

# Iceland – Winter Wildlife & The Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour Report

13 – 17 March 2019



Orca (Killer Whale)



Sperm Whale



Northern Lights at Stykkisholmur



Harlequin Duck

Report and images by 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: Keith Clarkson (leader) with 7 Naturetrek clients

## Introduction

Iceland's island location, in the Atlantic Ocean, just south of the Arctic Circle, midway between the continents of North America and Europe, provides a unique opportunity to experience the dramatic volcanic landscapes and geological features associated with the mid-Atlantic Ridge, the remarkably rich marine wildlife, including whales, dolphins and seabirds and, when the skies are dark and clear, the northern lights. This trip is timed to balance the night and day length to enable us to enjoy the breadth of Iceland's natural wonders.

The northern lights or aurora borealis, 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. and seeing the aurora borealis on any given night is never guaranteed. 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 can create a dazzling dance of shimmering green, blue, white and red light in the sky.

## Day 1

**Wednesday 13th March**

Heathrow/Glasgow – Keflavík Airport – Eldhestar Hotel, Hveragerði

Keith was waiting in the arrivals lounge at Keflavík Airport as group members arrived. Once everyone was accounted for, the luggage was loaded aboard the minibus and we headed east through the Reykjanes Geopark to the Eldhestar Hotel, near Hveragerði. Heavy snow and low cloud created a dramatic introduction to Iceland.

Everyone quickly settled into the comfortable rooms and gathered for a very tasty dinner in the restaurant afterwhich Keith outlined the aims of the tour and some of the anticipated highlights.

The weather forecast was true to form and sadly the night sky remained in cloud. In the absence of being able to see the aurora everyone took the opportunity to catch up on some much needed sleep.

## Day 2

Thursday 14th March

### ‘The Golden Circle’

An overnight drop in temperature, clearing skies and a light dusting of snow ensured that everyone awoke to the sight of a magical winter landscape. After an excellent breakfast we headed out to marvel at the local hot springs, boiling grey mud-pools or Sulfatares and the fumeroles, steam vents that punctuated the mountain sides. Although the site of three tattooed young men bathing in the hot springs seemed to divert the attention of some of the party!

From Hveragerði the drive took the group north-east along the valley of the River Sog, where we stopped briefly to watch a feeding flock of 11 Barrow’s Goldeneye. Iceland is the only place in Europe where this basically American species is resident and the warmer, geothermal waters of the Sog provide one of the few regular wintering sites away from the main breeding grounds in the north of the island. Continuing northwards we drove past the Þingvallavatn, a large lake surrounded by dwarf birch and willow forest that dominates the landscape of the Þingvellir National Park. We were now in the heart of the great rift valley formed where the tectonic plates of North America and Europe are slowly moving apart – this is one of the few places where you can see the mid-Atlantic Ridge – a remarkable geological phenomena. Þingvellir is also one of the most important cultural sites in Iceland and we were able to see the ‘Law Stone’, at the heart of the historic Icelandic parliament or alþingi, one of the oldest in Europe, formed in 967 AD.

Now heading east we stopped briefly as a lone Gyr Falcon flew in front of our minibus, landing briefly on a fence-post before disappearing from view - a tantalising glimpse for some of the party, of this impressive but difficult to see raptor. We took lunch at Geysir where we watched in anticipation for the eruptions of Strokkur, a spectacular geyser set amongst crystal clear hot springs and pools. Refreshed we drove to the edge of the uplands to witness one of Iceland’s most spectacular waterfalls – Gullfoss. This magnificent ice-encrusted power-house did not disappoint.

Our final stop was at Kerið, a small, perfectly-formed, very accessible, water filled, or in our case, ice-filled, volcanic crater.

As the snow closed in once more we headed back to our hotel for another excellent dinner and an early night as cloud once again dominated the night sky.

## Day 3

Friday 15th March

Eldhestar Hotel – Stykkishólmur – Olafsvík – Fosshotel, Stykkishólmur

After breakfast we checked out of our hotel and headed north, to our next destination, Stykkishólmur, and the wonderful Snaefellsnes Peninsula. We drove past Reykjavík, through the 6km Hvalfjörður tunnel to the small town of Borgarnes, where we purchased packed lunches before continuing northwards past vast lava fields and ‘Vienetta-style’ mountains until we reached the spectacular Vatnaleið pass, our gateway through the Snaefellsnes

Peninsula, revealing the first view of the Breiðafjörður and the hundreds of small islands which pepper this vast fjord.

Arriving in Stykkishólmur, we received a phone call from Lákitours, our whale-watching company, saying that they were setting sail from the fishing town of Olafsvík, rather than their normal harbour at Grundarfjörður. This was wonderful news as it meant sea conditions were good and that we were potentially thirty minutes closer to the main whale feeding grounds, and so it proved to be. What followed was an amazing hour and half of whale watching. After 45 minutes our 'spotter', Maria, from the excellent whale conservation NGO, Orcaguardians, located a large group of feeding Orca which we watched in awe for a further 45 minutes. This was a known group of whales, led by the matriarch, 'Frigga' who was accompanied by her calves from three separate years and 11 other whales of a wide range of ages. These animals were intent on feeding, working as a group to drive the Herring into a ball before going in for the kill, whilst Glaucous and Great Black-backed Gulls and hundreds of Northern Fulmar and Black-legged Kittiwake picked up the scraps. The hunt was exciting but what followed was unexpected. A second, smaller group of five Orca appeared and the hunting came to a halt as the two groups interacted, young animals started spy-hopping with their heads held upright, completely out of the water, followed by a display of tail-flapping – exceptional! In all the commotion we barely noticed a young animal appear alongside the boat. The activity continued but our time had run out and we had to leave the whales and head back to port reflecting on the remarkable experience we had witnessed whilst enjoying the stunning backdrop of Snaefellsjökull, the active volcano, capped by a permanent ice-sheet that dominates the Peninsula.

After disembarking, Maria, the Director of Orcaguardians, gave the Naturetrek group a personal overview of what we had seen explaining that over 500 individual Orca have been identified. They are attracted to the Fjord in winter by the huge numbers of Herring. Fascinatingly, 21 of these individuals have later been re-sighted off the coast of Scotland in summer, where they feed not on Herring but seals.

After a 'team-photo' in our bright blue thermal onesies we headed back to the warmth of the Fosshotel and a fine dinner. Frustratingly, the night sky once more remained cloudy – the pressure was on - we only had one more chance to see the 'Northern Lights'.

## Day 4

## Saturday 16th March

Stykkishólmur – Arnarstapi – Hellissandur - Olafsvík - Grundarfjörður - Stykkishólmur

We awoke to a fresh light fall of snow and cloudy skies. The weather forecast suggested clear skies and sun in the afternoon so we explored the south side of the Snaefellsnes Peninsula in the morning leaving the spectacular northern fjords for the afternoon.

As it turned out this was a good call. Our first stop was to photograph the hardy Icelandic ponies that spend the winter outside and no sooner had we stopped than the air 'buzzed' with the sound of trilling Snow Buntings and a flighty flock of over 50 birds appeared, our first of the trip.

Moving on, we headed for the village of Arnarstapi, famous for its visually striking columnar basalt cliffs which support a large seabird colony. Hundreds of Black-legged Kittiwakes were already back on their nest sites creating a dramatic contrast with the black cliffs. Good numbers of Northern Fulmar also defended their nest-

sites in preparation for the forthcoming breeding season, whilst on the sea, five Harlequin Duck and a group of five Black Guillemots fed amongst the large numbers of Glaucous Gull, European Shag, and Common Eider.

Taking advantage of the now calm and sunny conditions we ate our packed lunch at a picnic site near the north-western tip of the peninsula overlooking a small golden sand cove and the Breiðafjörður. Seabirds feeding offshore drew our attention and we quickly honed in on a feeding group of five Orca. Life got even better when an eagle-eyed member of the party spotted the distant blows of a large whale. Further views revealed the more lateral blow of a large Sperm Whale.

Riding on the crest of our wave we headed east along the north coast of the fjord towards Grundarfjörður, enjoying the stunning scenery whilst keeping one eye on the sea. Our diligence was rewarded when a large aggregation of feeding gulls revealed the dorsal fins of a large number of feeding dolphins. Keith let out a cry to attract the attention of the group ‘loads of cetaceans’ which to his surprise was interpreted as ‘loads of crustaceans’. The bewildered group made their way to the scopes only to be amazed by the sheer number of White-beaked Dolphins feeding amongst the seabirds. After 30 minutes dolphin indulgence we headed on towards Kolgrafarfjörður having taken photographs of one of Iceland’s great landmarks, Kirkjufell, a striking mountain reflected perfectly in the icy, still-waters of the fjord below.

Kolgrafarfjörður did not disappoint, huge rafts of Common Eider, on the seaward side of the causeway, were interspersed with displaying Long-tailed Ducks and winter plumaged Black Guillemots. On the inland side of the fjord two Red-throated Divers attracted our attention when hundreds of Shag suddenly took to the air. In the distance a large bird of prey, being mobbed by a much smaller bird was flushing everything, as it flew closer, low over the water, it became apparent we were watching an immature White-tailed Sea Eagle being harried by a Great Black-backed Gull! Driving round to the side of the fjord we were able to obtain views of the bird as it landed on the water’s edge – a giant rock of a bird, at home in its Iceland stronghold here on the Snaefellsnes Peninsula

Time had flown and we had to head back to our hotel for a much appreciated dinner. Unfortunately, once again the cloud was closing in and our last chance of an aurora was starting to look precarious. However, a small window of clear sky was promised by the Icelandic weather service at 2130h. Our plan was to meet at nine o’clock and drive to an area outside the town to find dark skies, stepping out into the hotel car park we were amazed to see a very impressive veil of green light swirling across the sky, for 20 minutes we watched and photographed the Northern Lights – an extraordinary end to an extraordinary day.

## Day 5

Sunday 17th March

### Stykkishólmur – Reykjavík – Keflavík Airport

Today was about checking out from the Fosshotel, Stykkishólmur and retracing our steps south to Reykjavík, where we dropped off two members of the group, creating an opportunity to see the gargantuan concrete-built Lutheran church, Hallgrímskirkja, which dominates the city’s skyline.

From here we drove further south calling off briefly at the ‘Blue Lagoon’ so that everyone had chance to see glowing chalk-blue waters set against a backdrop of spuming steam from the large geothermal power station and the black, jagged lava coated in soft grey Woolly-haired moss. One member of the group had arrived in Iceland

ahead of the tour starting and had booked an independent visit to the ‘Blue Lagoon Spa’ which they highly recommended.

Twenty minutes later we arrived at the airport, unloaded the minibus and said our good-byes. The volcanic landscape, the dramatic weather and northern lights and of course the stunning wildlife providing a heady mix that will remain in the memory for a long time to come.

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Orca hunting



Group at Hveragerthi hot spring



Group ready for whale watching

## Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

|                      | Common name                            | Scientific name                     | March |     |      |       |    |
|----------------------|--|-------------------------------------|-------|-----|------|-------|----|
|                      |  |                                     | 13    | 14  | 15   | 16    | 17 |
| 1                    | Greylag Goose                          | <i>Anser anser</i>                  |       | 50  | 100s | 100s  | ✓  |
| 2                    | Whooper Swan                           | <i>Cygnus cygnus</i>                |       | 6   | 10   | 12    | ✓  |
| 3                    | Eurasian Wigeon                        | <i>Mareca penelope</i>              |       |     | 50   | 50+   | ✓  |
| 4                    | Mallard                                | <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>           |       |     | ✓    | 20    | ✓  |
| 5                    | Common Eider                           | <i>Somateria mollissima</i>         |       | 3   | 500  | 1000s | ✓  |
| 6                    | Harlequin Duck                         | <i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>    |       |     | 15   | 5     |    |
| 7                    | Long-tailed Duck                       | <i>Clangula hyemalis</i>            |       |     |      | 5     |    |
| 8                    | Barrow's Goldeneye                     | <i>Bucephala islandica</i>          |       | 11  |      |       |    |
| 9                    | Red-breasted Merganser                 | <i>Mergus serrator</i>              |       | 1   | 1    | 15    |    |
| 10                   | Red-throated Diver                     | <i>Gavia stellata</i>               |       |     |      | 2     |    |
| 11                   | Northern Fulmar                        | <i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>           |       | 20+ | 100s | 1000s | ✓  |
| 12                   | Northern Gannet                        | <i>Morus bassanus</i>               |       |     | 2    |       |    |
| 13                   | European Shag                          | <i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>    |       |     | 10   | 200   | ✓  |
| 14                   | Great Cormorant                        | <i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>          |       |     | 3    | 30    | ✓  |
| 15                   | White-tailed Eagle                     | <i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>         |       |     |      | 1     |    |
| 16                   | Eurasian Oystercatcher                 | <i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>        |       |     | 100+ | 100   | ✓  |
| 17                   | Ruddy Turnstone                        | <i>Calidris maritima</i>            |       |     |      | 1     |    |
| 18                   | Dunlin                                 | <i>Calidris alpina</i>              |       |     | 100+ | c100  |    |
| 19                   | Purple Sandpiper [ <i>littoralis</i> ] | <i>Calidris maritima littoralis</i> |       |     |      | 30    |    |
| 20                   | Common Redshank                        | <i>Tringa totanus</i>               |       |     |      | 5     |    |
| 21                   | Black-legged Kittiwake                 | <i>Rissa tridactyla</i>             |       |     | 200+ | 100s  |    |
| 22                   | Great Black-backed Gull                | <i>Larus marinus</i>                |       | 2   | ✓    | ✓     | ✓  |
| 23                   | Glaucous Gull                          | <i>Larus hyperboreus</i>            |       |     | 50+  | 200   |    |
| 24                   | European Herring Gull                  | <i>Larus argentatus</i>             |       | 4   |      |       | 1  |
| 25                   | Common Guillemot                       | <i>Uria aalge</i>                   |       |     |      | 50    |    |
| 26                   | Razorbill                              | <i>Alca torda</i>                   |       |     | 1    |       |    |
| 27                   | Black Guillemot                        | <i>Cephus grylle</i>                |       |     |      | 7     |    |
| 28                   | Rock Dove (Feral)                      | <i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>        |       | ✓   |      |       | ✓  |
| 29                   | Gyrfalcon                              | <i>Falco rusticolus</i>             |       | 1   |      |       |    |
| 30                   | Northern Raven                         | <i>Corvus corax</i>                 |       | 40  | 20+  | ✓     | ✓  |
| 31                   | Common Starling                        | <i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>             | 1     | 4   | 10   | ✓     | ✓  |
| 32                   | Common Blackbird                       | <i>Turdus merula</i>                |       |     |      |       | 1  |
| 33                   | Snow Bunting                           | <i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>        |       |     |      | c100  |    |
| Mammals (T = tracks) |  |                                     |       |     |      |       |    |
| 1                    | Orca (Killer Whale)                    | <i>Orcinus orca</i>                 |       |     | 20+  |       |    |
| 2                    | White-beaked Dolphin                   | <i>Lagenorhynchus albirostris</i>   |       |     |      | 50+   |    |
| 3                    | Sperm Whale                            | <i>Physeter catadon</i>             |       |     |      | 1     |    |
| 4                    | Atlantic Grey Seal                     | <i>Halichoerus grypus</i>           |       |     |      | 1     |    |
| 5                    | Arctic Fox                             | <i>Alopex lagopus</i>               |       |     |      | T     |    |