

# Iceland – Northern Lights and Winter Wildlife

Naturetrek Tour Report

11th – 15th March 2020



Report and photos compiled by Andrew Bray



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Tour participants: Andrew Bray (leader) with seven Naturetrek clients.

## Day 1

## Wednesday 11th March

Starting from different airports, and at different times, our group converged on a hotel near Hveragerði. Andrew picked up three people at the airport and made a short detour to the town of Grindavík, where we scanned the harbour from both ends of the sea wall and saw Fulmar, Glaucous, Black-headed and Great Black-backed Gulls. Taking the main road to Þorlákshöfn there was lots of snow and we stopped at the bridge at Hildarvatn where we saw a female Harlequin Duck plus Wigeon and Whooper Swans. It was then onto Hveragerði and the hotel. We saw plenty of Ravens near dwellings.

Arriving at 6pm we met up with the other four people on the tour who had arrived several days earlier. That morning they had taken the opportunity to ride the diminutive Icelandic horses that belong to the stables next to the hotel and told us about it over dinner. We checked the no-show of the Northern Lights before retiring to bed.

## Day 2

## Thursday 12th March

It was not an early start as we left just before 9am. We drove nearly to Selfoss and turned left before heading to Þingvellir along the River Sog. We stopped at the lake between the two power stations to see Goosander, Red-breasted Merganser, Tufted Duck, Mallard and one male Barrow's Goldeneye. A juvenile White-tailed Eagle flew past us. Further on at Ultjótuvatn, the next lake, there were lots of Barrow's Goldeneye but too distant to take decent photos as the ice had melted a long way out.

We then visited Þingvellir the site of Iceland's ancient parliament, the Alþingi (Althing). It lies right on the mid-Atlantic ridge, where the flat valley floor is intersected by a series of dramatic fissures, the largest of which was the meeting place for the island's original settlers. Groups of Vikings would walk for many days to gather here in early summer and agree the laws that would govern life across the island. We saw the Prime Minister's summer house and the National cemetery where only two poets are buried. We walked around the Law Rock and visited the drowning pool where 18 ladies died in sacks from 1564.

We had lunch and learnt about the Aa and Pahoehoe lava. Afterwards we went to Geysir and watched Strokkur erupt several times. The first eruption was good then the following three were weaker but last was truly spectacular. We also visited Gullfoss though by now it was snowing very lightly. The path to the edge of the falls was closed as it is very icy in winter, but we still had dramatic views from the lower level as we descended the steps from the car park. There was a great deal of ice on the falls. The falls are in two parts: the first is 11 metres and the second is 20 metres high, with an average flow of 109 cubic metres per second. It was here, in the early part of the last century, that Sigríður Tómasdóttir fought to keep the falls from plans to build a hydroelectric power station. She was declared Iceland's first environmentalist and celebrated with a memorial plaque near the falls. The gorge is 2.5 kilometres long and up to 70 metres deep.

Our final stop was at Flúðir at the Secret Lagoon which is a popular hot pool. We had to find the hottest water in the pool, and everyone thoroughly enjoyed this open air experience! By the time we came out the vehicle was covered in snow and we headed back to the hotel. We had a lovely meal after which we all recorded our sightings

for the day. Unfortunately, the Northern Lights were not visible as the sky was very cloudy across the whole of Iceland.

## Day 3

Friday 13th March

We drove to Reykjavik and along Route 1 to Borganes where we had a drink and Andrew filled up the minibus with fuel. Driving on to Grundarfjörður on the Snæfellsnes Peninsula we discovered the whale watching had unfortunately been cancelled for the day due to high winds. However, the forecast was better for the following day, with calmer conditions, so we re-booked for the following morning.

Just outside the town of Grundarfjörður is Kirkjufell “Church Mountain”; one of the most photographed mountains in Iceland. Here we saw scores of Oystercatchers and Purple Sandpipers. We continued to Ólafsvik where we had lunch in the restaurant Hraun. On the way back we stopped twice just outside Ólafsvik where there were Harlequin Duck, Eider, Great Black-backed and Glaucous Gulls. There were three Iceland Gulls amongst the throng. We returned to the pretty port at Stykkishólmur where we saw gulls and Eider.

## Day 4

Saturday 14th March

From our base in pretty town of Stykkisholmur, today we drove along the length of the Snæfellsness Peninsula. Before leaving town, we first went to the port at to see Black Guillemot and learnt the difference between Shag and Cormorant. Heading west, we stopped at a lay-by at Búlandshófi, where we saw rafts of Harlequin Duck, before continuing on to Ólafsvik to check in for the whale-watching trip.

Donning warm protective blue, all-in-one suits we boarded the ship and set out into the wide bay of Breiðafjörður where cetaceans gather to feed during the winter. We were very fortunate in witnessing Orcas, Sperm Whales and Harbour Porpoises during our time at sea, as well as plenty of Fulmars and Razorbills. We docked a little late and went for a bite to eat and warm up before continuing our day on the Snæfellsness Peninsula.

It frequently snows in winter and snow posts at the sides of the road guide drivers along the road. Near the end of the peninsula we stopped to take some photos of the Snæfell Glacier which briefly showed through cloud. The glacier caps the Snæfellsjökull Volcano which was made famous by Jules Verne as the portal to the underworld in his fantasy novel “Journey to the Centre of the Earth”.

We stopped at the two stacks at Lóndranger where we saw lots of Guillemot and Kittiwake plus a single Brünnich’s Guillemot. Our final stop was at Arnerstapi where a monument to the troll Barður has been built. It was then back to the hotel where we had a lovely meal. The guide eventually retired at 1.45am, watching the sky for the elusive Northern Lights.

## Day 5

Sunday 15th March

Today was very windy and the blowing snow obscured the road at times as we drove over the pass towards Reykjavik. We continued through Borganes and stopped for a drink just before Mosfellsbær. Further on, we stopped at a bird-watching point at Gönguleiðir, where we saw lots of Greylag Geese and Whooper Swans plus

three Common Seals in the sea. It was then across the road to the bakery for lunch. After filling up with fuel we drove to the Park Inn where we said goodbye to one guest, then headed onto the airport.

Despite challenging conditions, the tour gave us all some spectacular views of nature including brilliant sightings of Orcas, Sperm Whales and Harbour Porpoises. There were huge flocks of birds including Purple Sandpiper and we did see rafts of Harlequin Duck at sea. The experience strengthened our resolve to come back during summer when a different landscape would be on view.

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## Species List

### Birds

	Common name	Scientific name	Trip	March 2020				
				11	12	13	14	15
1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	x			x		x
2	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	x		11			x
3	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	x		x	x	x	x
4	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	x		2			
5	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	x		x	x	x	x
6	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	x		x			2
7	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	x	x		x	x	x
8	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>	x	1		9	x	
9	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>	x			1		
10	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>	x		x			
11	Common Merganser (Goosander)	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	x		1			
12	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	x		3	3	2	
13	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	x			x	x	3
14	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	x			1		
15	Purple Sandpiper [ <i>littoralis</i> ]	<i>Calidris maritima littoralis</i>	x			x	1	
16	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	x				x	
17	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	x	x		2		
18	Mew (Common) Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	x	1		6		
19	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	x	x		x	x	x
20	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>	x	x		x	x	x
21	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>	x			3	4	
22	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	x	x		x	3	x
23	Thick-billed Murre (Brünnich's Guillemot)	<i>Uria lomvia</i>	x				1	
24	Common Murre (Guillemot)	<i>Uria aalge</i>	x				x	
25	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>	x				x	
26	Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>	x				6	
27	Red-throated Loon (Diver)	<i>Gavia stellata</i>	x				1	
28	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	x	x		x	x	x
29	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>	x	2				
30	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	x				1	
31	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	x	x	x	x	8	x
32	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>	x		1			
33	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	x	12	3	x	x	x
34	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	x			x	x	x
35	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>	x	x	x	x	x	



## Mammals

	Common Name	Scientific name	March 2020				
			11	12	13	14	15
1	Orca (Killer Whale)	<i>Orcinus orca</i>				5	
2	Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>				2	
3	Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>				3	
4	Harbour (Common) Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>					3