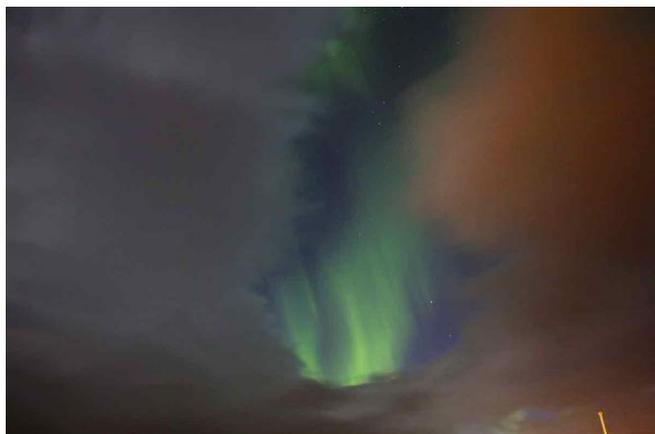


Iceland – Winter Wildlife & The Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour report

16 – 20 March 2016



Aurora at Stykkisholmur by Walter Burns



Barrow's Goldeneye by Martin Palmer



Ptarmigan by Wendy Schmitt



White-tailed Eagle by Peter Dunn

Report compiled by Peter J Dunn
Images by Martin Palmer, Walter Burns, Wendy Schmitt & Peter Dunn



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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 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

Wednesday 16th March

Heathrow – Northern Light Inn

After days of wind, rain and cloud, the Heathrow flight landed a few minutes late in sunshine. Peter met the group in the arrivals hall before whisking them off to the Northern Light Inn. Seven had booked the Blue Lagoon experience. We all met up in the bar/lounge where Peter ran through the plans for the next few days.

Following dinner we donned our warm gear and met Peter in the car park to practice night photography, should the lights appear, although the clouds had rolled back in. There were suggestions of green within the clouds and we retired to bed hoping there would be a phone call during the night from the night watchman alerting us to any light, however this did not come!

Day 2

Thursday 17th March

Northern Light Inn – Golden Circle – Reykjavik

We woke to an overcast but dry morning and during the day the cloud burnt back to amazing sunshine. The plan was to drive the 'Golden Circle', but spend the morning looking for Barrow's Goldeneye. With that in mind we left the Northern Light Inn at 8.30am and headed north towards Reykjavik, then east on Highway 1 towards Selfoss. We stopped to look across the flooded Sog valley, where the ice was rapidly melting, and recorded Whooper Swan, Greylag Goose, Mallard and both Red-breasted and Common Mergansers (Goosander), but alas no Goldeneye.

After crossing the Sog, we then travelled north, following the river towards the hydro plants. Peter spotted some small duck close to the bank. Great joy! There were at least six male Barrow's Goldeneye displaying to the same number of females. Scanning the far bank and nearer to the hydro plant we found more of them and estimated 20-22 birds. Inland cliffs here also had a good colony of Northern Fulmar, and Northern Ravens were everywhere.

We continued on and visited some of the highlights of the Golden Circle for the rest of the day: the spectacular water spout and fumerals at Geysir (which gave its name to this phenomenon), the powerful falls at Gullfoss, and finally the Asia/America tectonic plates at Þingvellir together with the site of the ancient parliament (and four more Barrow's Goldeneye). Driving back towards Reykjavik, the light and calm weather gave a photographic opportunity for reflected images of the hills in the melt water of the snow fields.

We arrived at our Reykjavik hotel in good time and with hopes that the clear sky would give us a chance for the aurora. After a steak dinner we boarded the minibus and headed out of town to a frozen lake in the east. Unfortunately low cloud had drifted back in over the area and all we saw was the reflected orange from the lights of Reykjavik. We tried a dark area to the north and also at the lighthouse in the south but by then there was full cloud cover, so by 11pm we unanimously voted to have an early night after a long but enjoyable first full day in Iceland.

Day 3

Friday 18th March

Reykjavik - Stykkishólmur

This morning we rescheduled the itinerary and left Reykjavik at 9am to spend as much time as possible on the Snaefellsnes peninsula. We headed north on Highway 1, passing through the deep tunnel under Hvalfjörður, with increasing numbers of Whooper Swans and Greylag Geese in the fields. We had a rest stop at Borgarnes and then continued on to the peninsula. The original plan was to take the coast road all the way round the peninsula, but low cloud and drizzle would have hampered any views, so we took the centre road over the top to Ólafsvík. A brief stop at some woodland on the south side produced good views of the Icelandic race of Wren; dark and longer tailed than those we were use to. Dropping out of the clouds onto the north side gave us clearer and calmer weather from the brisk southerly winds. We went straight to Ólafsvík where we juggled between lunch and some great wildlife. Amongst the large numbers of Common Eider were 30 fresh plumaged male and female Harlequin Ducks, some nice male Long-tailed Ducks and one or two summer plumaged Black Guillemots. Hillary said she'd seen a "spout" out at sea and sure enough, we watched (albeit at a distance) up to eight Humpback Whales. We could easily see their 'hump backs' and occasionally a tail fluke. At one point there was a feeding frenzy of gulls and what looked to be dolphins jumping out of the water.

We spent some time watching these events and then, after another brief comfort stop, we headed east, stopping on a car park high up on the cliffs overlooking the sea. We could still see the Humpback Whales at a distance, but there was no sign of the dolphin or any other cetaceans. As we descended the hill continuing east, Ann called out "raptor" and we watched an adult White-tailed Eagle soaring above us. It flew to the cliffs and took a Fulmar before disappearing out of sight.

We called at Grundarfjörður where huge numbers of Fulmar and Common Eider were feeding from the fish factory outfall, and then gradually made our way to Stykkishólmur, briefly seeing another White-tailed Eagle over the hills.

We settled in at our hotel and met before dinner to complete our checklists for the past two days. The forecast for an aurora was poor with heavy cloud expected, however Peter went out after dinner and saw a few holes in the cloud with stars appearing. People gathered outside the hotel to look into the heavens when suddenly a bright glow appeared from behind the cloud in the smallest of windows and we were treated to a brief, but quite intense, series of curtains moving through the gap. It only lasted a short time, but long enough for everyone to see and most to photograph. We tried to get better views out of town in the dark but the cloud had all but filled back in. We returned to the hotel congratulating ourselves on how lucky we had just been!

Day 4

Saturday 19th March

Stykkishólmur – Grundarfjörður - Hellissandur

Early morning rain gave way to clearing skies and a day of sun and cloud. We had breakfast, made our lunches and then made straight for Grundarfjörður as we were booked on the 10am whale watching tour. We stopped at a couple of spots to check for wildlife before arriving at the harbour in time to prepare ourselves and get fitted with our one piece insulated waterproof clothing. Once onboard the Láki II, we headed out in relatively calm waters, intending to visit Kolgarfjarfjörður because Orca were seen there at 9am.

We were amazed by the numbers of Fulmar, and we saw Northern Gannet, both Red-throated and Great Northern Divers (Loons) and a few Kittiwake; but we could not find the Orca. Scouring the area, we did not find any cetaceans this time but had good views of Grey Seals on 'Fox Island' and large numbers of Icelandic Purple Sandpipers. As we came into the harbour we found the gaudy Common x King Eider male (*Somateria mollissima* x *spectabilis*) which shared features of both species.

We ate packed lunches by the harbour and then headed west, visiting Ólafsvik again. This time in bright sunshine, we watched the Harlequin Ducks and Eider displaying. Way to the west we saw distant whale blows and travelling further west we had some great views of what were probably the same Humpback Whales we had found yesterday. We managed to get closer by visiting Rif seafront.

On our return journey to the hotel we checked some sites for raptors. Apart from a brief eagle sighting by the leader it was quiet, although the scenery was stunning in the bright sunshine.

We kept our fingers crossed throughout the evening for clearing skies, but even though there were clear windows in the cloud, there wasn't any activity tonight and most of us had given up by 11pm.

Day 5

Sunday 20th March

Stykkishólmur –Keflavik Airport

We woke to a dull overcast day which soon turned to rain. We were pleased with the good weather we had experienced whilst in Iceland, and as we were travelling back to the airport, the rain was not a real problem. In fact it helped us find a new bird for the list as our reduced speed enabled Andrew to find two nice Rock Ptarmigan still in their white winter plumage, taking grit from the side of the road. We slowly reversed back for all to have a good view. We continued on to Borganes for refreshment and fuel, checking geese (Greylags) and Whooper Swans in the roadside fields en route.

As we passed through Reykjavik and turned towards Grindavik the rain eased and we stopped at the harbour to eat our packed lunch whilst checking through the Eider and gulls. Next stop was the bubbling mud pools and fumerals of Gunnuhver, and then on to the bridge between two tectonic plates where we could walk from Asia to America. Our final stop was on Keflavik seafront where some checked out the bird life and others visited the Giantess Cave at Skessuhellir with its scary noisy giant woman!

It was now time to head to the airport where we said goodbye to Walter, Ann and Peter who were flying home early on Monday, and checked in for the journey back to Heathrow.

It had been a successful trip. We enjoyed brief but good views of the Northern Lights in the windows in the clouds; watched feeding Humpback Whales from various points on Snaefellsnes peninsula; and saw some of the special species that make Iceland their home, such as Barrow's Goldeneye and the enigmatic Harlequin Duck.

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Reflections in melt water by Peter Dunn

Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	March				
			16	17	18	19	20
1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓	✓	2	✓
2	Greater White-fronted Goose (Greenland)	<i>Anser albifrons flavirostris</i>			6		
3	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	2	30	✓	12	✓
4	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>			49	28	
7	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>			10		
8	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>		26			
9	Common Merganser (Goosander)	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		4	1		
10	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		20	3	8	1
11	Rock Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus muta</i>					2
12	Red-throated Loon (Diver)	<i>Gavia stellata</i>				3	
13	Great Northern Loon (Diver)	<i>Gavia immer</i>			1	1	
14	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
15	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>			3	6	2
16	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>				10	
17	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		1	16	✓	✓
18	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>			2	1	
19	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		1	25	✓	✓
20	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>			2		
21	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima littoralis</i>			200	300	
22	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>				8	
23	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>				10	✓
24	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
25	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>		2	✓	✓	✓
26	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>		✓	✓	10	✓
27	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		✓	✓	5	✓
28	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		1			
29	Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>			3	20	
30	Rock Dove (Feral)	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>			1		
31	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓
32	Eurasian Wren (Iceland)	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes islandicus</i>			1		
33	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
34	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>			2		
35	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>			1		

Mammals

1	Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>				20	
2	Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>			8	5	