

# Iceland – Winter Wildlife & The Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour report

2 – 6 March 2017



Aurora near Stykkishólmur



The group enjoying the Northern Lights



Sperm Whale with Snæfellsjökull in the background



A pod of Orca

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Tour participants: Peter Dunn (leader) with seven Naturetrek 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, and 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

Thursday 2nd March

### Heathrow – Northern Light Inn

The Heathrow flight arrived in sunny Iceland a few minutes late and five travellers were greeted by Peter, who had landed earlier from Manchester, and two other Naturetrekkers who had been in Iceland for a few days. With the minibus already hired and waiting on the car park, bags were quickly loaded and we drove the short distance to the Northern Lights Inn. As some of the group had booked various times at the Blue Lagoon experience, we decided to have dinner at 6pm, where Peter ran through the plans for the next few days. Following dinner we donned our warm gear and met in the car park to practice night photography, should the lights appear. While we waited a ghostly light appeared in the west and there was a hint of green and movement. Although not clear or as intense as it had been reported on previous nights, this was our first sightings of the aurora.

Over the next two hours the light came and went between the clouds and the orange glows of Keflavik and Reykjavik, and we eventually retired to bed hoping there would be a phone call during the night from the night watchman alerting us to any better activity. Alas this did not happen; although Jen looked out of her window at 5am and thought there were moving curtains of light visible!

## Day 2

Friday 3rd March

### Northern Light Inn – Golden Circle – Reykjavik

We woke to a bright sunlit morning and it remained like that all day long. The plan was to drive the ‘Golden Circle’, but spending the morning looking for Barrow’s Goldeneye. With that in mind, we left the Northern Light Inn around 9am and headed north towards Reykjavik then east on Highway 1 towards Selfoss. We stopped to look across the flooded Sog valley as the ice was not completely covering the river here and recorded Whooper Swan, Mallard, Eurasian Wigeon and a single Tufted Duck, but alas no Goldeneye.. The white undersides of Northern Fulmar gleamed against the blue sky as they returned to their inland breeding cliffs.

Crossing the Sog, we then went north following the river and drove to a hydro plant car park where Peter spotted some small ducks. Great joy as there was a pair of Barrow’s Goldeneye below the rapids with a pair of Common Merganser (Goosander). The male Barrow’s Goldeneye was a striking bird with a white crescent in front of his eye.

We continued on and visited some of the highlights of the Golden Circle for the rest of the day. At the spectacular water spout and fumerals at Geysir (which gave its name to this phenomenon), we ate our packed lunch. Next it was the crashing falls at Gullfoss, and finally the Asia/America tectonic plates at Þingvellir, together with the site of the ancient parliament. Driving back towards Reykjavik, the light and calm weather gave us an option for some fantastic images of Lake Þingvellavatn and hills in the background.

We arrived in good time at our Reykjavik hotel, passing the partially frozen central lake with its skaters and flocks of Whooper Swans, Greylag Geese and Tufted Duck. We had hopes that the clear sky would give us a chance for the aurora, so after dinner we boarded the minibus and headed out of town to Gróttá Island Lighthouse. This was a popular place as there were many cars and people with cameras. Apart from a hint on images, we didn’t see any sign of the aurora tonight. We called it a day after having given it our best shot, and we were starting to feel the -7C temperature. We returned to the hotel for an early night after a long but enjoyable first full day in Iceland.

## Day 3

Saturday 4th March

### Reykjavik - Stykkishólmur

This morning, after contact from our whale boat company, we rescheduled our trip to go out in the afternoon. We therefore left Reykjavik at 9am to be at Oláfsvik on the Snaefellsnes peninsula for a 2pm sailing. We headed north on Highway 1 passing through the deep Hvalfjörður Tunnel, the snow making for some very scenic views. We had a rest stop at Borgarnes and then continued on to the peninsula. We arrived early in Oláfsvik and lunched at a car park on the outskirts overlooking the rocky coast. Here we had some good views of four pairs of Harlequin Duck, plenty of Common Eider, both Glaucous and Iceland Gulls and a flock of 150 roosting Purple Sandpipers of the long-billed Icelandic race

We headed down to the harbour and kitted ourselves in our warm and waterproof ‘onesies’ before boarding the Láki II. Leaving the harbour, we headed west towards the Atlantic. Passing the end of the Snaefellsnes peninsula we spotted some blows. These were angled forwards and to the left of the whale’s head, indicating Sperm Whales. We slowly sailed into the area and had very close views of two individuals which were ‘logging’ on the surface, but eventually fluked up and dived. Blows on the horizon indicated that possibly up to eight Sperm Whales were present. Next there were some tall fins in the distance and as we approached, we were rewarded with some great

views of a pod of around 20 Orca, spread around in groups of four to five animals. What a fantastic whale watch with the backdrop of Snæfellsjökull and sunshine!

We returned to the harbour around 5.30pm and headed for our last hotel (for two days) at Stykkishólmur, where we settled into our comfortable rooms and had a nice three course meal. We were sat in the bar area to complete our checklist for the last three days when other hotel guests starting running for their cameras: the aurora was starting to show.

Initially it was a huge crescent of pale green light arching over the church and town; then it began to build into ribbons of lights and a suggestion of movement. After trying to take photographs with the town lights masking the effect, Peter drove the group out of town into the darkness and here we witnessed some of the best light displays of curtains, ribbons, colours and movement that Peter had seen. We returned the hotel triumphant, the day having been completed by a perfect aurora display that would remain in everyone's minds eye for many years.

## Day 4

Sunday 5th March

### Stykkishólmur – Grundarfjörður - Hellissandur

We woke to wall to wall sunshine again, and after breakfast we headed out to spend the day along the north coast of the Snaefellsnes peninsula. We made a few stops in the morning, firstly to photograph the indigenous Iceland ponies and then a scenic view across a snow covered lava field. We checked the edges of Hraunsfjarðarvatn where Peter found a White-tailed Eagle sat high on a crag, but unfortunately it left via the back of the mountain and out of view. Down in the water were many Common Eider, some Eurasian Wigeon and one or two Common Seals with their noses raised vertically from the water.

We crossed the causeway over Kolgarfarfjörður and from here, amongst the Eiders, we found a few nice Long-tailed Ducks (both males and females), a male Red-breasted Merganser and one or two Great Northern Divers (Common Loons). We arrived in Grundarfjörður for coffee/hot chocolate after which we checked a garden feeder and saw many Snow Buntings, Starlings, a few Icelandic Redwings and a Blackbird. There were sea duck at the back of the harbour. Amongst the Common Eider, Peter found the King/Common Eider hybrid; a smart bird with many features of a male King Eider that had been present here for a number of years. There were also one or two Harlequin Ducks, two Black Guillemots and single Shag and Red-throated Diver (Loon).

We drove on to Oláfsvík where we had our packed lunches overlooking the sea in bright sunshine. Then we headed past Hellissandur to try and look at the sea from the very tip of the peninsula. First we stopped at the church on the hill (Ingjaldshólskirkja) above Hellissandur to view the Snæfellsjökull volcano, made famous by Jules Verne, and then moved towards the point. The wind was quite strong now (and cold) and we could see why the whale watch trip had been swapped: the sea was quite rough and choppy and we could not see any whales or Orca.

On the return journey we stopped at various viewpoints for photographs of large icicles and a dramatic view of Kolgarfarfjörður from a hill top. We tried unsuccessfully to find somewhere to pull off the road as a White-tailed Eagle flew over us. Our final call was back with the ponies we had seen at the start of the day to take more photographs in better light, and then back to the hotel. Group members used the time before dinner to explore the harbour area of Stykkishólmur while Peter fuelled-up and prepared the minibus for our return to the airport the next day.

That evening the aurora put on another good showing out of town for a short while before clouds started to build.

## Day 5

Monday 5th March

### Stykkishólmur – Keflavik Airport (226 kilometres)

We woke to a dull, overcast day which soon turned to snow and then rain. We congratulated ourselves on 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. There was very little to see on the first part of the journey apart from a White-tailed Eagle sat on a rock as we travelled by. We stopped at Borganes for refreshments and a comfort break. Just after Borganes, geese in a roadside field appeared to be Greylag and Greenland White-fronted Geese.

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 gulls. Next stop was the bubbling mud pools and fumerals of Gunnuhver Hot Springs, and then on to the bridge between two tectonic plates where we could walk from Asia to America.

We arrived at Keflavik airport where the Heathrow contingent waved a happy farewell after a very successful tour, and the three flying to Manchester left later that evening.

This had been a memorable tour with two good aurora displays and a hint of a third, and also excellent close views of Sperm Whale and Orca. The presence of snow and wall to wall sunshine for all but the last day added to the experience and enhanced the scenery, as did some of the special species that make Iceland their home, such as Barrow's Goldeneye and the enigmatic Harlequin Duck.

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Þingvellavatn

## Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	March				
			2	3	4	5	6
1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓	✓		✓
2	Greater White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>					40
3	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		30	✓	8	2
4	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>		8		30	
5	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		✓	✓		
	Common/King Eider hybrid	<i>Somateria mollissima/spectabilis</i>				1	
7	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>			8	8	
9	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>				6	
10	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>		2			
11	Common Merganser	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		2			
12	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>				1	
13	Red-throated Loon	<i>Gavia stellata</i>				1	
14	Common Loon	<i>Gavia immer</i>				4	
15	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	✓		✓		✓
16	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>			2		
17	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>				1	
18	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			5	5	
19	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>			1	3	1
20	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>			1	8	
21	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>				1	
22	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>				10	
23	Purple Sandpiper (Icelandic)	<i>Calidris maritima littoralis</i>			150	75	
24	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>					1
25	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		2	✓	✓	✓
26	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>			✓	✓	✓
27	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>			✓	✓	✓
28	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>			✓	✓	✓
29	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>			✓	✓	
30	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>				2	
31	Rock Dove (Feral)	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>			1		
32	Icelandic Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius subaeson</i>			1		
33	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	1	✓	✓	✓	
34	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>			✓	✓	✓
35	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>				1	
36	Redwing (Icelandic)	<i>Turdus iliacus coburni</i>				4	
37	Snow Bunting (Icelandic)	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis insulae</i>				60	

## Mammals

1	Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>				2	
2	Killer Whale (Orca)	<i>Orcinus orca</i>			20		
3	Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>			8		