

Iceland – Northern Lights & Winter Wildlife

Naturetrek Tour Report

4th – 8th March 2022



Glaucous Gull

Report & images by Neil McMahon



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Summary

A short five-day trip to the unique island of Iceland provided us all with an opportunity to see this land of ice and steam at its most beautiful. Drifts of clean white snow, dramatic mountains, distant glaciers, inert (only just!) volcanoes, hot springs and spectacular waterfalls provided an almost surreal backdrop to our journey around parts of the south and west. The hardy Icelandic horses could be seen wherever we went, stoic animals able to put up with the extremes of weather and temperature. Mobile flocks of Snow Buntings with their beautiful clear calls and ginger-and-white plumage defied the impossible conditions for small birds. The harbours were full of white-winged gulls, big Glaucous Gulls sharing the ice and rocks with their smaller Iceland cousins and rafts of shellfish-eating Eider ducks could be seen almost wherever we went along the coasts. The birds may have been few and far between, but we managed several views of Merlin, a pair of stately Gyrfalcons and of course the 'flying door' White-tailed Eagles. The Northern Lights only provided a weak showing but the extremes of weather and the hues and contrast against the black volcanic escarpments and lava fields more than made up for this. Our whale-watching expedition proved to be particularly successful with close views of a pod of Orca (Killer Whales) and no less than three Humpback Whales at close range! This short trip was centred around two geo-thermally warmed hotels with comfortable rooms and good food and of course the legendary Icelandic hospitality.'

Day 1

Friday 4th March

Five guests and the tour leader met up at North Terminal, Gatwick and left on an easyJet flight to Keflavik, the journey lasting just short of three hours. Don met us at the airport, and we quite quickly managed to obtain our nine-seater minibus and stow our luggage.

We took a slow drive east and then south to Grindavik, passing the turn-off for the famous 'Blue Lagoon'. At Grindavik we scanned across the harbour, which immediately provided views of two Black Guillemots, plenty of Common Eider and flocks of gulls which included good numbers of Glaucous, Great Black-backed and Herring Gulls, small numbers of Black-headed Gulls, hundreds of Kittiwakes, about 20 Iceland Gulls and a first-winter 'Nelson's' Gull (a hybrid Glaucous x Herring Gull). Waders included three Redshanks, a Turnstone and 30 Purple Sandpipers. Two Mallard, Eurasian Wigeon and Shags and Cormorants were also on view and a flock of 25 Snow Buntings and a female Blackbird were attracted to a nearby garden. Reasonable numbers of Starlings were also in the settlement, which still had plenty of snow, albeit melting a little.

We popped into a café in the town with good coffee and cookies and the like, and having warmed up, we boarded our vehicle and headed east along route 427 with more Starlings and Snow Bunting seen in Grindavik on our departure. Wildlife was minimal from this south-coast highway except for plenty of Ravens and wheeling Fulmars and occasional concentrations of gulls. Up to 20 Whooper Swans were grazing on poor-quality grasses and we saw our first Icelandic ponies/horses. Distant ducks on a thawing lake included Red-breasted Mergansers and another flock of Snow Bunting were mobile.

We took a diversion into Porlakshofn and checked the shoreline there. Unbelievably, there were several surfers braving the icy seas!! Birds around them included plenty more Eiders, the same variety of gulls, a single Razorbill

in summer plumage, a flying drake Long-tailed Duck and Shags, Cormorants and four passing Gannets. A flock of Greylags and more Starlings were nearby.

We drove on to Hotel Eldhestar after first purchasing some food supplies from a nearby supermarket for our picnic lunch the following day. Greylag Geese, Starlings singing their imitation of Redwing and Great Spotted Woodpecker and more Whooper Swans and Ravens were our final birds of the day. Later efforts at viewing the clouded sky for the Aurora were initially poor with very limited glimpses, and we could hear Whooper Swans calling in the dark from the nearby fields. However, from 11pm until midnight the Aurora Borealis provided a more sustained, if rather weak showing in the sky above us and over the ridge to the north. It improved again in the early hours of the morning, by which time Don was the only one with the persistence and stamina and technical skill with his camera to capture an image of the best of the show.

Day 2

Saturday 5th March

By 6.20am in the morning a heavy veil of cloud prevented any viewing of the Northern Lights and our buffet breakfast was available from 7am and proved a pleasant distraction!

We left the hotel at about 8.20am to complete the 'Golden Circle' Route. As we progressed first east and then north-east the snow cover deepened, and it was very much a winter scene with very few signs of life. The small herds of tough Icelandic ponies kept us focused after the initial rush of bird sightings which included Starling, Raven, Fulmar and a pair of Mallard. A bird perched in a roadside tree proved to be a female Merlin – but there was not much out there for her to hunt!!

We saw distant views of the volcano, Hekla, but it was not showing any visible signs of activity. We continued slowly along the road to Gullfoss, our studded winter tyres being essential for the ice-affected final miles of the journey. On arrival we took a comfort stop and fitted crampons to walk down to the icy waterfall. The upper viewing area was wind-affected and cold, but lower down it was much more comfortable, being out of the wind and afforded great viewing. Efforts were made with a variety of lenses and mobile phones to capture the scene.

This birdless zone was shattered when a bird appeared over the waterfall and then dashed past us down the ravine – sadly, only Paul and Neil saw the fast-moving Gyrfalcon. A minute or two later and another bird appeared overhead, and some very loud shouting alerted everyone in our party to see the second Gyrfalcon, this one carrying the remnants of prey. It also hurtled past us down the ravine. This was a bird we had only dared hope for, and the wildlife highlight of the day!!

After having our fill of the waterfall, we headed to the café and shop where Don much enjoyed his beloved lamb soup! The rest of us drank beverages and completed a little retail therapy – particularly fridge magnets – and of course, warmed ourselves up too. After watching a close-up pair of Ravens we drove back down the road to Geysir and watched the regular eruptions of Strokkur. No matter how much anticipation there was, it still made us jump with the sudden explosion of scalding water and steam. After trying to capture the event by photo and video, we headed back to the minibus and consumed our packed lunch. The remainder of the day was spent driving west to Pingvellir National Park. However, at about 2pm, and exactly as forecast, heavy rain and strong winds hit us hard and continued for the rest of the day and into the night.

We initially endured the weather from the comfort of the minibus, but the higher areas were a total whiteout with a considerable layer of snow, and the lower areas were difficult to appreciate in the awful weather. We took a route south down an ice-affected Route 36 and down the eastern flank of Lake Pingvallavatu which was mostly frozen over. We scanned occasional patches of open water but the only species on view were a few examples of hardy Red-breasted Mergansers. Moving south onto Route 35 we again bumped into plenty of Ravens, but there was no other wildlife on offer, so after a quick grocery shop in the nearby supermarket, it was back to the hotel for 4.20pm and an early bath (or the option of a hot tub) to warm up.

The Arctic Char with potatoes and spinach was a much-enjoyed evening meal (we'd had roast lamb the night before) with sweets of chocolate mousse and Skyr yogurt and berries also enjoyed. Gull beer, Lava stout and brandy were amongst the alcoholic beverages sampled. The rain and heavy cloud continued through the first half of the night with no opportunities for seeing the Northern Lights.

Day 3

Sunday 6th March

We awoke to a partly cloudy night sky, and it had been snowing during the early hours. The sliding door of the minibus was locked frozen until a combination of heat and brute force permitted entry. After our buffet breakfast and packing, we departed the Hotel Eldhaster and headed west over the hills to the outskirts of Reykjavik before turning north. Strong sunlight and the glare of fresh snow tinged the clouds with pinks, yellow and buff. We saw several vehicles abandoned on the edge of the highway, caught out by the wintry conditions earlier. Snow-ploughs were in operation as we filed northwest and took the six-kilometre tunnel under Hvalfjodur – where the air temperature was 8°C warmer than outside!!

We made steady progress, seeing Greylag Geese, Whooper Swans, Common Eider, gulls, Fulmars and Ravens en route. We crossed the road causeway over to Borgarnes where it was time for a hot drink, toilets and to top up the minibus with diesel. Here we witnessed a Merlin pursuing a flock of Snow Buntings. Later the buntings came flying back and the three flocks totaled at least 300 birds. We then followed the minor roads along the southern coastline of the Snaefellsner Peninsula. We came across a stranded motorist who had pulled off the road and miscalculated the depth of the roadside snow and was stuck. With the assistance of another motorist and a towrope, it didn't take us long to pull him out and send him on his way! Powerful storms swept in from the south and intermittently obliterated the road with hail and powdered pellets of snow, but for much of the time it was still sunny!

Guests armed with cameras and suitable lenses went into overdrive capturing shots of buttresses of rock, snowfields, lava-fields, bridges and . . . some more horses! We ate our packed lunch at an elevated vantage point which was both dramatic and also beautiful. After lunch we drove the short distance to the community of Arnastapi where we parked up and went for a walk. It was icy underfoot with a strong wind doing its best to blow us off our feet. We looked briefly at the Stone Troll and checked out the sea birds on the cliffs or flying along them. Kittiwakes and Fulmars were already claiming nesting rights on the ledges and numerous species of gull sallied along over the cliffs including Glaucous and Iceland. A dark Grey Seal was fishing just beyond the breakers and Common Eider and Shag were plentiful. Unfortunately, one of our number slipped on the ice, but thankfully there were no broken bones, although a camera smacking into the nose was painful!!

A Common or Harbour Seal was close in, but disappeared behind the basalt columns. In less challenging conditions we would have lingered longer in the hope of finding something new, but the powerful wind had a cold edge to it, so it was back to the bus and off to a café to thaw out.

We next took a drive round the western headland of the Snaefellsner Peninsula, stopping to scan the sea and taking scenery photographs where appropriate. Most of the birds were repeats as we progressed east and ended up at the Stikkisholmur Foss Hotel. Here we checked in and subsequently enjoyed a pleasant evening meal of Icelandic Cod. A very weak Aurora was captured digitally that evening from outside the hotel, but to some observers it was passed over as a veil of light cloud.

Day 4

Monday 7th March

Our whale-watching trip booked for the previous day had been postponed until 2pm today and then put back again to 4pm, to try and coincide with the best weather and sea conditions. We were keeping our fingers crossed that we would be able to get out later in the day.

After breakfast, and following a fair dollop of snow overnight, we left our hotel and took the short journey down to the harbour. Straight away we were into the birds, with plenty of vocal Ravens, rummaging Starlings and flights of Snow Buntings. On the water there were several Common Eiders and Black Guillemots providing a close approach and a flock of 30 rather confiding Purple Sandpipers were roosting on the bases of the harbour mooring areas. Assorted gulls loafed on the pontoons or on the water just outside the harbour, with a few Shags thrown in for good measure. A very distant White-tailed Eagle could be seen perched up on a folded peak beyond some islands and an adult Great Northern Diver rode the waters very majestically. Agitated gulls and Fulmars were the signal that another eagle was nearby, and we enjoyed great telescope views of an immature White-tailed Eagle resting on an offshore island.

Very pleased with our harbour foray, we motored west and took our time looking for scenery shots and any wildlife that wanted to show itself. It wasn't long before we found a small gathering of Harbour Seals and of course, plenty of Common Eiders. Our third White-tailed Eagle of the day flew around the shoreline and inland. Immediately west of Grundarfjörður we found a flock of 11 Harlequin Ducks which were much appreciated, as were the 10 Long-tailed Ducks about 20 minutes earlier. We spent some time looking at a small group of Glaucous Gulls which included dappled-headed winter-plumage birds, clean white-headed summer-plumage birds and of course, first-, second- and third-winter immature birds too.

At Olafsvík we had lunch at the very good Sker restaurant just off the main road in order to fortify ourselves for our sea adventure. Travelling in the minibus as far as Ríf, we checked the sea for any signs of life and were immediately rewarded with views of several Humpback Whales, two of which were initially close to the shoreline and remained close to each other. Around them were lots of gulls, particularly Kittiwakes, plus Fulmar and flocks of Razorbills.

Flushed with success we returned to Olafsvík in order to board our whale-watching boat. A Merlin sat on some harbour lightstands, our second of the day as we had seen one chasing Snow Buntings just as we were leaving our hotel earlier.

After donning some very fetching all-in-one suits which fitted over our fleeces and coats, we boarded our hundred and fifty foot vessel and chugged out of the harbour. Fly-past Fulmars were photogenic, and they and the Kittiwakes remained alongside for the whole excursion.

It was probably about 35 minutes after leaving the harbour that we encountered our first Orcas. A huge male and a couple of small animals were slowly cleaving the water around us, the male slow and methodical, and smaller animals quicker and more energetic. With a two-metre dorsal fin, it was generally easier to keep tabs on the male(s) when they nearer the surface. Video is probably the most effective way to record the presence of these apex predators as the loose pod of eight or 10 animals concentrated on homing in on their Herring prey. Trying to anticipate where an animal might surface next for an all-too-brief head shot is tricky when taking digital stills, but we kept trying! After some 30 minutes watching these supreme sea mammals, we moved off further east and encountered three different Humpback Whales which provided close views prior to their protracted dives. Probably the most likely large baleen whale to be located in these waters, the population around Iceland is at least stable as the world population slowly increases. These animals seemed intent on feeding and so after judging their behaviour to be not particularly adventurous we left them to it and headed back to the harbour. Other birds out there included Razorbills, Iceland and Glaucous Gulls, and a single Gannet was noted. Many of these birds and the Humpbacks were thought to be attracted to shoaling Capelin, a small plankton-eating fish that regularly forages just under the surface of the water.

We left the harbour just after 7pm and arrived back at the hotel a little after 8pm. After completing our passenger locator forms, we ate our lamb dinner rather late, but enjoyed it and the following ice cream. A check for the Aurora in cloudy conditions was a very brief affair!

Day 5

Tuesday 8th March

We awoke to yet more snow, and the forecast was for constant snow showers all morning. After loading up with sustenance at the breakfast table it was time to leave, and because of the adverse weather, it was decided to make straight for the airport just in case. Two-foot snow drifts surrounded the minibus as we loaded up and we drove off in complete “white out” conditions. Very few vehicles were on the road as we slowly headed west then south. The high road travelling south was down to a few metres’ visibility in blizzard conditions, with several abandoned vehicles at the side of the road. We kept our momentum going and, despite high winds and drifting snow, we made it over the high road and onto the very snowy Route 54 highway. In due course we arrived at our coffee and fuel stop at Borgarnes. From this point onwards, the snow had stopped and we were driving into very strong, but relatively mild, winds which of course stimulated a big melt, and birds were very few and far between.

After a comfort stop and drinks at Borgarnes we continued south and past Reykjavik to the Keflavik area. We took a peek at the lurid water associated with The Blue Lagoon and enjoyed our lunch at the nearby restaurant.

Prior to going to the airport, we checked out the eastern side of Grindavik harbour where quite a number of gulls were on show including Iceland and Lesser Black-backed. We then took a circular tour of the Reykjanes Peninsula, stopping to examine the hot springs and the geological fault line between the North American and European plates. We also drove round the lighthouse to view some dramatic rocks adorned with early-nesting Kittiwakes and an incredibly rough sea and spray with hundreds of Kittiwakes, other gulls, Fulmar and even a

Gannet. It was then time to say goodbye to Don as we dropped him off at a hotel and drove to the airport where Neil said goodbye to the remainder of the group as they went off to check in at the easyJet desks.

We had enjoyed a great five days together and despite challenging weather conditions collectively felt that Iceland had demonstrated plenty of raw power and natural beauty for us to enjoy.

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Species lists

Birds

	Common name	Scientific name	March				
			4	5	6	7	8
1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓		✓		✓
2	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	20	H	✓		✓
3	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓			1	
4	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	2	2	✓	✓	✓
5	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>				1	
6	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	100s		100s	100s	✓
7	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>				11	
8	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>	1♂			10	
9	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>			1		
10	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	✓	✓	1	✓	✓
11	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	H			✓	✓
12	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	H			4	✓
13	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>	30			30	
14	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	3				
15	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	100s		100s	100s	100s
16	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓			✓	✓
17	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>					2
18	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓
19	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>					2
20	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>	100s		✓	100s	✓
21	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>	c20		c15	c6	c10
22	"Nelson's" Gull		1		1	1	
23	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓
24	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>			✓		
25	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>	1		✓	✓	
26	Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>	2			5	
27	Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>				1	
28	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
29	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>	4			1	2
30	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓		✓	✓	
31	European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>	✓		✓	✓	
32	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>				3	
33	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		1♀	1♀	2	
34	Gyrfalcon	<i>Falco rusticolus</i>		2			
35	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	c60	c30	c70	c50	✓
36	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	70+	c70	c50	c50	c70
37	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	1♀				
38	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>	c100		c400	300	✓

Mammals (LO = leader only)

Common name	Scientific name	4	5	6	7	8
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>			1 LO	1	
Harbour (Common) Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>			1 LO	6	
Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>				6+	
Killer Whale	<i>Orcinus orca</i>				8-10	



Humpback Whale