

Iceland – Killer Whales & The Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour Report

28 February - 4 March 2013



Amazing northern lights



Male King Eider



Grundarfjörður



Kirkjufell

Report & images compiled by Malcolm Stott



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Nature's Magical Light Show

The northern lights are elementary particle physics, superstition, mythology and folklore come to life. Throughout the ages they have filled people with wonder and fear; they have challenged and inspired scientists and artists. But while scientific knowledge of the 21st century may offer us a cold and precise explanation of this magnificent phenomenon, we should never cease to relish the fascinating tales of old and enjoy the natural beauty and magic of the northern lights.

To be lucky enough to see the aurora is an unforgettable experience, since no pen can draw it, no colours can paint it and no words can adequately describe it in all its magnificence. Auroras are caused by a vast super-heated, super-sonic collection of smashed atoms, known as the solar wind that enters the earth's upper atmosphere where they collide with oxygen and nitrogen atoms. These collisions usually take place between 60 – 300 kilometres above ground, causing the oxygen and nitrogen atoms to become electrically excited and to emit light (fluorescent lights and televisions operate in much the same way). The result is a dazzling dance of green, blue, white and red light in the sky, but seeing the aurora borealis on any given night is never guaranteed.

Day 1

Thursday 28th February

Heathrow – Northern Light Inn; Weather details: Overcast, wind 4m/s, temp 7⁰C

The UK flights touched down at Keflavik where Malcolm was on hand to greet and meet us. We were soon on board the bus for the brief journey to the Northern Light Inn. And before you could say 'Eyjafjallajökull' we were blissfully relaxing in the warm geo-thermal waters of the unique Blue Lagoon, the non-bathers simply chilled-out in the comfort of the hotel.

After supper Malcolm gave a tour briefing on what we might expect over the next few days before we headed upstairs to the observatory for guidance on how to take good images of the northern lights. With little chance of testing our newly gained knowledge tonight, we retired to our rooms full of anticipation of the days ahead.

Day 2

Friday 1st March

Northern Light Inn – Stykkishólmur: Weather details; Overcast, light rain am, sunny periods pm, wind 8m/s, temp 7°C

We departed the Northern Light Inn and headed back towards Keflavik, stopping at some wetlands on the edge of town we scanned through the assembled wildfowl and it didn't take long to find the two American Wigeon. Starting our journey to Stykkishólmur we first travelled along the barren Reykjanes Peninsula where ancient lava fields were concealed in soft grey mosses, *Racomitrium lanuginosum*. Taking advantage of the new ring-road around the capital, we soon left the modern high-rise skyline of Reykjavik and headed out into the countryside. The Hvalfjörður tunnel was an impressive feat of engineering (6km long and 0.6km in depth) giving the illusion of disappearing deep into the bowls of the earth, perhaps as Jules Verne imagined his classic novel, 'Journey to the Centre of the Earth', centred on the shield volcano, Snæfellsjökull.

Once on the Snæfellsnes Peninsula we stopped by a small wooded area for lunch and it was timed to perfection, the rain stopped and we enjoyed a spell of sunshine. We continued on the steep mountain road to Grundarfjörður keeping a keen-eye open for Arctic Fox along the way, but saw none on this occasion. We stopped by the seawall in Grundarfjörður and had good views of our first Harlequin Ducks. Sifting through the large assembly of gulls it didn't take long to find both Iceland and Glaucous Gulls, the former perhaps twice as numerous as the later. Patiently working through the huge Eider rafts we eventually managed to find the elusive King Eider and had some brilliant views of this rare vagrant to Icelandic waters. Before leaving town we called at the harbour for a sneak preview of Láki, the ship we will be sailing on during our Orca trips.

We had a leisurely drive to Stykkishólmur, looking for Gyr Falcons and White-tailed Eagles, but saw none en-route before stopping briefly at Folgrafafjörður. The unpleasant odour of rotten fish was strong and Malcolm explained the reason. In two recent incidents about 60,000 tons of herring perished here, the cause of such a high mortality of fish was attributed to two factors, first the huge numbers of herring present coupled with the rapid depletion of oxygenated water caused by its slow replenishment rate, due to the seas restrictive flow into the inner fjord after the construction of the new causeway. To put some kind of perspective on the scale of the incident, Iceland's total quota for herring this winter was 62,000 tons! In an attempt to avoid botulism and the equally potential disaster to birds contaminating their feathers with any oily bi-product while feeding, the majority of dead fish had been removed for burial. However, the stench lingered and served as a poignant reminder as to the catastrophe.

At Stykkishólmur we briefly visited to harbour before arriving at our hotel and before checking-in Malcolm suggested we walked the short distance from behind the hotel to the lobby so we were familiar with any obstacles under-foot that may be hazardous in the excitement and darkness should the aurora show tonight. Conditions were looking good for the aurora this evening, so after a delicious Icelandic lamb supper we prepared to depart for a night out under the stars to see if we could see the elusive northern lights. This was likely to be our best opportunity with little cloud and a high aurora activity level predicted!

With this in mind Malcolm suggested returning to Grundarfjörður and that the impressive Kirkjufell would provide an ideal foreground with plenty of sky on view. Even before we had reached the outskirts of Stykkishölmur the ethereal lights were evident in the night-sky; wands of vivid green celestial light dancing amongst the stars in the dark-velvet of night, much to our delight. By the time we arrived at Kirkjufell the luminescence had increased its intensity and the aurora began its magic, swirling, twisting and racing through the stars (with an accompaniment of noisy Oystercatcher!).

By 11:30pm the aurora had quietened, so we took this opportunity to relocate our position and travelled part-way back to Stykkishölmur, frequently checking on the sky for further signs of activity. About halfway on our return journey the sky appeared to erupt in celestial luminescence, shafts of lights stretched through the night-sky, moving in huge waves. Wow, this display was in a very different league to the one earlier; it was much more vivid, colourful and animated. We pulled into side road and watched mesmerised as sheets of vivid colours arced through the starry-sky, pulsating and swirling, falling in colourful curtains with crimson fringes and hints of violet. Exactly the experience we had hoped for and now we were living the dream! This was a very magical and a moving experience, the 'Tricky Lady' finally revealed herself in all her grandeur. We stayed transfixed for an hour or more until the performance finally calmed. It was 1:30am in the morning by the time we returned to the warmth of our hotel where we retired feeling very privileged to have seen such a fascinating natural phenomenon!

Day 3

Saturday 2nd March

Snæfellsnes Peninsula; Weather details; Wet with snow flurries, winds of 7m/s temp 3°C

We watched the beautiful cerise sunrise through the breakfast room window this morning, casting a wonderful pink tint to the mountain. Still recovering from a fantastic night we had a leisurely start before departing the hotel to travel the short distance back to Grundarfjörður in time for the orca sailing. As we reached the town Malcolm received a call to say the sailing had been delayed until 2:00pm when the weather was forecast to be better, so we had time for a short walk to a nearby waterfall and look for Arctic Fox over lunch.

Returning to Grundarfjörður, the initial news wasn't good; apparently the orca had left the fjord, but had been relocated in Folgrafafjörður. Managing all kinds of contortions we climbed into our thermal-suits and boarded 'Láki' and were soon sailing through snow-flurries around the headland into Folgrafafjörður. Some 90-minutes later we had located the orca, they were busily feeding beneath huge white clouds of frenzied gulls falling from the sky like confetti and squabbling over every floating herring! We stayed close to the 4 or 5 pods present for an hour or so, each contained 8 or 12 individuals. Including other pods seen in the distance, there were 50 - 70 individuals present in the fjord this afternoon. It was a magical experience and one we will not forget in a hurry! By the time we returned to the harbour it was 6:20pm and with supper due in 10 minutes we wasted little time changing and returning to the hotel. We retired to the bar area after dinner for the daily-log and retired early with little chance of the northern lights this evening.

Day 4

Sunday 3rd March

Snæfellsnes Peninsula: Weather details; Sunny, snow flurries mid-afternoon, evening sun, wind 4m/s, temp -6°C

A real change in the weather this morning with temperatures dropping to a more normal -6°C! We enjoyed a lovely wintry sunrise during the drive to Grundarfjörður for our second orca sailing. We were well-accustomed by now to the procedures of thermal-suits, so it didn't take long and we were soon on board 'Láki' heading out into the fjord. It was a beautiful morning for the sailing, the sun highlighting the mountains making the scenery look both dramatic and spectacular. We found our first orcas, a pod of 7 or 8 busily feeding and very approachable, giving some amazing views. We encountered several pods this morning during the 2-hour sailing and saw them hunting, feeding and at resting, with some individuals just metres from the ship! After hot chocolate and a doughnut twist, the return journey to harbour was quite dramatic in the snow blizzard! The weather, the scenery and the orcas made a truly magical experience.

Despite the poor visibility, we decided to have lunch by the Arctic Fox site but didn't manage to see any foxes. We returned to Grundarfjörður and visited the sea wall where we found 6 Harlequins and a very large raft of Eiders, but we could find the King Eider on this occasion. Next we returned to Kolgarfajörður to try our luck with finding a Gyr Falcon, but failed so we returned to Stykkishólmur. On the outskirts of town we visited a plantation where a male Gyr Falcon was known to hunt Starlings as they came into roost. Again we saw nothing but, perhaps we were a little too early? We did, however, manage to add Wren and Redwing to the bird list before returning to the hotel.

After a welcome hot drink most set out to enjoy the remaining 2 hours of daylight, before the arctic night. After supper the night-sky looked promising, so we disappeared to our rooms to collect warm clothing and cameras before a night-drive to Grundarfjörður in search of the northern lights. However, incoming snow flurries put a premature end to any attempts to seeing the aurora tonight, so we returned to Stykkishólmur. The night drive wasn't a complete waste we did managed to see an Arctic Fox in its thick, white winter-coat running by the side of the road!

Day 5

Monday 4th March

Stykkishólmur - Keflavik Airport: Weather details; Overcast, snow showers, wind 20m/s and temp -6°C

We left Stykkishólmur still slumbering in the morning darkness as we made an early start for our journey back to Keflavik. Despite strong winds and near 'white-out' conditions we had made good progress by the time we arrived at the Hvalfjörður tunnel, so Malcolm suggested taking a detour via Þingvellir and the River Sog to see, perhaps Iceland's most iconic landscape and to chance our luck with Barrow's Goldeneye. Our stop at the viewing platform was cold, windy and brief, but long enough to grasp the enormity of the geological feature before arriving by the river where we did manage to find a pair of Barrow's Goldeneye. Further down the river we had fantastic views of an immature White-tailed Eagle flying very low close to the road.

We called at the market garden town Hverigerði for coffee and a comfort stop before taking the new coast road to Grindavik. The Atlantic was wild, enormous white-topped rollers crashing onto the black sands in a contrast of colour. Passing through Grindavik we visited the unsettled landscape of Gunnhver. The unworldly scenery was surreal and desolate yet colourful with yellow, pink and brown hues where steam escaped from hissing fumaroles in giant white plumes and the earth's crust bubbled and gurgled in a series of boiling mud-holes and the odour of sulphurous gasses lingered in the air.

With no time to walk the 'Bridge between Two Continents' we arrived at Keflavik airport for our onward flight to the UK.

On a personal note, I sincerely hope you can now share a little of my enthusiasm for this amazing land and its wildlife 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/March				
			28	1	2	3	4
1	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellarta</i>			4		
2	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmaris glacialis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Gannet	<i>Sula bassana</i>			1		
4	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		1	4	6	
5	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	
6	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus Cygnus</i>		100		2	6
7	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓			24
8	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	King Eider	<i>Somateria spectabilis</i>		1			
10	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>		10		6	2
12	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyernalis</i>		1	2		
13	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islansica</i>					2
14	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		6	4		2
15	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>		7	1		1
16	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>			1		
17	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegas</i>		✓	✓	✓	
18	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritime</i>		1	24		
19	Redshank	<i>Tringa tetanus</i>				6	
20	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>		1	✓	✓	
21	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		✓	✓	6	
22	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>		✓	✓	✓	6
23	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>		✓	✓	✓	
24	Greater Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		4	5	20	
25	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus graellsii</i>		3	5	5	
26	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>			1		
27	Brünnich's Guillemot	<i>Uria lomvia</i>			2		
28	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>		1	6		
29	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>				1	
30	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>				2	
31	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
32	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
33	Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>			2		
34	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>			1	200	

Mammals

1	Arctic Fox	<i>Alopex lagopus</i>				1	
2	Orca	<i>Orcinus orca</i>			30	20	
3	White-beaked Dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus albirostris</i>					
4	Atlantic Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>			5	5	
5	Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>		4	6	6	