

Iceland - Killer Whales & Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour Report

12 - 16 February 2013



Killer Whale by Heather Morgan



Aurora borealis by Stuart Michaels



King Eider with Eider by Peter Dunn



Grundarfjörður falls by Geoff Vorley

Report compiled by Peter Dunn
Images by Geoff Vorley, Stuart Michaels, Heather Morgan & Peter Dunn



Naturetrek Cheriton Mill Cheriton Alresford Hampshire SO24 0NG England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour Leader:	Peter Dunn	Naturetrek Naturalist
Participants:	Jill Holtham	
	John Holtham	
	Rosamond Steel	
	Linda Harrison	
	Richard Adlam	
	Helen Stollar	
	Stuart Michaels	
	Diane Walker	
	Geoff Vorley	
	Lyn Vorley	
	Heather Morgan	
	Heather Collett	
	Francesca Woodhams	

Day 1

Tuesday 12th February

Heathrow – Northern Light Inn

Weather details: Clear sunny skies and relatively mild (2 degrees C). Clear night

The group arrived in Keflavik and met Peter in the arrivals area. We packed the coach and headed for the Northern Lights Inn, where four of the group decided to visit the Blue Lagoon before dinner. After a delicious supper, Peter outlined the itinerary for the next few days and then arranged to meet up in the car park at 10.15pm to practice night time photography should the lights appear. However even as we walked outside a faint glow of curved light appeared in the sky and soon the practice became the real thing as the sky ‘exploded’ into colours and shapes as the lights moved back and forth across the sky. This was a magnificent display and what a way to start our tour! By 11.30pm most had retired to bed but apparently the lights kept going, although at times fainter, during the night, and the arc was still visible at 6am.

Day 2

Wednesday 13th February

Northern Light Inn – Stykkisholmur

Weather details; Clear, sunny skies, cold N wind, clear night

It was clear and frosty when we left the Northern Light Inn with the intention of circumnavigating the Snæfellsness 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, in bright sunshine but with some gusty winds from the mountain passes. We stopped at a very scenic picnic site to have our packed lunches.

We travelled through ancient lava fields and the shield volcano of Snæfellsjökull was clear of cloud and warranted two or three stops along the road to photograph before we arrived at Hellissandur and a welcome coffee and comfort stop. At Ólafsvik we stopped briefly to see a pair of Harlequin Ducks in the surf along with many Eider and Purple Sandpipers that flitted from rock to rock. We called in at the harbour at Grundarfjörður, the small fishing community from where we would be taking our boat trips. As we arrived at Urthvalafjörður there was a strong, unpleasant smell of rotten fish in the air and driving along 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. Checking offshore we could see pods of Orca in the distance, close to a research boat, and looked forward to closer views during the next couple of days...

We pressed on to the hotel at Stykkisholmur where we were allocated our rooms with time then to relax or explore the town before dinner. After dinner the aurora was just starting to show to the north and east, so we spent the next hour or two watching it move across the sky, albeit faint and not as good as the previous night. However most had gone to bed, Heather remained outside and had a fantastic display over the hotel.

Day 3

Thursday 14th February

Snæfellsnes Peninsula

Weather details; Brisk NE wind, choppy sea and cloudy

We were planned to sail from Grundarfjörður at 10am and we arrived in time to get suited up. However a heavy frost and icy roads had delayed another group and we had to hang about for an hour. Eventually we set off into the fjord and then out into the channel to head for Urthvalafjörður where in the distance we could see the fins of orcas. We moved into huge flocks of feeding Fulmars and white-winged gulls feeding on Herring and spent at least 40 minutes watching a party of about 45 Orcas hunting, 'logging' and generally lazing about, all round the boat. It was a fantastic sight and well worth braving the spray to get there! Eventually we had to leave but not before hot chocolate and Icelandic doughnuts.

We arrived back into harbour around 3pm and the owner offered us the use of his hotel for soup, coffee and to eat our sandwiches in comfort. A few went outside to check the Eider flock feeding on the shrimp factory outfall. Eventually we found the male King Eider that had been associating with this flock for the last week. Setting off we stopped at Hraunfjörður when Peter spotted a White-tailed Eagle flying over, and we saw a second, sub-adult bird fly by and frighten all the Eider and waders. We arrived back at the hotel round 5.30pm to dry out socks and boots and prepare for dinner - both orca and northern lights boxes well and truly ticked! The cloudy weather did not fare well for aurora watching this evening so most went to bed, but brave Heather kept watch with a promise of a phone call if anything happened.

Day 4

Friday 15th February

Snæfellsnes Peninsula

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

We were on the afternoon sailing today so we set off a little later this morning (10am) as it was frosty and had even snowed in the mountains softening all the colours.

We made a number of stops along the road, firstly at a partly frozen stream, then a lava field. We parked up alongside Hraunsfjörður and scanning the hills, Peter found a group of White-tailed Eagles sat overlooking the water. We counted six there, one had flown past earlier and an eighth was sat on the opposite hill. Suddenly one huge adult flew right overhead, making nine. There were also a good number of Common (Harbour) Seals watching us from the water. We carried on to look out over Urithvalafjörður where we could see a number of Orcas feeding, and on the beach rotting Herring were now being cleared up. Following a brief stop in Grundafjörður we spent a little time at the waterfall at the far side of the town before returning to the harbour to have lunch.

Half the group had opted for the whale trip on the boat so while they were out, Peter took the rest of the group on a small tour of the peninsula to photograph, the scenery, architecture and Icelandic Ponies. Returning to Grundafjörður we found the King Eider showing very close on the shoreline and when the group returned from the boat they spoke of great Orca sightings, with spy hopping, tail slapping and close views.

After dinner, Peter took the group 3km out of town to try and see the aurora one last time and although we could see some green shapes in the sky, it was soon hidden by thicker cloud so we ended up returning to the hotel at 11pm to prepare for our return journey to the UK tomorrow.

Day 5

Saturday 16th February

Stykkisholmur - Keflavik Airport

Weather details; Partly cloudy with gusty NE winds, otherwise sunny -3C to 2C

We left Stykkisholmur in the dark and made our way south, stopping at Borgarnes for coffee and then passing through the Hvalfjörður tunnel. Peter made a brief detour to visit the Þingvellir National Park, where the European and American tectonic plates are obvious. This was the first national park in Iceland (1930) and had been the site of Iceland's first parliament. After this brief visit we carried on to the Gunnhver 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. Following this we had a steady drive to Keflavik Airport where we had an easy check-in, boarded the plane and had a quick flight home, arriving 30 minutes early. Some met up in the baggage reclaim, but for those who I did not meet, many thanks for your company and I hope the tour was as successful for you as it was for me.

Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek e-mailing list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers. Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk to sign up.

Naturetrek Facebook

We are delighted to launch the Naturetrek Facebook page so that participants of Naturetrek tours can remain in touch after the holiday and share photos, comments and future travel plans.

Setting up a personal profile at www.facebook.com is quick, free and easy. The [Naturetrek Facebook page](#) is now live; do please pay us a visit!

Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	February			
			13	14	15	16
1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓			✓
2	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	✓		2	10
3	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>			11	
4	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	King Eider	<i>Somateria spectabilis</i>		1	1	
6	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>	2		3	
8	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>			1	
9	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	2	5	12	
10	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>		✓	✓	
12	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	
13	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
14	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>		2	11	
15	Gyrfalcon	<i>Falco rusticolus</i>	1			
16	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		✓	✓	
17	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>	✓	100	200+	
18	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>		✓	✓	
19	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓	✓	
20	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus canus</i>			1	
21	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
22	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
23	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>	✓	✓	✓	
24	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		✓	✓	✓
25	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>		✓		
26	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>		✓		
27	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>	2	3	2	
28	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>	5			
29	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	
30	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
31	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>			30	

Mammals

1	Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		1	1	
2	Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>		1	6	
3	Killer Whale	<i>Orcinus orca</i>	6	45	25	