

Iceland – Killer Whales & The Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour report

18 – 22 March 2014



Harlequin Duck



White-winged Scoter with Eider raft



White-tailed Eagle



Orca

Report & Images compiled by Malcolm Stott



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Day 1

Tuesday 18th March

Heathrow to Northern Light Inn: Weather details: sunny & 3⁰C

By late afternoon all tour participants had gathered at the Northern Light Inn where some opted for a bathe in the Blue Lagoon while other photographed Snow Bunting around the hotel.

The hotel had a rather novel location next to a modern geothermal power-plant and the world's only Carbon Recycling Methanol Plant. The latter is an experimental process that makes wood alcohol for blending with gasoline and bio-diesel fuels by extracting Carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. When combined with water and electricity, from the nearby geothermal power plant, it produces a carbon neutral source of liquid energy, making it the first of its kind in the world. The need to produce clean affordable fuels is generally agreed to be an urgent one, and renewable methanol may be a solution. The methanol produced by carbon recycling is economical, and works by combining hydrogen with carbon dioxide under low pressure and temperatures. Hydrogen is made by breaking apart water molecules with electricity. The only bio-product is oxygen. Water in Iceland, as implied by its name, is frozen in abundance. Methanol also has the benefit of being biodegradable, water-soluble, and easy to store safely.

After a delicious supper of 'wolf-fish' Malcolm gave us a tour briefing before we retired to a more comfortable venue in the hotel lounge where he explained techniques on how to get successful images of the northern lights. After an exhausted day of travel a nice comfortable bed was exactly what was needed and most retired early.

Day 2

Wednesday 19th March

Northern Light Inn – Stykkishólmur: Weather details: cloudy with some brighter periods. Temperature -2⁰C.

Heavy overnight snow presented us with a fairy-tale wintery landscape for our drive today, albeit a slow journey especially between the hotel and Thingvellir; only the yellow roadside post distinguished the snow-laden road from the rest of the landscape! After a quick stop in Selfoss to refuel, and for some the first Gyr Falcon, we continued

along snow-compacted roads to, perhaps the most iconic landmark in Iceland, Thingvellir National Park. Following a coffee stop at the information centre we had time to stretch our legs and walk to the Althing before Malcolm collected us from the upper car park by the Interpretive Centre. It was already past 1pm by now so we had lunch before continuing our drive west. After the impressive tunnel under Hvalfjörður we arrived in Borgarnes where we made a brief stop.

From here on, we enjoyed some spectacular landscapes; Snæfellsjökull glacier dominates the diverse and magical landscape of the peninsula. 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 is also the setting for the classic novel by Jules Verne, 'Journey to the Centre of the Earth'.

Before going to the hotel we first checked out Folgrafafjörður on the off-chance some Orcas may be present. Within minutes of our arrival we were watching a pod of 10 Orca, albeit it at a distance, and three White-tailed Eagles. The Orca were busy feeding so we decided to wait as long as possible to see if they would swim beneath the bridge, but the pod remained in the inner fjord. By 7pm we had no choice but to leave in anticipation of closer views in the coming days. Huge clouds of gulls were also present, feeding on the Herring by plunge-diving like Gannets.

Our Stykkishólmur hotel was located on top of a hill with a stunning view of Breiðafjörður Bay stretching out to the north and its many islands. This is an expansive and shallow bay, the largest area of shallow coastal water in Iceland and teeming with rich wildlife. The area has greater tides and tidal currents than elsewhere in the country and a staggering 2,500 or so islands. The area is one of the most important in Iceland (and the whole of the North Atlantic) for birdlife. It is characterised by birds which are wholly dependent on marine-life, and many of them nest in large colonies. The area holds two-thirds of the Icelandic White-tailed Eagle population and to the north perhaps the world's largest Razorbill colony is found on the Látrajarg bird cliffs to the north, while approximately one-third of the Common Eider population breeds here in Breiðafjörður.

Having checked in we only had time to deposit our luggage in the rooms before heading down to the restaurant for a traditional supper of Icelandic lamb. Following dinner we retired to the lounge and completed the daily log. With no break in the cloud cover and the Aurora strength at zero we retired to our rooms, but couldn't help keeping a cursory glimpse through the bedroom window just in case the ethereal lights did put on a show!

Day 3

Thursday 20th March

Snæfellsnes peninsula: Weather details: severe wind. Temperature 0°C

The predicted storm arrived with vengeance at 4am this morning, waking most of us as winds hammering on the bedroom windows! Unperturbed we set off after breakfast for the causeway with knowledge that all sailings had been cancelled. The road across the mountain was partly covered by snow drifts and caused some difficulties, but we eventually arrived at the causeway where the storm-force winds whipped up some mighty waves that reached across the road. This was no place to be, so after trying to rescue a grounded Fulmar we chose to head for the higher car park and gain an overview to see if any Orcas were in the inner fjord. After scanning the waters below there was little evidence that would suggest any Orcas were present, so we departed for Grundarfjörður.

The winds were violent, rocking the bus as we attempted to check the harbour, but the rafts of Common Eider usually seen here were all seeking shelter from the winds and swell. Next we visited the sea wall to view the effluence out-flow pipe from the seafood factory, but such was the force of the huge waves they topped the wall and on occasions crashed into the bus! We retreated to the comfort of the service station for a warm drink, but not before having some reasonable views of Harlequin Duck!

We returned to the car park above Folgarfarfjörður to check again if any Orca had entered the fjord and found none, so we risked going down to the sea wall by the bridge to see if any could be seen in the outer fjord, but given the height of the waves it was impossible to say for sure.

We had lunch from a position that allowed us to view a valley that Malcolm knew of where Arctic Fox were known to frequent, but any self-respecting fox would surely be hunkered down in this appalling weather, wouldn't it? And this proved to be the case, so after lunch we returned once more to Grundarfjörður. While we attempted to search for the King Eider, Malcolm disappeared to check on weather conditions for later this afternoon and the following days. On his return the news was not good: the winds were predicted to increase in strength and the forecast was for more of the same tomorrow! By early afternoon the weather was of great concern and becoming quite dangerous to be out driving in, so we all agreed that discretion was, perhaps the better part of valour, and reluctantly called it a day. During the journey back to the hotel, unrelenting winds buffeted the bus from one side of the road to the other; everyone was mightily relieved when we arrived back in Stykkishólmur and none more so than the driver!!

With enforced downtime everyone simply chilled out in the warmth and comfort of the hotel and sat out the storm until it was time for supper.

Day 4

Friday 21st March

Snæfellsnes Peninsula: Weather details: severe winds. Temperature -2°C

Over breakfast we sat and watched huge Atlantic rollers dissipate their energy on the small islands in Breiðafjörður; the severe winds continued unabated!

Trying best to ignore the weather this morning we set off for Folgrafafjörður. The bus was buffeted along the way until we eventually reached the causeway and made our first stop at the car park to see if there was any evidence that the Orcas were present. We found none, so returned back to the bridge and tried scanning between the numerous white-topped waves for signs of black triangular fins, but it proved an impossible task! Next we parked above Grundarfjörður and scanned the waters below for Orca, again with no luck. With options fast running out we braved the strong head-wind and drove around the peninsula stopping and scanning the angry seas ... but to no avail!

During a comfort stop in Grundarfjörður, Malcolm disappeared in search of information from the Orca Research Team and tried to make some sense of what might, or might not, be happening. He returned with little news other than what we had already ascertained: there were no Orcas in the fjords today! So we decided to drive to Oláfsvik and perhaps further, if necessary. Before we left town we were lucky enough to have some wonderful views of two majestic White-tailed Eagles as they soared above where we had parked – marvellous! Although the wind strength had not decreased we did eventually make it safely to Oláfsvik where we visited the harbour and had great views of

Harlequin and Long-tailed Duck and also found both Common and Black Guillemots present, albeit sheltering from the raging seas!

After lunch we decided to try and visit Arnistapi where in recent days a Humpback Whale had been seen very close to the cliffs. During the drive around the peninsula the weather worsened and conditions were getting very serious; the icy road conditions and wind-blown snow were creating a 'white-out' so we had no alternative but to turn back. It would have been foolhardy to continue!

Back at Folgrafafjörður we scanned the waters to see if any Orca had ventured into the fjord during the afternoon. We sat in the rocking bus for nearly an hour and found no evidence of Orcas. While scanning through a flock of Eiders Malcolm found a White-winged Scoter, an American vagrant. We managed the best views we could given the bus was rocking and the raft of Eider it was associated with kept disappearing in the troughs of waves! On that happy note we returned to the hotel.

With a predicted good strength Aurora Borealis this evening we anxiously waited to see if the skies would be clear! Unfortunately, total cloud-cover persisted, so after the daily log we retired early to pack, with just a glimmer of hope that we may be lucky and see the lights around 3am!

Day 5

Saturday 22nd March

Stykkishólmur - Keflavik Airport: Weather details: morning snow flurries & sunny periods in the afternoon. Temperature 5°C.

The storm-force winds had diminished in strength, but had brought a snow blizzard for the start of our journey back to Keflavik this morning! Leaving town we cautiously followed the yellow roadside marker posts over the high mountain road, since they were the only distinguishing features that separated road from countryside! Once we had left the peninsula the weather improved dramatically and we had our first spell of sunshine! And we had a close encounter with a White-tailed Eagle that was perched close to the road during the return journey to Borgarnes.

After a comfort stop we continued on to Reykjavik, calling briefly at a local retail outlet. Following a brief tour of the city we then had some free time in this cosmopolitan capital for an hour or so. We rejoined the bus by the impressive new opera house, Harpa, for the final leg of our journey back to Keflavik.

Once at the airport we said our farewells and made a quick exit for the check-in gate, leaving Malcolm the job of cleaning the bus and preparing for the next group.

NB – There is nothing more predictable in nature than its unpredictability! So, we may not have had the best of weather, the storm-force wind and continual dense cloud conspired against our main objectives, but we did see some very remarkable landscapes and some memorable wildlife.

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Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	March				
			18	19	20	21	22
1	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmaris glacialis</i>	2	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Gannet	<i>Sula bassana</i>		100	250	3	
3	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>		150	✓	60	
4	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus Cygnus</i>		6	2		75
5	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>					1
6	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		80			✓
7	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		6	24	30	✓
8	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		8			24
9	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		✓	✓	✓	
10	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>			6	10	
11	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyernalis</i>				12	
12	American White-winged Scoter	<i>Melanitta deglandi deglandi</i>				1	
13	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>		10			
14	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		2			
15	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		2	6	30	3
16	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		2			
17	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>		3		3	2
18	Gyr Falcon	<i>Falco Rusticus</i>		1			
19	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>				1	
20	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		25	40	24	20
21	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>			8		
22	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>			40	24	
23	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>			3	6	
24	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		✓	✓		
25	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>		20	200	30	12
26	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>		30	100	60	6
27	Greater Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		35	400	80	2
28	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus graellsii</i>		2	1	1	1
29	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>				1	
30	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>		1	4	2	1
31	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>					1
32	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>					2
33	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>				1	10
34	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>					1
35	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	3	100	12	6	8
36	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		10	15	20	✓
37	Common Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>					12
38	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>	40	75	50	60	15

Mammals

1	Orca	<i>Orcinus orca</i>		10			
2	White-beaked Dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus albirostris</i>		7			
3	Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>			6	2	
4	Atlantic Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		3	15	20	