

# Iceland – Winter Wildlife & The Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour Report

9 - 13 March 2018



Gullfoss by Sheila Thomas



Northern Lights & shooting stars by Peter Dunn



Orca by Peter Dunn



Snow Buntings by Keith Clarkson

Report compiled by Peter Dunn & Keith Clarkson  
Images courtesy of Sheila Thomas, Peter Dunn & Keith Clarkson



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: [info@naturetrek.co.uk](mailto:info@naturetrek.co.uk)

W: [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk)

Tour participants: Peter Dunn & Keith Clarkson (leaders) with 12 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; 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

Friday 9th March

### Heathrow – Northern Light Inn

Peter and Keith were waiting in the arrivals lounge at Keflavik Airport as group members from two flights arrived almost together. Once we were all accounted for, the mini buses were brought round ready to load the luggage and transport the group to The Northern Lights Inn in hazy sunshine.

We were quickly settled into our comfortable rooms and gathered in the lounge before dinner where the leaders outlined the aims of the tour and some of the highlights to be looked for. This was followed by a tasty dinner in the restaurant where we got to know each other better.

One member of the group had booked to visit the Blue Lagoon whilst the remainder prepared to meet around 21:30 to look for an aurora or practice our night photography. However, the aurora pre-empted us and some were already outside watching it whilst others were summoned from their room. A small area of the aurora was visible in two sections of the sky but some low cloud also reflected strong orange light from the towns of Keflavik and Reykjavik. Although brief, we had witnessed this phenomenon and eventually we succumbed to the cold and headed in for a warm drink and sleep.

## Day 2

Saturday 10th March

### Northern Light Inn – Golden Circle – Reykjavik

Overnight heavy snow and strong easterly winds created a spectacular backdrop to our excellent breakfast at the Northern Lights Inn. After an hour we managed to dig our vehicles out of the metre-high snow drifts and edge our way through the blizzard amidst spectacular scenes. Remarkably, by the time we left the Reykjanes Peninsula, the sun broke through revealing a stunning snow-covered volcanic landscape.

Our drive took us through the outskirts of Reykjavík on our way to Selfoss and Iceland's golden circle via the Sog Valley. The River Sog provides one of the largest stretches of open water in the south west and naturally attracts a variety of wildlife including our first White-tailed Eagle, a few Whooper Swan and both Red-breasted and Common Merganser/Goosander. Further up the Valley, below the dam of the hydro-electric plant we found a pair of Barrow's Goldeneye and a lone immature male Harlequin Duck - all-in-all a fine start to our adventure.

Now it was time to enjoy the highlights of the 'Golden Circle' including a drive through a spectacular icy landscape to the world famous Geysir and the magnificent ice-encrusted waterfall at Gullfoss. After-which we headed back through the birch dominated dwarf scrub and past the frozen lake in the Þingvellir National Park. Here we witnessed the dramatic divergence of the American and Eurasian tectonic plates and the site of Iceland's historic seat of parliament - the Alþingi, which dates back to 967 AD.

Satiated we headed back to Reykjavík, to the hotel where we once again enjoyed an excellent meal before retiring for a well-earned sleep.

## Day 3

Sunday 11th March

### Reykjavik - Stykkishólmur

After breakfast we left the town and headed north for the Snaefellsnes Peninsula. It was a breezy start and the wind steadily increased as we went north. Although the air temperature hovered around 0C, the wind chill felt more like -10C!

We passed through the 6 km long Hvalfjörður road tunnel and stopped to view back towards Reykjavík from the other side. The wind chill meant we didn't stay out of the vehicles for long but still managed Northern Fulmar, Common Eider, Northern Raven and Great Black-backed Gull along the shoreline. We then attempted to view the partially frozen estuary nature reserve Blautós, but it had been gated off however we succeeded in seeing a young Grey Heron, a scarce bird in Iceland.

A comfort stop, lunch purchased and a warming drink was purchased in Borganes before we headed north. We made a brief stop at Langerfoss to photograph a frozen waterfall and also a relatively fresh lava field. Lunch was taken at a picnic spot on the southern shore of the peninsula (although the cold breeze kept most inside the vehicle) before we headed up over the Vatnaleid Pass where the scenery changed with drifting snow and the ice and snow fields making for a fantastic landscape.

First stop was at Kolgrafafjörður where a nice male Long-tailed Duck showed well along with a Black Guillemot and good numbers of Red-breasted Mergansers. As we were about to leave a local birder told us where the King

Eider was last seen and with a little effort most were able to see this stunning male through the telescope. Continuing on, we dropped down into Grundarfjörður where we had a warming drink before visiting the church (which was unfortunately locked) and checking the harbour where another Long-tailed Duck showed well and we could compare both Glaucous with Iceland Gulls. Just before we left the town a flock of 75 Snow Buntings briefly dropped onto some snowed cleared ground next to the mini buses.

We travelled back towards Stykkishólmur stopping for a photo of Kolgrafafjörður from a high viewpoint and arrived at the hotel by 5:30pm to freshen up before a nice three course dinner.

After dinner and the checklist we ventured out beyond the town to get a brief but reasonable show of the Northern Lights arching across the sky.

## Day 4

## Monday 12th March

### Stykkishólmur – Grundarfjörður – Oláfsvik Boat Trip

We awoke to the sun rising over Stykkishólmur Bay, highlighting the local church, a striking example of modern architecture that dominates the town. The design of the church was inspired by the Arctic Tern, of which Iceland supports the largest population in the world.

Although temperatures were still below freezing a calmness had returned and the warming sun created an idyllic start to our whale watching day. Our boat didn't sail until 2pm in the afternoon allowing a further chance to explore the stunning landscapes of the Snaefellsnes Peninsula.

Our first stop at Helgafellssveit provided a great photo-shoot opportunity of the hardy Icelandic Ponies that remain on the hill throughout the winter. In the same area we saw our second White-tailed Eagle of the trip, heading west towards the fjord. A later stop provided further sightings of what was presumably the same bird sitting, sentinel-like on the scree slopes overlooking Seljafjörður

A return visit to Kolgrafafjörður in almost mirror calm conditions provided prolonged views of the male King Eider, at least 14 Long-tailed Duck and a fleeting view of a lone Gyr Falcon which caused havoc amongst the resident Shag.

Moving on to Grundarfjörður harbour and a welcome cup of coffee we were able to watch 35 Purple Sandpipers, Turnstone and get to grips with the nuances of identifying Glaucous and Iceland Gulls.

Refreshed, we continued westwards to Oláfsvik, where our boat was harboured. En route we enjoyed spectacular views of the Snaefellsnesjökull ice-cap and volcano and, whilst eating our packed lunch, were able to marvel at a group of c14 Harlequin Duck, which included several males in immaculate plumage.

Shortly after, at Oláfsvik, we donned our insulated, waterproof onesies, boarded the 'Iris', Laki Tours very comfortable new boat, and motored along the coast to the waters off the end of the Peninsula where Orcas had been seen in the morning. En route we enjoyed a flying masterclass provided by the host of Northern Fulmars breeding along the coast. Suddenly, the tranquillity was broken when a shout went out and we experienced our first Orca, the enormous dorsal fin of a male Killer Whale. For the next exhilarating hour Orcas, large and small,

distant and close, enthralled us. The highlight, a large male powering towards the boat only to disappear underneath us, re-appearing seconds later on the opposite side of the boat giving everyone close-up views. Even more excitement followed, when the skipper spotted the forward pointing blow of a Sperm Whale. Within a few minutes we were almost alongside the 'logging' whale. We watched in awe as it started to prepare for a deep dive, the huge forehead broke the surface, then the back and dorsal fin arched and finally the enormous tail and deep brown flukes towered upwards and slid down into the dark waters. A truly magical moment for the whole group.

Our journey back to Oláfsvík was delayed by yet more encounters with Killer Whales but there were no complaints from the exhilarated group. Once we had landed, it was time to head straight back to our hotel for another feast.

Finally, a post-dinner quest for yet more Northern Lights and even though the aurora forecast was very low the clear dark skies produced a Milky Way spectacular, several shooting stars and wave of green 'northern lights' that entertained us for an hour.

## Day 5

Tuesday 13th March

### Stykkishólmur – Keflavik Airport

We breakfasted earlier today as there were places to see on the way to the airport and the vehicle was packed and ready to go by 8:30am. We left a sleepy Stykkishólmur and made our way south crossing the mountain using the Vatnaleid Pass again. The snow and ice was still quite thick here but on reaching the southern side it disappeared and we were able to make better progress.

We arrived at Borganes where we chose our lunch snacks and had a warming drink before continuing on. Crossing the fjord through the Hvalfjörður road tunnel, we circumnavigated Reykjavík and turned south towards Grindavík. We took the road past the Blue Lagoon and stopped at the fumerals at Gunnhver where the group walked along the boardwalk and read about Gunna a female ghost that was laid there. She had caused great disturbance until a priest set a trap for her and she fell into the spring. This happened about 400 years ago. We ate our lunches here before pressing on to the bridge between the two continents of Asia and America. This area is part of the Reykjanes UNESCO Global Geopark and is the only place in the world where the Mid-Atlantic Ridge is visible above sea level.

Unfortunately, it was time to head for the Airport and as we drove along we could still see the Snæfellsjökull glacier and volcano glowing in the afternoon sunshine. This had been a successful and varied trip, not only for the amazing wildlife we were privileged to see but also the changes in weather condition, from sun to blizzards to bitterly cold gales and rough seas to calm waters and of course the Northern Lights!

The majority of the group were heading back to the UK together but two were flying later, two were staying overnight and Peter and Keith were taking an evening flight. We said farewell to each other with promises to meet up again maybe on another Naturetrek Tour.

## Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	March				
			9	10	11	12	13
1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓	✓		3
2	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		✓	✓	3	✓
3	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>		✓	20	2	
4	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓		✓
5	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		✓	✓		
6	King Eider	<i>Somateria spectabilis</i>			1	1	
7	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>		1		14	
9	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>			14	4	
10	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>		2			
11	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		15		1	
12	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		8	✓	4	
13	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
14	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			1		
15	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>				2	
16	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>			6	25	
17	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			1	1	
18	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>		1		2	
19	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>			✓	✓	✓
20	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>				2	
21	Purple Sandpiper [littoralis]	<i>Calidris maritima littoralis</i>			12	36	
22	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>				100+	
23	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>			2	2	
24	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
25	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>			✓	✓	✓
26	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>			2	✓	
27	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>			✓	✓	✓
28	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>			2	2	
29	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>			2	1	
30	Gyrfalcon	<i>Falco rusticolus</i>				1	
31	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
32	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
33	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>			3		✓
34	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>			135	1	

Mammals (T = tracks)

1	Arctic Fox	<i>Alopex lagopus</i>			T	T	
2	Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>			2	2	1
3	Killer Whale	<i>Orcinus orca</i>				11+	
4	Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter catodon</i>				1	

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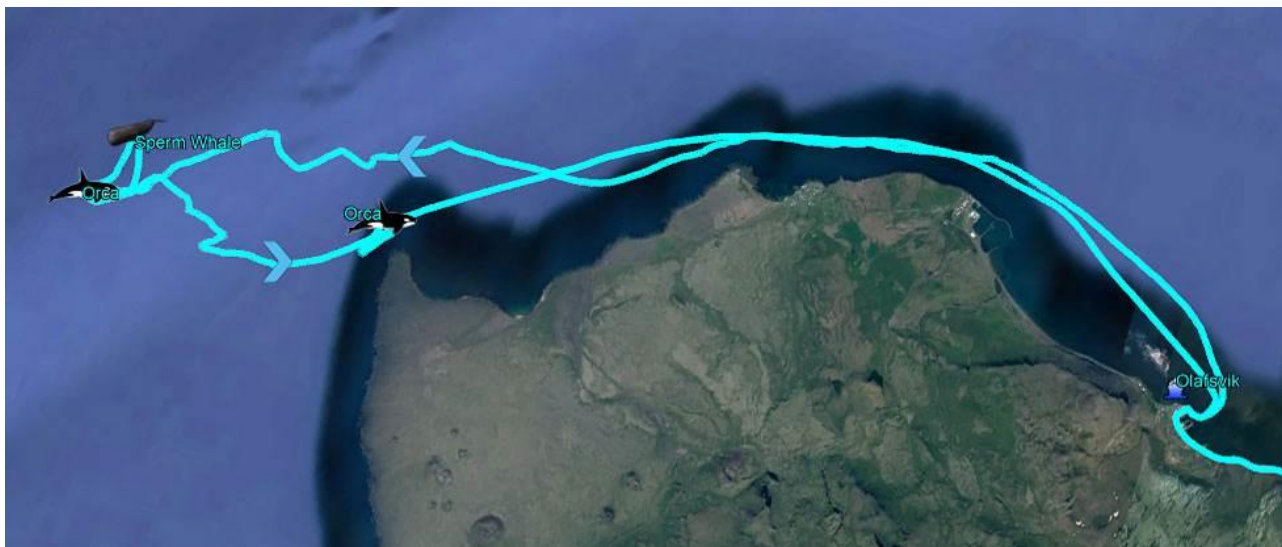
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Whale Watch route and sightings



Sperm Whale by Peter Dunn



Barrow's Goldeneye & Harlequin Duck by Sheila Thomas



The group kitted out for the whale watch tour