

# Iceland – Killer Whales & Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour report

17 – 22 March 2015



Northern Lights over Stykkishólmur



Aurora Kp9 from the aptly named Northern Light Inn



Common & Hybrid King Eider



White-winged Scoter

Report compiled by Malcolm Stott  
Images courtesy of Martin Dixon



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Tour leader: Malcolm Stott and 12 clients

## 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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

Tuesday 17th March

Heathrow – Northern Light Inn. Sunny, wind NE 4m/s & 0°C

All UK flights descended into a sunny Keflavik afternoon (quite a rare event this year) where Malcolm was waiting in the Arrivals Hall. Once at the aptly named Northern Light Inn, everyone had plenty of time to settle into the spacious, comfortable rooms before Malcolm held a pre-dinner 'camera clinic' in the lounge, to advise on camera settings and best techniques for capturing aurora images; especially with the kp9 predicted for tonight! Next, we headed for the dining room where we enjoyed a traditional cod supper and, just as dessert arrived, so did an announcement that the aurora had started! Dashing outside, we glimpsed the beginning of the northern lights before disappearing to our rooms to grab warm clothes and cameras. With so many people outside the hotel, Malcolm suggested taking a short drive to find a quiet space to appreciate the event.

We travelled a short distance to where we could gain a wide vista above a lava landscape to enjoy the experience of witnessing an 'extreme' aurora develop. It began by forming wands and spirals that quickly gained colour and intensity. We were spell-bound as the vivid green bands of colour 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. With a chill in the night air, we decided to return to the hotel for a hot cup of chocolate, and to continue our observations from there.

It was most active between 11pm and 11.30pm, almost as if the sky was erupting in colourful light, with greens, magenta, and pink hanging in huge shimmering drapes before dancing through the constellations. It was both

breath-taking and awesome and, while no two nights are the same and no two auroras are alike, it does not get much better than the experience we shared tonight!

By 1am the light show had faded and, one by one, we reluctantly retired back inside the warmth of the hotel to sleep contentedly with wonderful memories of an exceptional start to our stay in Iceland!

## Day 2

Wednesday 18th March

Northern Light Inn – Golden Circle. Overcast am, snow showers pm, wind NE 12m/s & -2°C.

Still full of excitement of the previous night's activities, we left the hotel at 10am to enjoy some of Iceland's most iconic and most celebrated landscapes on the 'Golden Circle' tour. Soon after leaving the hotel, we were travelling along the barren coastal road where ancient lava fields were covered in a grey/green carpet of soft *Rhacomitrum* moss, perhaps giving a false impression as to Iceland's natural beauty and wonderment.

Just after mid-day, we had arrived at the famous Gullfoss, the undisputable queen of Icelandic waterfalls. It was an amazing sight, gushing waters cascading down three falls with breath-taking power and grandeur, encrusted with blue icicles and cocooned in rising mist. Afterwards, we visited the geothermal area of Geysir, the natural phenomenon that gave its name to the world. It was a spectacular experience, as the earth gurgled and bubbled when super-heated water escaped from the ground with enormous force in a plume of hot vapour, a sight not soon forgotten. Our final destination was the iconic Þingvellir National Park, perhaps Iceland's most celebrated landscape and a UNESCO world heritage site, and the original birthplace of the oldest, still existing, parliament in the world. In addition, it is the place where the tectonic plates of America and Europe meet and the rift valley was clearly visible. After a visit to the Interpretative Centre, we walked to the viewing gallery before taking a stroll down to the Althing, while Malcolm relocated the bus to a lower car park.

By the time we left the National Park, the weather had deteriorated. We followed the outlet of the River Sog, hoping to find Barrow's Goldeneye. We only managed the briefest of views of a single bird by the bridge, where road repairs unfortunately prevented us from stopping. After a comfort stop at Hvergerði, we made the journey back to the Grindavik, during which the weather got worse and worse. It was a relief to return to the hotel. We had time to relax and reflect on the day before gathering in the dining room for a delicious, fillet of lamb, supper. The daily log and a tour briefing followed and, with little chance of any aurora tonight, we happily retired for the evening.

## Day 3

Thursday 19th March

Northern Light Inn – Reykjavik. Overcast/bright periods, wind NE 4m/s & 6°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 enjoyed a walk around the small harbour and Malcolm explained the subtle identification differences between two similar species of 'white-winged' gulls. In the harbour, we had some good views of a winter plumaged Great-northern Diver, many Common Eiders, Redshank, Turnstone and Oystercatchers which are early spring migrants in Iceland.

Collecting the bathers, we continued onto Reykjavik and arrived at the old harbour in plenty of time for the pelagic. Once on board the ship, we struggled into the thermals 'onesies' and headed onto the upper deck. Leaving the harbour, we saw small numbers of Black Guillemots, some of which had summer plumage. Small groups of Common Guillemots were seen during the sailing, and a pair of Long-tailed Duck was added to the bird list, before we encountered a Minke Whale, newly arrived from its warmer wintering grounds. This was not the most obliging of animals and only allowed limited views of a distant dorsal fin! Northern Gannets were most obvious with their pristine white plumage, black wing-tips and sulphur-yellow heads, and a joy to see while we searched for more 'confiding' whales. We didn't have to wait too long before a distant blow marked the presence of a Humpback Whale. The ship's engines roared into action, leaving a black trail of exhaust fumes as it picked up speed and headed for the white plume of vapour. Unfortunately, the whale was busy travelling and not feeding, so it was difficult for the ship to keep up and gain closer views of this magnificent creature. Our time at sea was fast ending as the ship turned and headed back to Reykjavik.

The hotel was only a five minute walk from the harbour, and so we had an opportunity to gain our 'land-legs' once more. Confusion at check-in was quickly sorted by Malcolm, and we had plenty of time to relax, rest or even indulge in a little retail therapy, before the evening meal. Having requested a 3-course dinner, a multiple course meal duly arrived, which was unexpected, and supper became a rather protracted affair. With clear skies expected around midnight, a few hardy individuals boarded the bus for another evening 'chasing the light'. We travelled away from the city's bright lights, back along Reykjanes to a favourable spot with a strong foreground for photography. It was a frustrating night, the clouds never really did clear, yet we could see the green glow of the northern lights illuminating them from behind. The clouds did eventually disperse momentarily and we were able to catch the full aurora, but it was never for very long before total cloud coverage resumed and, by midnight, we decided to return to the hotel.

## Day 4

Friday 20th March

Reykjavik – Stykkishólmur. Sunny, strong winds/rain late pm, wind NE 12m/s & 0°C

With clear skies this morning, we walked down to the harbour after breakfast to wait for the eclipse to happen. By 8.38am the moon was visible as it started to pass in front of the sun and, an hour later, we had about a 98% eclipse. Although the light dimmed, it never got really dark and the birds continued as normal. The most noticeable effect of the eclipse was the chilling morning air distinctly getting a lot colder!

Back at the hotel, we loaded the bus and, with the prospects of Orcas being present in Grundarfjörður and a sailing on offer after lunch, we left the vibrant capital and started our journey to Snæfellsnes. The sun highlighted the mountains and the scenery en route was spectacular. After a brief coffee and cake stop at the bakery on the outskirts of Borgarnes, we continued our travels along Snæfellsnes peninsula. Snæfellsjökull glacier, immortalised by Jules Verne in his classic novel 'Journey to the Centre of the Earth', dominates the diverse and magical landscape of the peninsula, which 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 planet. During the drive through this empty, monumental landscape, you couldn't help contemplate why people live here!

We arrived at Grundarfjörður in plenty of time for the sailing, passing an eerily quiet Kolgrafarfjörður before arriving in the small fishing town. We headed straight for the whale centre, for an update on events and coffee. Sadly the news was not what we wanted to hear, but the better news was there would be a sailing. After an

introduction to Orcas, we climbed into our thermal ‘onesies’ and walked the short distance to where the ship was moored. After a slight delay while we waited for another group to arrive, the ship slipped her anchorage and headed out of the tiny harbour.

The scenery was magnificent with fairy-tale mountains covered in snow engulfing the fjord, and the sea was calm as we started our quest to find the elusive Orcas. The presence of Gannets, plunge-diving from great heights, was a marvellous sight, and an encouraging indication that fish were present in some abundance. Although we didn’t find any Orca, we had two sightings of the enigmatic Humpback Whale; one obliging individual allowing us to approach very close.

The weather began to worsen, as the wind gained strength and whipped a salty spray over the ship’s bow, which meant we had a very wet sailing back to Grundarfjörður. With no improvement in the weather looking likely in the short-term, we travelled onto Stykkishólmur and the hotel.

After supper we retired to the bar for the daily log and, with no forecast of a break in cloud-cover, we retired early.

## Day 5

Saturday 21th March

Stykkishólmur – Grundarfjörður. Overcast/brighter periods pm, wind NE 12m/s & 1°C

Hotel Stykkishólmur is located on top of a hill and, from the breakfast room, we enjoyed the stunning view 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 the whole of the North Atlantic, characterised by birds which are wholly dependent on a marine life, and 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.

Following a leisurely start to enjoy the environment and visit the picturesque harbour, we departed this morning to explore the northern shores of the peninsula. Kolfarfarfjörður provided an opportunity to stop and scan the sea, looking for tall, black triangular fins; sadly none were seen and few birds were present. Next we continued onto Grundarfjörður, where we had time to visit the harbour and bay in our search to find Harlequin Duck and the King Eider. While we enjoyed excellent views of the former, along with flocks of Purple Sandpipers, we failed to locate the latter.

The wind had become quite strong by the time we had arrived at an elevated parking area above the cliffs for lunch. It did, however, provide a good vantage point to scan the sea below, looking for Orcas.. Although none were found, the fly-past of Fulmar provided some entertainment and, for a few, a glimpse of a Gyr Falcon came as a surprise. We visited the fishing town of Oláfsvík, where Long-tailed Ducks often frequent the harbour area, but none were present on this occasion and the very rough sea limited any sea-watching possibilities.

By now the wind was very blustery and it would have been irresponsible to attempt to travel any further along the peninsula, so we decided to return to Grundarfjörður and attempt to find the elusive King Eider. Patiently scanning through the rafts of Common Eiders eventually had its rewards, when we managed to locate the King Eider, or to

be more correct, a hybrid drake Common x King Eider (*Somateria mollissima* x *spectabilis*). And, for some, there was the added bonus of another brief sighting of a Gyr Falcon as it caused panic and confusion amongst the flock of waders present by the shore.

Following supper and the daily-log, the aurora prediction was looking very encouraging, so most disappeared to collect warm clothes and cameras before we set off to find a suitable location for watching the northern lights. As we departed the hotel, the aurora was clearly visible from the car park so, without further delay, we boarded the bus and travelled back to Grundarfjörður. Although the weather was frustrating to say the least, with snow flurries and rain obscuring the night skies, when the stars were visible rays of green lights tinged by pink edges began to dance amongst the sparkling constellations. By 11.45pm, the aurora had faded and, with the threat of more snow, we left Kirkjufell to return to Stykkishólmur and a nice warm bed for our last night on Snæfellsnes.

## Day 5

Sunday 22<sup>th</sup> March

Stykkishólmur –Keflavik Airport. Mixed periods of cloud/sunshine, wind N12 m/s & 6°C

With the bus loaded, we left Stykkishólmur still slumbering this morning, as we commenced our journey back to Keflavik. The journey proved uneventful and we were soon in Borgarnes, enjoying coffee and cakes. Continuing onto Keflavik, we took the ring road avoiding the capital, before arriving at some pools on the outskirts of town where we added Wigeon and the newly-arrived migrant Lesser Black-backed Gull to the bird list.

In Keflavik we had lunch by the waterfront while searching for the American White-winged Scoter that was allegedly present there. It didn't take too long before we located the bird and were able to enjoy some very close views. The light was exceptional and provided a truly memorable end to a very remarkable holiday. Having dropped off members who had an extra night's stay at their Keflavik hotel, we continued onto the airport. Farewells said, we left Malcolm at check-in and headed upstairs for departures and a little retail therapy, no doubt!

NB – The group had been less than five hours in Iceland, and experienced an extreme display (KP9) of the northern lights: it does not get any better! In all we had three nights when we could enjoy this natural phenomenon, that most people can only dream of experiencing! We didn't see Orca (sigh), but had some remarkable views of Humpback Whales, together with the exceptional views of Harlequins, King Eider, and both Glaucous and Iceland Gulls. If that were not enough, we finished off with brilliant views of the American White-winged Scoter. I sincerely hope you are now able to share a little of my enthusiasm for this amazing land and I hope one day soon you will return to experience more of what Iceland can offer!

Malcolm

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## Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	March					
			17	18	19	20	21	22
1	Great Northern Loon (Diver)	<i>Gavia immer</i>			1			
3	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmaris glacialis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>			24	200+	100+	
5	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			5	1	30	✓
6	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>			30	✓	✓	✓
7	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>				1		
8	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus Cygnus</i>		12	2	40	3	5
9	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		2				✓
10	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas Penelope</i>						24
11	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		6	✓	10	10	12
12	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>						✓
13	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>			✓	1000+	750+	✓
14	Hybrid Common x King Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima x spectabilis</i>					1	
15	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>					13	
16	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyernalis</i>			6		2	
17	American White-winged Scoter	<i>Melanitta deglandi deglandi</i>						1
18	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islansica</i>		1				
19	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>				1	1	
20	Common Merganser (Goosander)	<i>Mergus merganser</i>				1	2	
21	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>				1	1	
22	Gyr Falcon	<i>Falco rusticolus</i>					2	
23	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		1				
24	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>			15	30	24	✓
25	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>				55	150	
26	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa tetanus</i>			17		12	
27	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>			3			
28	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>			30		3	
29	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>			100	500	100	✓
30	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>			40	45	100	✓
31	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>		3	200	250	40	✓
32	Greater Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>			20	12	150	✓
33	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>						30
34	Common Murre (Guillemot)	<i>Uria aalge</i>			80			
35	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>			10			
36	Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grille</i>			10	4		
37	Feral Pigeon/Rock Dove	<i>Columbia livia</i>						✓
38	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	3	40	20	24	30	✓
39	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		5	50	60	50	✓
40	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>	20	40	38	10		

## Mammals

1	Minke Whale	<i>Baleaenoptera acutorostrata</i>			1			
2	Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>			1	2		
3	Harbour (Common) Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>				1	6	
4	(Atlantic) Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>				1	3	