

Iceland – Killer Whales & The Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour Report

23 - 27 February 2013



Orcas from the causeway at Kolgrafafjörður



Harlequin Ducks



American Wigeon

Report compiled by Malcolm Stott
Orca images courtesy of Steve Davies, ducks by Malcolm Stott



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Day 1

Saturday 23rd February

Heathrow – Northern Light Inn; Weather details: Overcast, wind 5m/s, temp 6⁰C

The UK flight touched down at Keflavik where Malcolm was waiting to greet and meet everyone. We were soon on board the bus for the brief journey to the Northern Light Inn. After a delicious supper, most simply chilled-out in the bar, while others enjoyed the experience of the geo-thermal waters of the unique Blue Lagoon.

Day 2

Sunday 24th February

Northern Light Inn – Sykkishólmur; Weather details; Light rain am, sunny periods pm with winds gusting 8m/s, temp 6⁰C

We departed the Northern Light Inn and headed back to Keflavik this morning where Malcolm had seen two American Wigeon the previous day. Although it didn't take long to locate them the weather was rather inclement, so we quickly continued on our journey. We travelled along the barren Reykjanes Peninsula through ancient lava fields concealed by centuries old grey mosses *Racomitrium lanuginosum*. Arriving in the modern capital we first visited Hallgrímskirkja, the impressive church that dominates the city skyline before driving passed Harpa the spectacular new 'glass' opera house by the harbour. On leaving 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 the shield volcano, Snæfellsjökull. Our lunch stop at Hofstaðaskogur was timed to perfection, the rain had stopped and the sun came out and two Ptarmigan also obliged. With inclement weather returning there seemed little point to be gained in taking the coastal route, so we decided on the shorter mountain road to Grundarfjörður.

When we stopped on the edge of town the sea appeared calm and we could see Láki, the ship we would be sailing on, out in the fjord with about 5 or 6 orcas surfacing round her. Next we visited the harbour and saw hundreds of Eiders, but sadly no King Eider amongst them! A few Long-tail Ducks and 2 Harlequins were also present along with numerous Glaucous and Iceland Gulls. On leaving town Debbie noticed a female Gyr Falcon sitting on a fence post. Sadly, what with the trailer in tow and double white lines on the road, manoeuvring and parking proved difficult to get good views of this the largest falcon in the world!

Pressing onto Stykkishólmur we paused briefly at Folgrafafjörður where there was a strong, unpleasant odour of rotten fish. Malcolm explained that in recent weeks two incidents involving about 60,000 tons of herring perished here, the cause for such a high mortality of fish was attributed to the huge numbers present in the inner fjord resulting in a rapid depletion of oxygenated water compounded by the slow rate it was being replenished. To put this incident into some kind of perspective, Iceland's total fishing quota for herring this winter was 62,000 tons! Although the majority of dead fish were being removed for burial in an attempt to avoid botulism and the equally potential disaster to birds, particularly eagles, contaminating their feathers with any oily by-product from decaying fish while feeding, the stench lingered in the air and served as a poignant reminder to the catastrophe.

Next we arrived at Hraunfjörður where many White-tailed Eagles had been seen earlier and we didn't have long to wait before an immature eagle soon appeared soaring through the landscape. By now the weather had deteriorated further and low cloud began to veil the mountains. Continuing with our journey to Stykkishólmur we saw another Gyr Falcon perched on a nearby hillock on the edge of town. We called at the harbour first before arriving at the hotel where Malcolm suggested we walked around outside to familiarise with conditions under-foot, so we could be aware any obstacles that may be hazardous in the excitement and darkness, should any celestial light activity. There was plenty of time to relax and unwind from the long journey before a delicious supper of Icelandic lamb. After dinner we gathered in the bar area for the customary daily-log and briefing. The weather forecast predicted total cloud-cover all night, so with little optimism of any northern lights be visible tonight we retired.

Day 3

Monday 25th February

Snæfellsnes Peninsula; Weather details; Wet and wild, winds of 12m/s temp 7°C

Our first stop after leaving Stykkishólmur this morning was by Hraunfjörður and without too much effort we managed good views of an immature White-tailed Eagle. Next we briefly stopped at Grundarfjörður before continuing onto Ólafsvik on the off-chance the shield volcano may be viewable. Half-way between the two communities we managed to see a beautiful Arctic Fox, this particular individual was of the 'Blue' colour morph and much scarcer in Iceland. We watched the fox and the fox watched us for 10 minutes or so before it disappeared into the landscape. This was a real bonus and the only one seen on any tours so far, how lucky we were!

On the outskirts of Ólafsvik we stopped at a cliff-top parking area to view the shield volcano - unfortunately it was wrapped in low-cloud denying us the opportunity of its splendour. From the cliff-top we looked for Harlequins on the sea below and managed to find a pair amongst the rafts of Eiders before it was time to leave.

It was almost midday by now and time to return to Grundarfjörður where we had lunch by the sea wall while waiting for news of our Orca sailing. A small group of Harlequins, a flock of Purple Sandpiper and the handsome male Eider Drakes, freshly moulted into full breeding plumage, were all present close-by giving exceptional views and a good photographic opportunity. It was 12:45pm by the time we arrived at the quay and the ship was just arriving at her moorings, but the news was not good. Apparently the weather was too rough to sail right now, but the captain would reassess the situation at 2pm. A little disappointed we had a short walk or did a bit of local bird-watching before arriving back at the quay an hour later to receive news that the weather showed little signs of improvement, not what we wanted to hear! Malcolm made further enquiries into the possibilities of a sailing later should there be any dramatic change in the weather conditions, and was told they would keep all possibilities under review.

With our spirits and expectations at a low-ebb we headed out of town, but before we had travelled far Malcolm received a call and was told a small 'weather window' may potentially develop around 4pm so we decided on returning back to Kolgrafafjörður to wait and look for orca from land. Before long we saw the distinctive black dorsal fins of orca in the distance and we also had reasonable views of 3 adult eagles soaring above the fjord. The orcas were clearly in hunting mode, we could see them herding the shoals of herring followed by great tail-splashes as they stunned the fish. For some the sight of an orca breaching caused great excitement, pity it wasn't much closer and more of us managed to see it! We watched the activities of 20-30 orcas for 30 minutes or so before the tension was too much to bear, so we returned to Grundarfjörður, more in hope than anything else, to see if there would be a sailing today? Sadly, the news wasn't good, the probable 'weather-window' never materialised, so sailing in the current conditions was deemed unsafe by the captain. Feeling a little down-hearted we decided to return to Stykkishólmur and hoped for better sailing conditions tomorrow!

After supper we made our way through to the bar area where we held the daily-log and given the latest weather forecast of unbroken cloud-cover, any prospects of seeing the northern lights this evening were not good! Having said he would check the computer regularly for weather updates and would alert everyone should the situation change, Malcolm suggested we retired. Sadly there was no change in the weather!

Day 4

Tuesday 26th February

Snæfellsnes Peninsula; Weather details; Overcast, light rain with a brief sunny period, winds 9m/s, temp 7°C

We had time for a leisurely breakfast this morning while we waited for news regarding the orca sailing. Finally, word arrived that the weather looked good for a sailing at 11:30am, so we decided on a stroll down town and coffee before departing for Grundarfjörður. The only notable sighting on our journey this morning was that of a magnificent White-tailed Eagle seen flying very low on the edge of Stykkishólmur.

At the harbour we enthusiastically dressed into our thermal-suits and boarded the ship. Although the strong winds created a swell against the tide, the sailing was not too unpleasant. We sailed along the north shore of the fjord to its outer limits scanning the horizon for orca and to return in a large loop via the southern shores, a trip of 2 hours with no signs of the distinctive tall, black dorsal fins of orca! Before we left the harbour Malcolm arranged an extra sailing later in the day should any orca arrive in the fjord.

After lunch we revisited Kolgrafafjörður, being a good and convenient place to look for orca should we have any opportunity for another sailing at short notice later this afternoon. We positioned ourselves on the beach from where we could see several killer whales in the fjord, at least two pods containing 20 or so individuals. At the start all the activity was some distance away, although after a while a few individuals approached where the main current was flowing through the causeway and within 300 metres from our position to give some reasonable views. We watched the activity for over an hour before deciding to return to Grundarfjörður for an update of any possibility of a sailing. Any hopes we may have had were dashed when Malcolm received a call to say no orca had been seen on the afternoon sailing either; again disappointing news! It was now getting quite late in the afternoon and with few alternatives we decided on returning to Stykkishólmur. Our approach into town was greeted with views of another sighting of White-tailed Eagle similar to that of this morning.

Over supper, what little clear sky there had been during the evening slowly disappeared and the weather forecast predicted snow! However, being optimistic some keeping vigilance on the night-sky from the dining room window and Malcolm keep an eye on the weather patterns on the computer, just in case something miraculous would happen! One by one we eventually all retired to our rooms to pack and prepare for an early start the next morning.

Day 5

Wednesday 27th February

Stykkishólmur - Keflavik Airport; Weather details; Overcast, light rain, wind 12m/s, gusting to 20m/s, and temp 7°C

We left Stykkishólmur still slumbering in the morning darkness as we made an early start for our journey back to Keflavik. By the time we arrived at the Hvalfjörður tunnel we had made good progress, so Malcolm suggested taking a detour via Þingvellir and visiting, perhaps Iceland's most iconic landscape and the impressive stretching point of the two tectonic plates and chance our luck with Barrow's Goldeneye. Although our stop at the viewing platform was brief, we could appreciate the enormity of the geological feature that stretched across the rift below. We drove across the rift valley cover in birch and willow scrub and where stretch-marks in the form of great fissures were obvious evidence to the ground movement. We checked the River Sog as we passed-by, but didn't manage to see any Barrow's Goldeneye. Next we arrived at Hverigerði, the market garden town, where we stopped for coffee and witnessed the geological fault that nearly 'under-mined' the community centre during the 1995 earthquake.

Our drive along the new coastal road to Grindavik was impressive; the Atlantic was wild with enormous white-topped rollers crashing onto the black sands in a dramatic contrast of colour. Passing through Grindavik we visited the unsettled landscape at Gunnhver. This unworldly and surreal scenery appeared desolate yet colourful with yellow, pink and brown pastel hues and where steam escaped from hissing fumaroles in giant white plumes and the earth's crust bubbled and gurgled in a series of boiling sulphuric-mud holes and the odour sulphurous gasses lingered. With no time to walk the 'Bridge between Two Continents' we soon arrived at Keflavik airport. Check-in was empty and after saying our farewells it was upstairs through security and in to the departure lounge for a little retail therapy before our onward flight to the UK.

Summary – There is nothing more predictable in nature than its unpredictability! So we were unlucky in not having the best of weather; which conspired against one of our main objectives of seeing the northern lights and the unseasonal strong winds and unfortunate herring catastrophe sadly hindered our Orca experience, but we did have some wonderful and memorable wildlife moments:- a ‘blue morph’ Arctic Fox, the first of any trip so far, reasonable views of Orcas hunting/feeding from the causeway and many White-tailed Eagles plus Gyr Falcons to select a few! I sincerely hope your experience was a good one, and that one day you will return to enjoy more of this amazing land and its wildlife...

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Northern Fulmars by Malcolm Stott

Species List

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	February				
			23	24	25	26	27
1	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmaris glacialis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		10		2	
3	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus Cygnus</i>		100	5	2	5
5	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓			20
6	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		6			
8	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>		2	15		3
10	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyernalis</i>		6	2		
11	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>					2
12	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		3	9	12	
13	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>		1	4	3	
14	Gyr Falcon	<i>Falco Rusticus</i>		2	1	1	3
15	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegas</i>		✓	✓	✓	
16	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		10			
17	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>		30	150	30	
18	Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>			14		
19	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>				✓	
20	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>			4	12	
21	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
22	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucooides</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
23	Greater Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>				2	
24	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus graellsii</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
25	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>		6	3	4	
26	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
27	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Mammals

1	Arctic Fox	<i>Alopex lagopus</i>			1		
2	Orca	<i>Orcinus orca</i>		6	30	20	
3	Atlantic Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		20	5	1	