

Iceland – Killer Whales & The Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour report

13 – 17 March 2014



Folgarfarfjörður



Causeway Bridge



Harlequin Duck



Killer Whale from bridge

Report & Images compiled by Malcolm Stott



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Day 1

Thursday 13th March

Heathrow – Northern Light Inn

Weather details: Sunny Wind SE 2 Temp 3⁰C

Our flight from the UK touched down at Keflavik where Malcolm was waiting to greet us in the arrivals hall. Once on board it was a 20-minute drive to the aptly named Northern Light Inn. Thirty minutes later some were blissfully soaking in the geo-thermal waters of the Blue Lagoon before dinner.

Following convivial conversation over a delicious Icelandic supper, Malcolm gave a tour briefing setting out the programme for the next few days. Next we relocated to the more comfortable lounge where we received instructions on camera settings and good practice techniques on how to take good northern light images. With total cloud-cover limiting any chance of seeing the northern lights tonight we retired to our cosy rooms full of anticipation of the days ahead.

Day 2

Friday 14th March

Northern Light Inn – Stykkishólmur (385km)

Weather details; Overcast with some brighter periods, wind NW 2m/s and temp -2⁰C

This morning we departed the cosy Northern Light Inn bound for the diverse and magical landscape dominated by the Snæfellsjökull Glacier. The glacier is considered to be one of the most beautiful mountains in Iceland and is believed to be one of seven main energy centres of the earth. Snæfellsjökull was also the setting for the classic novel by Jules Verne, 'Journey to the Centre of the Earth'.

On arrival at Hvalfjörður, it seemed as if we were to follow in the footsteps of Jules Verne as we seemingly disappeared into the bowels of earth through the new tunnel. Emerging on the north-side, the coastal scenery was amazing with tall majestic mountains veiled in a light covering of snow.

We made a brief stop by the estuary in Borgarnes for lunch then continued through the flat coastal plain where the sublime light dictated a brief stop to photograph a group of Icelandic Horses. Next we journeyed over the high mountain pass before descending onto the north coast. The late afternoon light was glorious, so after several photogenic stops we finally arrived in Grundarfjörður.

Passing through the small town Malcolm turned off the main road and headed up a snow-covered track to a venue where we hoped to take Northern Light images that evening all-being-well. We had a short walk to familiarise ourselves with ground conditions in daylight first and assess conditions for later that evening should the aurora grace us with an appearance. Back in town we had an opportunity for a spell of bird-watching while Malcolm checked on sailing-time information regarding our whale-watching. This afternoon's whale trip was just returning to the tiny harbour, so keen to know exactly what they had seen we travelled the short distance to discover that they had indeed seen Orca. On the final leg of our journey to Stykkishólmur we stopped by the causeway bridge at Folgrafarfjörður to watch a pod of nine White-beaked Dolphins feeding or just playing.

Following a delicious dinner of traditional Icelandic Lamb we disappeared to our rooms to collect warm clothing and cameras and in optimistic mood decided being pro-active was perhaps our best chance of seeing the lights tonight and go in search of clear skies. We travelled as far as Oláfsvík and found 'thinner' cloud where the green glow was barely discernable, even by a camera sensor, so we called it a day and returned to the hotel by midnight.

Day 3

Saturday 15th March

Snæfellsnes Peninsula (136km)

Weather details; Generally overcast with strong winds WNW 10m/s temp 3°C

This morning we were greeted with storm-force winds and the news that our Orca sailing had been cancelled, so we reverted to plan B – watching the Orcas from the bridge on the causeway across Folgrafarfjörður. En route we paused briefly by Hraunsfjörður, where we had some very good views of both Common and Atlantic Grey Seals close to the causeway.

Arriving at Folgrafarfjörður we were greeted with clouds of gulls engaged in a feeding frenzy, where large gulls, including both Glaucous and Icelandic were plunge diving to catch Herring; this was an amazing sight! We enjoyed the spectacle of gulls feeding while we searched through the rafts of Eider hoping to find a 'King', but had to settle for a White-winged Scoter instead! We patiently waited for the Orcas to enter the inner fjord under the bridge, but were caught by surprise when a cry was heard 'the Orcas are coming!' They had already entered deep the inner fjord much earlier than expected, fed and were now about to leave for the open sea. Scrambling onto the bridge, even under the bridge for some, we had some spectacular, albeit brief views as the three males passed-by very close!

In jubilant mood we left the fjord and journeyed the short distance into Grundarfjörður to visit the super-market for a comfort stop and a warm cup of coffee. We had lunch by the seawall while looking for Harlequin Ducks and scanning the rafts of Eiders looking for their smaller, northern cousin. Although we found some very obliging Harlequins and flocks of Purple Sandpipers the 'King' still eluded us, so we drove as far as Oláfsvík enjoying the scenery bathed in low, late-afternoon light. On our return journey we briefly stopped by Folgrafarfjörður and found the pod of White-beaked Dolphins again.

We paused at Hraunfjörður to check if we could see any White-tailed Eagles. Although none were present roosting by the shores, we did see two eagles soaring very high. Before arriving at the hotel we visited the picturesque harbour in town. Follow dinner of succulent Icelandic lamb we opted to have the daily log in the lounge. With little, to no, prospects of any ethereal lights tonight we had time to sit and enjoy convivial conversation before retiring.

Day 4

Sunday 16th March

Snæfellsnes Peninsula (230km)

Weather details; Snow-showers & sunny periods from late am, wind W 9m/s and temp -2°C

Huge Atlantic rollers dissipating their energy on the small islands in Breidafjörður was not exactly what we wanted to see from the breakfast room this morning! So, it came as no surprise when Malcolm announced the Orca sailing had been cancelled for a second day! Down-hearted but certainly not too despondent we set off in a snow blizzard for Kolgrafafjörður expecting to catch the Orca on their way into the inner fjord. Again they were ahead of the game, but this time we were ready and in position when they passed under the bridge, giving some marvellous views, perhaps better than being on a boat! Although the wind reduced the chill factor considerably and we suffered snow-flurries, it was a great privilege to see and photograph these most charismatic creatures so close.

After a warming cup of coffee and a comfort stop in Grundarfjörður we journeyed onto the end of Snæfellsnes and had lunch by the church at Ingjaldshóll while waiting to see if the snow-flurries would stop and the cloud to lift long enough to gaze at the volcano made famous by Jules Verne. Wrapped in low cloud it kept its secrets! By late afternoon the light had improved a lot, so retracing our journey back to Stykkishólmur we stopped frequently to take photographs and capture images in our minds-eye.

With an expectation that the northern lights may put in an appearance this evening we returned to the hotel by 4pm to pack and prepare for an early departure to Reykjavik the next morning, expecting we were likely to be out late this evening. As it happened, the predicted break in cloud cover never materialised!

Day 5

Monday 17th March

Stykkishólmur - Keflavik Airport (380km)

Weather details; Cloudy with sunny spell, wind W5m/s and temp -4°C

We left Stykkishólmur still slumbering as we made an early start on our journey back to Keflavik. After crossing the mountain road we were presented with excellent views of an immature White-tailed Eagle that took flight from a rock close to the road. The rest of the journey was uneventful and on reaching Borgarnes we stopped for coffee and a leg stretch before continuing onto Mossfellbær, where we made a visit to the factory retail outlet store.

We made a brief tour of camera shops in Reykjavik, returning a battery charger borrowed earlier, before travelling along the Reykjanes Peninsula and Keflavik. With plenty of time before check-in we visited the geothermal hot temperature zone at Gunnuhver. In contrast the wind here was bitterly cold, so we quickly took some photos and were soon heading for one last stop, where the Mid-Atlantic Ridge is first evident on Iceland and visited the 'Bridge Between Two Continents'

Once at Keflavik airport we said our farewells departing in separate directions, some to collect a hire car to continue their Iceland adventure, some staying overnight while the majority headed airside for a little retail therapy before boarding the flight back to Heathrow.

There is nothing more predictable in nature than its unpredictability! So, we may not have had the best of weather, which conspired against our main objectives, but we did have some very remarkable views of Orca each day from the bridge. But for me, my lasting memory is watching the spectacular sight as clouds of gulls plunge-dived for Herring and so close to the causeway!

I 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 what Iceland can offer!

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Species Lists

Birds (H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	March				
			13	14	15	16	17
1	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmaris glacialis</i>	2	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Gannet	<i>Sula bassana</i>			12	6	
3	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		80	12	6	17
4	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>			200	200	
5	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus Cygnus</i>		120	10	2	4
6	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓			✓
7	Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>		3			
8	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓	✓	
9	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		30			
11	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>			13	5	
12	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyernalis</i>		12			
13	American White-winged Scoter	<i>Melanitta deglandi deglandi</i>			1	1	
14	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>					1
15	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		15	12	6	
16	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>			2		1
17	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>	1				
18	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		20	40	6	
19	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>		50	80	24	
20	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>			3	1	
21	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
22	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>		50	200	200	6
23	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>		75	300	300	4
24	Greater Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		12	✓	✓	2
25	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus graellsii</i>		3	✓	✓	1
26	Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>			1		
27	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>		1			
28	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		12	2	3	6
29	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	2	15	80	60	20
30	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
31	Redpoll	<i>Carduelis fammea</i>		15			
32	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>	35	120	150	50	12

Mammals

1	Orca	<i>Orcinus orca</i>			3	4	
2	White-beaked Dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus albirostris</i>		9	9	9	
3	Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>		5	2	1	
4	Atlantic Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		7	3	2	