

# Iceland – Killer Whales & The Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour Report

18 - 22 February 2013

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Orca hunting



Orca Female



Orca Male



Glaucous Gull with Herring

Report & images compiled by Malcolm Stott



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## Day 1

**Monday 18th February**

Heathrow – Northern Light Inn; Weather details: Overcast, wind 4m/s, temp 5<sup>0</sup>C

The UK flight touched down at Keflavik where Malcolm was there to meet and greet us. We were soon on board the bus for the brief journey to the Northern Light Inn and before you could say ‘Eyjafjallajökull’ most were blissfully soaking in the warm geo-thermal waters of the unique Blue Lagoon.

After a delicious fish supper, Malcolm gave a tour briefing, setting out the programme for the next few days, followed by a ‘camera clinic’ advising how to take good images of the northern lights. With little chance of the aurora making an appearance tonight we retired to our rooms full of anticipation of the days ahead.

## Day 2

**Tuesday 19th February**

Northern Light Inn – Sykkishólmur; Weather details; Overcast with winds gusting 16m/s, temp 6<sup>0</sup>C

This morning we departed the Northern Light Inn and travelled through a bewildering landscape of ancient lava-fields concealed by centuries of grey mosses *Racomitrium lanuginosum*. Leaving the modern city of Reykjavik we soon arrived at the Hvalfjörður tunnel an impressive feat of engineering (6km long and 0.6km in depth), giving an illusion that you were disappearing deep into the bowls of the earth, perhaps as Jules Verne imagined in his classic novel, ‘Journey to the Centre of the Earth’ and centred on Snæfellsjökull. There came a point when we had to make a decision, to take the much longer coast road or cut across the mountain pass. Since the wind wasn’t a significant factor the decision was unanimous on taking the more scenic coastal road. Veiled in low cloud the scenery was somewhat muted and without delays for photographic stops we soon arrived at Ólafsvik for a welcomed coffee and comfort break.

On the outskirts of town we stopped briefly to sort through a flock of ‘white-winged’ gulls, learning the subtle identification features that separate Iceland from Glaucous Gulls. We also found our first Harlequins and with a telescope we managed some good views. In Grundarfjörður we made our way down to the harbour for a sneak preview of ‘Láki’ the ship we would be sailing on during the Orca trips before continuing onto Stykkishólmur.

With day light rapidly fading we wasted little time before arriving at Kolgrafafjörður where we were greeted with a very unpleasant odour of rotten fish; this was the scene of an earlier catastrophe when 30,000 tons of Herring perished due to the lack of oxygenate water reaching the inner fjord. This sudden bonanza of Herring attracted many thousands of Fulmars to gather in a feeding frenzy. And we soon had our first glimpse of the distinctive, black dorsal fin of Orca with more joining the party and heading our way. In total we had at least 16 individuals feeding and our excitement was bubbling, but unfortunately we had to leave all this activity.

In the dying embers of day-light we paused briefly at Hraunfjörður to look for White-tailed Eagles, but on this occasion we didn’t find any. By the time we arrived in Stykkishólmur day-light was almost gone, but we did manage a quick visit to the harbour before the hotel. At the hotel we took a familiarisation walk around the grounds to note any obstacles under-foot that may be hazardous in our excitement and the darkness should the northern lights make an appearance. After a delicious supper of traditional Icelandic lamb we gathered in the bar for the daily-log and with little chance of witnessing the aurora this evening, we retired to our rooms.

## Day 3

## Wednesday 20th February

Snæfellsnes Peninsula: Weather details; Mainly overcast, light rain winds of 5m/s temp 6°C

We left Stykkishólmur just as day was breaking for the short journey to Grundarfjörður. At the harbour we twisted limbs in all manner of contortions to climb into our thermal-suits and with controllable exuberance boarded the ship. We found no Orca in Grundarfjörður, so we sailed round the peninsula into Kolgrafafjörður, a smaller fjord further north. Just before negotiating the tricky entrance we encountered a pod of 5 Orcas and followed them into the fjord, having wonderful views along the way. Once inside fjord we found plenty more, mostly engaged in hunting activities; wave after wave of Orca, three and four abreast pushing herring towards where the matriarch controlled activities. The feeding frenzy was amazing to watch and many thousands of gulls, even a few Gannets also joined the feeding bonanza. Following an hour or so of feeding activity they came to rest and began socialising and were very approachable giving some incredible close views This was an amazing experience and usually only witnessed on TV! By late morning brilliant sunshine highlighted the snow-covered mountains making a spectacular backdrop to an incredible day with some of the most enigmatic creatures on earth. After 3.5 hours we sailed back to Gundarfjörður we enjoyed hot chocolate and doughnut twists.

After a late lunch by the sea wall and following a quick walk around the harbour doing a little bird-watching, we returned to Stykkishólmur. At Kolgrafafjörður we could see evidence of the massive clean-up operations following the herring catastrophe. Again we paused at Hraunfjörður to search for White-tailed Eagle, but only saw distant views of at least 3 birds soaring very high before disappearing into low cloud. We eventually arrived back at the hotel in plenty of time to enjoy a walk down to the harbour before darkness fell. Evening supper of local produce fresh mussels and smoked salmon was delicious before retiring to the bar for the daily-log and preview our images of the Orcas. Low cloud reduced the chance of any visible aurora activity this evening...

## Day 4

Thursday 21st February

Snæfellsnes Peninsula; Weather details; Overcast, light rain, winds 5m/s, temp 7°C

We arrived at Hraunfjörður early this morning and started scanning the landscape in a search for White-tailed Eagles and didn't have long to wait. A bird was seen soaring over the mountain ridge and was soon joined by another 6; a great start to this morning!

At Kolgarfjörður we stopped briefly on the causeway to witness the unbelievable sight as thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of birds, mainly Fulmar and to a lesser extent Glaucous and Iceland Gulls, Kittiwakes and Lesser Black-backed Gulls were busily engaged in a feeding frenzy. Above the fjord the sky was full of gulls, falling like confetti from a giant white cloud as far as the eye could see; wow, this was an amazing spectacle!

Eventually we arrived at Grundarfjörður and quickly climbed into our thermal-suits before boarding the ship. This morning the Orcas had been seen in Grundarfjörður, so no need to sail around the headland! With no time at all we had located a pod busily engaged in feeding activities. We approached the group with caution and soon found ourselves right in the middle of all the action. Looking beyond the immediate pod we followed another 4 or 5 other pods could be seen and all engaged in feeding judging by the clouds of gulls in attendance. The actual number of birds present was very difficult to estimate, simply because there were so many; easily tens of thousands present in Grundarfjörður alone! Our little ship bobbed amongst all this dramatic action and we had a grandstand seat as wave after wave of Orca passed close-by herding shoals of Herring before the distinctive tail-slapping signalled a free-for-all, and aggressive gulls fell from the sky to join the feeding frenzy – wow, this was really something special and we felt very privileged to witness such a phenomenon! The clarity of the water even allowed us to see them pass beneath the ship and amongst the 60 or so Orca present we frequently had sightings of a very young individual, its 'white-patches' still a yellow-pink colour suggesting it was less than a year old.

All too soon hot chocolate and doughnut twists were being served indicating it was time to return to the harbour. After a quick comfort stop we had lunch at a view point, on the fringe of town, over-looking the shore. Next we travelled onto Ólafsvik where low cloud shrouded the shield volcano and deprived us of its splendour. During the drive back we concentrated on finding a Gyr Falcon and our efforts came to fruition when we located a large, grey female perched patiently on a post by the causeway at Kolgarfjörður allowing some marvellous views through the telescope.

Again, like this morning, we paused at Hraunfjörður and searched the landscape for White-tailed Eagle. An eagle was found perched on a distant ridge and through the telescope we all had some reasonable views of this majestic bird before we returned to Stykkishólmur. On the outskirts of town we visited a wooded area to look for Ptarmigan and although we found none, some had good views of a male Gyr Falcon before returning to the hotel. After supper, and with little optimism of the Northern Lights happening on our last night, we held the daily-log before retiring to pack and prepare for an early start the following morning.

## Day 5

Friday 22nd February

Stykkishólmur - Keflavik Airport; Weather details; Overcast, light rain, winds 8m/s gusting to 20m/s and temp 7°C

We left Stykkishólmur still slumbering in the morning darkness as we made an early start on our return journey back to Keflavik. By the time we had reached Borgarnes and stopped for coffee dawn was just about breaking. Since we had made fairly good progress by the time we arrived at the Hvalfjörður tunnel, Malcolm suggested a brief city tour. We visited 'Old Town' Reykjavik, first the impressive church, Hallgrímskirkja that dominates the city skyline before arriving at the harbour and the striking new opera house Harpa.

Back on the Reykjanes Peninsula we had a brief comfort stop at the Blue Lagoon before going on to visit Gunnahver and the 'Bridge between Two Continents' eventually arriving at Keflavik airport for our onward flight to the UK.

**Summary** – There is nothing more predictable in nature than its unpredictability! So, we may not have had the best of weather, the dense cloud conspired against one of our main objectives of seeing the northern lights, but we did manage a spectacular time with the large numbers of Orca, tens of thousands of gulls, 8 White-tailed Eagles and that superb Gyr Falcon just to mention a few wildlife moments!

I sincerely hope you can now share a little of my enthusiasm for this amazing land and that one day you may return to experience more of the wonders Iceland can offer on another Naturetrek tour.

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## Species List

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	February				
			18	19	20	21	22
1	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmaris glacialis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Gannet	<i>Sula bassana</i>			✓	✓	
3	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		6	10	20	
4	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>			✓	✓	
5	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus Cygnus</i>		24	12	20	
6	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓				✓
7	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>					✓
19	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>		6			
11	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyernalis</i>		10	3		
12	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		1		4	
13	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>			3	8	
14	Gyr Falcon	<i>Falco Rusticus</i>		1		2	
15	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegas</i>			✓	✓	
16	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>		40	150	50	
17	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>			✓	✓	
18	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		6	2	6	
19	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
20	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
21	Greater Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
22	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus graellsii</i>		2	✓	✓	3
23	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>			2		
24	Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>		3	5		
25	Winter Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			1		
26	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>					2
27	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
28	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
29	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>		5			

## Mammals

1	Orca	<i>Orcinus orca</i>		18	70	60	
2	White-beaked Dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus albirostris</i>			2		
3	Atlantic Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		1	20	16	