

Iceland – Killer Whales & The Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour report

8 – 13 March 2015



Aurora from Northern Light Inn



Northern Lights over Garðskagi



Common Eider with a Common/King Eider hybrid



Harlequin Duck

Report compiled by Malcolm Stott
Images courtesy of Jennie Cleal



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Introduction

The northern lights are many things to many people: elementary particle physics, superstition, mythology and folklore come to life. Throughout the ages they have filled people with wonderment 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.

The sun, moon and the stars belong to the everlasting and predictable in our universe. The northern lights are on the other hand elusive, changing and unpredictable. No two nights are the same and no two auroras are ever alike. 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 it collides 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 shimmering green, blue, white and red light in the sky, but seeing the aurora borealis on any given night is never guaranteed.

Day 1

Sunday 8th March

Heathrow – Northern Light Inn, Weather details: Snow showers, wind NE 5m/s & temp -3°C

The Manchester flight arrived on schedule whereas, later in the day, heavy snow fall and icing meant the Heathrow flight was delayed for an hour, while airport authorities made the runway safe, and cleared the back-log of incoming flights before it could land.

Once at the aptly named Northern Light Inn, everyone had plenty of time to settle into the warm comfortable rooms, before Malcolm held a tour briefing in the bar (where else?), after which we moved to the dining room for a traditional Sunday roast of lamb and salmon for supper. After dinner the lounge beckoned, where Malcolm held a 'camera clinic', advising on camera settings and best techniques for capturing aurora images. With newly acquired knowledge, we ventured as far as the observatory to wait for incipient signs that the aurora was about to begin.

Although the sky was partly clear, nothing had happened by 10.30pm so we decided to retire, with confidence that the hotel staff would alert us, if and when the aurora made an appearance.

It was 1.15am when the hotel telephones started ringing (well, most of them!) to announce the aurora had started. Still half asleep, struggling into warm clothes and grabbling camera equipment, we eventually appeared outside to be greeted by a blizzard obscuring the night-sky! However, we didn't have long to wait before the skies cleared and we were soon spell-bound as the emerald green wand swirled slowly in the darkness, flickering amongst the constellations. We stood almost breathless, totally absorbed for over an hour until suddenly, as though somebody had cruelly flicked the light switch, the aurora faded: gone, as though it had never been there at all.

Day 2

Monday 9th March

Northern Light Inn – Golden Circle (396km)

Weather details; Snow showers, wind NE 2m/s & temp -3°C

Although it was snowing this morning when we left the hotel at 9am, our enthusiasm was not dampened, as we set off to enjoy some of Iceland's most iconic and celebrated landscapes on the 'Golden Circle' or perhaps, more appropriately, the 'White Circle' tour. Our drive across the barren coastal road, where ancient lava fields normally covered in a grey-green carpet of soft *Rhacomitrium* moss were transformed into blankets of snow, perhaps gave a false impression of Iceland's natural beauty and wonderment.

After a brief stop in Selfoss, we eventually reached Gullfoss, the 'Golden Waterfall' and it was well worth the long journey. The scenery was awesome; the cascading falls were encrusted with blue icicles and cocooned by rising mist. Next we visited Geysir, the natural phenomenon that gave its name to the world. It was spectacular, a large dome of azure-blue water erupting into a plume of hot steaming vapour. Because of the weather, we had lunch in the bus in the visitor centre carpark, before continuing onto Þingvellir National Park, Iceland's most celebrated landscape.

Arriving at the site, where two of the earth's greatest tectonic plates are tearing apart, we travelled across the 'new land' to the Interpretative Centre. Standing on the edge of the American tectonic plate, we could look across the valley to where the Eurasian plate was just about discernible, before the weather really closed in. While Malcolm relocated the bus, we had plenty of time to stroll down to the Althing, site of the very first Parliament, and continue along the boardwalk to where the bus had been parked.

Leaving the National Park, we followed its outlet, the River Sog in the hope of finding Barrow's Goldeneye. After a journey on a very icy road, made even trickier by a covering of slippery snow, we arrived at a site where Malcolm had found birds in previous winters. We were not disappointed, by the hydro-station we managed to find a few birds present, with some Tufted Duck and Pochard. Further down river we found another small group of Barrow's Goldeneye and an unexpected Harlequin Duck; these normally spend the winter months along the coast. The rest of the journey back to the hotel was tediously slow due to the awful weather but, thankfully, without incident.

After supper and the daily-log, we gathered our warm clothes and cameras before boarding the bus for a journey to Garðskagi, where cloudless skies had been predicted and, given a weak aurora forecast, this would be our best strategy of viewing the northern lights tonight. We waited on the car park for the celestial lights to begin, which they eventually did about 11.45pm and, although calm and lacking structure, the aurora did briefly increase its

intensity, before being obscured by snow clouds. Happy with a second presence of the capricious northern lights, we arrived back at the hotel to a welcome warm bed by 1.15am.

Day 3

Tuesday 10th March

Northern Light Inn – Reykjavik (125km)

Weather details; Blizzards dominated, wind gust NE 26m/s & temp -3°C

This morning, we rescheduled the day's events to give the bathers an opportunity to experience the Blue Lagoon and, for the non-bathers, a chance to visit Grindavik harbour. While the bathers wallowed in thermal effluence from the power-plant, the birders coped with strong winds down at the harbour, where many 'white-winged' gulls were gathered. Ben managed to throw some confusion into 'white-winged' gull identification by finding a bird that showed grey/brown primary feather tips, characteristic of Kumlien's Gull! There are three species of gull whose taxonomic separation causes the greatest confusion: Thayer's, Kumlien's and Iceland Gulls. Although each has its own subtle plumage traits and apparently individual 'long' calls, the whole debate of three potential distinct species rumbles on (why I'm not exactly sure, as all three have distinct breeding and wintering areas?) and without definitive taxonomic guidance it is very difficult to be certain.

We returned to the Blue Lagoon at 11.30am, after a brief stop at the hotel where Malcolm was able to confirm the whale-watching pelagic had definitely been cancelled, which came as no surprise. Before travelling on to Reykjavik, we first visited Keflavik in search of an American Velvet Scoter known to be present there, but given the atrocious weather conditions, we failed to find the bird. After lunch, the weather had seriously worsened and was becoming a cause for concern, so we didn't delay any further before starting our journey into the northern capital. After a slow and cautious journey, we reached the city-centre hotel, where we learnt the authorities had closed the Keflavik road and all airports!

After checking-in, Malcolm suggested taking us to Hallgrímskirkja (the church) and walking back to the hotel (or, perhaps, being 'blown back' would have been a more accurate description!) The hotel was located by the harbour and, despite the inclement weather, it didn't take Dave long to find the Glaucous-winged Gull. This is another potentially contentious species taxonomically but, should it be accepted by Iceland's rarity committee, it will be a first record for the country!

Having especially requested a 3-course dinner, we enjoyed the multiple-course tapas that duly arrived, and supper became rather protracted. On this occasion, this didn't matter, since the conversation over dinner was convivial and the night-sky cloudy! Following the daily log, we all retired to bed, while the storm raged outside!

Day 4

Wednesday 11th March

Reykjavik – Stykkishólmur (122km)

Weather details; Snowy, occasional brighter period pm, wind SE 12m/s & temp -5°C

With no pelagic from Reykjavik on offer this morning, due to the stormy weather continuing unabated, and with little hope of change by the afternoon, we decided to continue on to Snæfellsnes. The main highway between the capital and Borgarnes was still very icy and snowy, with many large 4x4 cars and

even a bus abandoned where they had been blown-off the road in yesterday's storm. The bakery by the causeway provided a welcome refuge and coffee stop in Borgarnes, before we continued into the countryside. Immortalised by Jules Verne, in his classic novel 'Journey to the Centre of the Earth', the Snæfellsjökull glacier dominates the diverse and magical landscape of the peninsula. It is considered to be one of the most beautiful mountains in Iceland, and is also believed to be one of seven main energy centres of the earth.

During the drive through this empty, monumental landscape we couldn't help contemplating the people who live here. Fairy-tale mountains dominated the mono-coloured landscape – white and whiter! This winter, Iceland is certainly living up to the name on the box!

Once on the north side of the peninsula, we headed straight for Grundarfjörður, passing an eerily quiet Kolgarfarfjörður. Here it is normally an amazing experience to witness huge numbers of gulls, gorging on the Herring bonanza but, sadly, their absence was marked by a strange silence this winter. Arriving in the small fishing town, we headed straight for the whale centre, keen to learn the latest news and enjoy a hot coffee. The lack of any Orca present in the fjord was not what we wanted to hear! Undeterred, we spent the afternoon birdwatching around the tiny harbour, where we had brilliant views of Harlequin Duck, hundreds of 'white-winged' gulls, and even managed to find a King Eider or, to be more correct, a hybrid drake Common x King Eider (*Somateria mollissima* x *spectabilis*).

Returning past Kolgarfarfjörður, on our way to Stykkishólmur, we managed brief views of an adult White-tailed Eagle, before it disappeared into the landscape. Two more eagles were seen on the outskirts of the town before we arrived at the hotel.

After supper we retired to the bar for the daily log and, with no signs of a break in the cloud cover, we enjoyed some entertaining conversation before retiring, full of anticipation of a sailing the next day.

Day 5

Thursday 12th March

Stykkishólmur – Grundarfjörður (102km)

Weather details; Persistent snow showers, wind E 5m/s & temp -5°C

Hotel Stykkishólmur is located on top of a hill and, from the breakfast room, we enjoyed the stunning view (when not snowing) north across Breiðafjörður Bay. This expansive marine ecosystem is the largest area of shallow coastal water in the country, and extremely rich in wildlife. The area has greater tides and tidal currents than elsewhere in Iceland, and its many islands seem almost infinite, with an estimate of approximately 2,500. Its birdlife is unique, and one of the most important in Iceland and even the whole of the North Atlantic, characterised by birds which are wholly dependent on marine life, with many of them nesting 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. About one-third of the Common Eider population breed in Breiðafjörður.

After the relatively short journey from the hotel, we duly arrived in Grundarfjörður in plenty of time and full of enthusiasm for our Orca sailing this morning. We headed straight for the whale-watching centre

and, after a brief introduction to Orcas, we gathered next door where we struggled into our thermal ‘onesies’ before boarding the ship. It was snowing as we left the tiny harbour and, after an hour out at sea, where the snow flurries had turned into a blizzard with visibility less than 50 metres, the captain decided to return to the harbour with a promise of a second, free trip should the weather improve later.

With the small town inundated with deep snow and the roads only just passable, we had lunch in a layby on the fringe of town overlooking a bay. We had time to spare before the next sailing, so Malcolm attempted to drive towards Oláfsvík in search of Arctic Fox but, given the weather conditions, it was no surprise when we didn’t find any!

By now it was time to return to the whale centre, where we climbed into our ‘onesies’ for the second time and headed for the ship. Sailing out of the harbour, the weather looked more promising and the scenery was looking magnificent. Other than Fulmar and ‘white-winged’ gulls we saw little except a couple of Razorbills, a few Guillemots and the odd Red-throated and Great Northern Divers. Unfortunately, Cetaceans were only noticeable by their absence! We sailed within the bay for a couple of hours in search of dolphins, until the weather deteriorated, once more forcing a return to Grundarfjörður.

The journey back to Stykkishólmur was, I’m pleased to say, without incident and, once at the hotel, we had plenty of time to relax before the evening meal. Following supper and the daily log, the thought of packing and an early start the following morning, perhaps even a late night with the northern lights being a possibility, encouraged an early night.

Day 5

Friday 13th March

Stykkishólmur –Keflavik Airport (226km)

Weather details; Bright with snow flurries, wind SE 12 m/s & temp 6°C

With the bus loaded, we left Stykkishólmur still slumbering this morning, as we commenced our journey back to Reykjavik early, in an attempt to avoid the worsening weather. The mountain road was a bit tricky but, once on the southern shores, we made good progress. With time in hand, we stopped at the bakery in Borgarnes for coffee and cakes, before arriving in the northern capital where we said goodbye to Jo and Ben, who enjoyed the awful weather so much they planned on spending another two days being blown around Reykjavik!

Before arriving at the airport, we visited the waterfront in Keflavik, to try to find the elusive scoter for a second time, but failed. So, with the wind gaining strength and another weather front threatening to sweep across the country, we headed straight for the airport, and were not surprised to find all flights in and out of Keflavik had been temporarily suspended. Being eternal optimists, we checked in and bade farewell to Malcolm, before disappearing upstairs and air-side, for an unexpected period of extended retail therapy!

NB – You experienced some of the worse winter weather Iceland has seen for the last 20 years and, in the face of adversity, your patience and good sense of humour was very much appreciated. I sincerely hope the bad weather didn’t detract too much from enjoying your holiday, and you were able to share a little of my enthusiasm for this amazing land. Thank you very much for your great company and I hope, one day soon, you will return to experience more of what Iceland can offer - in good weather!

Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	March					
			8	9	10	11	12	13
1	Great Northern Loon (Diver)	<i>Gavia immer</i>				1	2	
2	Red-throated Loon (Diver)	<i>Gavia stellata</i>			1		3	
3	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmaris glacialis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Northern Gannet	<i>Morura bassanus</i>			2			
5	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			12	300+	✓	
6	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>			6	✓	✓	
7	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		2	80	6	2	✓
8	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>			120	20		✓
9	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>			8			
10	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>		3				
11	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	3	✓	20	✓
12	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		20	10			✓
13	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>			100+	500+	✓	✓
14	Hybrid Common x King Eider	<i>S. mollissima x spectabilis</i>				1		
15	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>		1	4	9	3	
16	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>				5	3	
17	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>		10				
18	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		2	10	5	6	4
19	Common Merganser (Goosander)	<i>Mergus merganser</i>				3	4	2
20	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>				3	1	
21	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		1	1		1	
22	Rock Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus muta</i>		H				
23	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>				300+	60	✓
24	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>			50	150	60	
25	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>			1			
26	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>			15	4	13	
27	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>			150	20	6	
28	Mew (Common) Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>			12	1		
29	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>			30		50	
30	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		5	15		3	
31	Glaucous-winged Gull	<i>Larus glaucescens</i>			1	1		
32	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>			40	100+	100+	✓
33	Kumlien's Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides kumlieni</i>		1				
34	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>			300+	70	35	✓
35	Greater Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		20	24	✓	450+	✓
36	Common Murre (Guillemot)	<i>Uria aalge</i>					1	
37	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>					2	
38	Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grille</i>			1	5	8	
39	Feral Pigeon/Rock Dove	<i>Columbia livia</i>						✓
40	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>					3	
41	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	3	24	6	24	20	✓
42	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		100+	12	80	30	✓
43	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>	50	250+	75	450+	50	✓

Mammals

1	Harbour (Common) Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>				20	3	
2	(Atlantic) Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>				6	5	

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