulphur smells but saw the bubbling pools of water and mud, all emanating from the earth's core. A heavy squall and cold winds had us returning to the coach to eat our packed lunches.

Finally Peter took us to the area where the European and American tectonic plates met and first come ashore in Iceland, and the group walked the symbolic bridge between the two. Following this we had a steady drive to Keflavik Airport where said goodbye and all expressed how successful this tour had been.

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Aurora over Hotel Stykkisholmur at 3am by Lucy Williams

Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted; H = heard only; C = Common)

	Common name	Scientific name	February			
			8	9	10	11
1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓			✓
2	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	✓		8	15
3	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓	✓
4	King Eider	<i>Somateria spectabilis</i>			1	
5	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓	C	C	✓
6	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>	6			
7	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>			1	
8	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>			3	2
9	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>			✓	
10	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	C	C	C	✓
11	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		✓	C	
12	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>		✓	✓	
13	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓	✓	✓
14	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>		1	6	
15	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		✓	✓	
16	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>	20	✓	80	
17	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>		✓	C	
18	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	
19	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
20	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>	✓	C	C	✓
21	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucooides</i>	✓	C	✓	
22	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
23	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>		✓	✓	
24	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>		✓	✓	
25	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>	2	4	3	
26	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	C	✓
27	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
28	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>		1		12

Mammals

1	Arctic Fox	<i>Vulpes lagopus</i>			H	
2	Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		2		
3	Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>		4	2	
4	White-beaked Dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus albirostris</i>			5	
5	Killer Whale	<i>Orcinus orca</i>		25	60	