

# Iceland – Northern Lights & Winter Wildlife

Naturetrek Tour Report

4th – 8th March 2023

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Aurora Borealis by Sheila Bowles



Orca by Johnny Mead



Thingvellir by Wendy Hyman



Arnarsapi by Gill Walsh

Tour report by Dave Jackson



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Tour participants - Dave Jackson (Leader) with six Naturetrek clients.

## Summary

This five day tour gave us the opportunity to enjoy all that Iceland has to offer as winter turns to spring. We visited the Golden Circle with its geyser and thundering waterfall and hoped to see the Northern Lights. We travelled through some wild and wintry landscapes and joined a whale-watching trip where Orca was most anticipated. We witnessed the hardy birdlife around Snæfellsnes before returning to the Reykjanes peninsula where we walked over the bridge between two continents and came away with incredible memories and photographs of this amazing country.

## Day 1

**Saturday 4th March**

### Heathrow to Keflavik - Hotel Kriunes + 6°C

We all boarded our 12.15pm flight to Keflavik from Heathrow Airport and were all set for take-off when the pilot announced a delay due to a security alert involving a Kenya Airlines flight from Iceland that had lost communications. RAF jets escorted that aircraft to Stansted and we took off an hour later than scheduled and touched down three hours later.

We arrived in spring-like conditions of +6°C with remnants of snow on distant mountains, very different from the -6°C blizzard and heavy snow the February Naturetrek group left behind a few weeks before.

Collection of the hire vehicle went smoothly and we were soon on our way to our first stop at lagoons near the airport where Whooper Swans and Greylag Geese gathered to be fed by generous locals. A first winter Iceland Gull joined the Great Black-backed Gulls and flocks of Wigeon as we recovered our optics from the back of the bus. Ravens, Starlings and Blackbirds were seen in various places as we made our way through urban traffic and finally winding a way through narrow roads and roundabouts as we reached our hotel.

It was still light when we checked in and the lake that was frozen over in February was clear of ice and we could see more Whooper Swans, Greylags and seven Goosander with the four drakes in breeding plumage glowing on the mirror-like surface of the lake.

We met for a sumptuous dinner and checked our apps for the Northern Lights which was showing as moderate as we changed our camera settings in anticipation. Low cloud and drizzle put paid to any expectations, and we retired to our warm and comfortable bedrooms in the knowledge that the forecast was good for our second night in Iceland.

## Day 2

Sunday 5th March

### Geysir - Gullfoss – Thingvallir, cloudy -2°C

The temperature had dropped overnight and there was definite chill in the air. Being keen to get outside, Gill was rewarded with the sighting of a pair of Icelandic Redpoll and a singing Redwing at the top of tall conifers. A flock of Wigeon, Whooper Swans, Goosander and Greylags remained on the lake.

We started on our journey in a south-easterly direction to approach Thingvallavatn from the south at the river Sog where a lone female Barrow's Goldeneye dived and became more distant as we observed through the 'scope. Not the best views of this lifer for some but we'd get another chance later. The temperature had dropped further as we arrived at Geysir Hot Springs and we opted to walk around the area before lunch. The original Geysir is currently dormant although Strokkur erupts approximately every 10 minutes. It erupted as we arrived and it wasn't too long before several minor blows and a big eruption to the thrills of the waiting crowd. With everyone satisfied with their photos we retreated to the busy wrestling-themed restaurant for lunch where videos of old Icelandic wrestling competitions play on the screens around the walls. After lunch we drove the short distance to Gullfoss where we observed the impressive falls from both levels. Gullfoss, meaning Golden Waterfall is situated in a deep canyon of the Hvítá River and comprises two fast flowing, wide drops falling 32m in all. No wildlife other than a few Ravens were seen here as we gathered back at the bus for our next part of the excursion to Thingvellir.

We arrived at Þingvellir (Thingvellir) National Park, the site of Iceland's first parliament, the Alþing. It is located directly on the mid-Atlantic ridge, where a series of stunning fissures cut through the valley floor and served as the meeting place for the island's early settlers. Early in the summer, large groups of Vikings would travel for days to come together and decide the rules that would control life on the island.

A Raven called from the roof of the visitor centre where some of the group walked between the fissure down to the river. A pair of Ravens preened on rocks before an adult White-tailed Eagle came into view flying over the lake being mobbed by gulls and flew up and around before being joined by a second bird. Several flocks of Barrow's Goldeneyes gathered on the ice edge of the lake in rafts estimated at 40 birds. Some of the group went to the visitor centre but found it closed at 5pm so we took the northern route along R1 back to the hotel in time to freshen up before our evening meal.

It was a clear, still night and the Aurora forecast was good. After our meal we returned to our rooms having requested a door knock if the lights begin to show. With curtains open we watched from our rooms until a knock on the door around 10.45pm alerted us to a fantastic showing of the Northern Lights just out of view from the rooms facing south.

Several hotel guests were already outside with their cameras on tripods or mobile phones pointing towards the sky. The temperature had dropped and fingers were getting numb but the lights continued to enthrall us for around 20 minutes and there was no further activity after midnight meaning we could have a good night's sleep happy that we'd witnessed one of the tour's main objectives.

## Day 3

Monday 6th March

### Leave Reykjavik – Snæfellsnes -2°C

A beautiful sunrise over the lake greeted us as we met for breakfast at 8am ready for our departure at 9am. There were clear blue skies as we headed out of Reykjavik's suburbs and along Route 1 until we reached the Hvalfjörður Tunnel where the temperature rose to double figures inside the 6km-long tunnel before dropping rapidly as we neared the exit. We drove through spectacular snow-capped mountain ranges as we continued through low glacial land. A Gyr flew across the road in front of the bus at eye-level before disappearing from view – a brief but welcome sighting of this impressive falcon. Further on, an adult White-tailed Eagle became the third sighting of the trip and Johnny did well to film it on his phone from the moving vehicle, such is modern technology.

The road up ahead looked forbidding as we drove through a short but fierce snow storm before making a stop half an hour before Sykkishólmur where some of the group bought woollens made from Icelandic lambs' wool. We arrived at the hotel and dropped our luggage before heading west along the Snæfellsnes peninsula for our planned whale-watching trip, passing frozen waterfalls and stunning scenery. Although we were pushed for time, the light was too good to miss on Kirkjufell, or 'Church Mountain', a distinctly shaped peak found a short distance away from the town of Grundarfjörður and known as 'the most photographed mountain in Iceland'. We added to this reputation as photos were taken with the mountain in full sun as Glaucous and Great Black-backed Gulls meandered along the shoreline seeking out morsels of food.

We went to the local supermarket in Ólafsvík to buy lunch and found few options on this out of season Monday in March so we bought snacks and made our way to the whale-watching office to collect our out-sized overalls. The morning trip out had sightings of just two Orca, also known as Killer Whales despite being dolphins.

Many gulls including Kittiwake, Glaucous and Iceland, Shags, Fulmars and Razorbills were sighted as we sped out of the harbour and into the bay. It wasn't long before an Orca was spotted to great excitement for those on board. Instructions were given for sightings on both sides of the boat with many females and calves in evidence. Huge dorsal fins of adult males seemed to be on every point of the compass against a backdrop of snow-covered mountains. Frozen fingers were temporarily ignored as photos were taken of this amazing spectacle.

More Orcas appeared further out in the bay and the crew were in no hurry to return to base although some on board wished they had in the increasingly cold and choppy conditions. One Orca was seen spy-hoping with its head out of the water and another fluke-slapped the water, a hunting method used to stun fish before consumption. One of our group managed to photograph one leaping.

We were out for a full three hours and all credit to Laki's staff for giving us this incredible experience where they estimated as many as 40 Orcas surrounded the boat with a similar number further out.

We returned to the hotel elated at our Orca sightings and checked our Aurora apps which were showing as a 5, the highest forecast for the week although the low cloud wasn't in our favour. Checks were made until after midnight as the cloud thinned out but the Northern Lights were having a night off.

## Day 4

Tuesday 7th March

### Ólafsvík – Arnarstapi, -7°C to -9°C

We met at a civilised 8am for breakfast after our chilly day on the sea. The wind had picked up overnight as we checked out Sykkishólmur harbour from different points. There were plenty of white-winged gulls, mainly Glaucous and a few Iceland, adults and immature. Drake Eiders looked splendid with their peachy breasts and greenish head markings but the high wind deterred some of the group from leaving the relative comfort of the vehicle.

A few stops were made along the north of the peninsula but there was little activity out to sea from Búlandshöfði View Point and checking the cliffs in the high wind was a difficult task. A pair of Purple Sandpipers dodged the crashing waves in Ólafsvík harbour while a Black Guillemot in non-breeding plumage took advantage of the shelter along with drake Long-tailed Ducks in amongst the Eiders. A party of Ravens on the quayside looked up to no good as they tried to steal each other's food.

All the gulls took off as we drove down to Rif harbour as a Gyr shot across the sea wall at eye-level and out of sight; a brief but exiting encounter. Hellisandur has proclaimed itself as the Street Art Capital of Iceland with a surfing Puffin wearing a Viking helmet just one of the murals that amused us in this otherwise quiet coastal village. We followed the road passing lava fields and the glacier with its own micro-climate before reaching our lunch stop at Arnarstapi where one adventurous Naturetrekker tried the beetroot and chocolate soup!

Kittiwakes were nest building as we made our way along the cliff-top as we checked the Eider flocks for Harlequin Ducks. It wasn't long before three drakes were seen and were picked out from the larger eiders but they were lost to view as we walked along to get a closer look. It was -7°C and bitterly cold so we didn't spend much time trying to re-locate them.

The strong wind hadn't abated as we parked up at Ytri Tunga beach but at least we were no longer in danger of being blown off the cliffs! Harbour Seals splashed around in the shallow water presumably in a mating ritual or fighting off a rival. An unidentified whale spine was the subject of artful camera angles with large vertebrae scattered along the beach.

The temperature had dropped to -9°C as we followed a mountain pass back to the hotel. The birders in the group checked out the harbour again as a White-tailed Eagle, seen earlier flying over the Bonus Supermarket, scattered the gulls.

We met before dinner to complete the checklist for our last dinner in Iceland and felt very fortunate that we'd seen so many Orcas on the only day suitable for a boat trip *and* we'd seen the Northern Lights; mission accomplished!



## Day 5

Wednesday 8th March

### Sykkishólmur – Grindavik - Keflavik

We had time before our afternoon flight to explore the Reykjanes peninsula and the overwhelming decision during a discussion over breakfast was to visit the bridge between two continents at Sandvik.

The forecast heavy snow didn't materialise; instead we left Snæfellsnes under clear skies, drove through the barren landscapes with Ravens along the way and stopped for a leg stretch at Borgarnes. We arrived at Grindavik café for lunch where a rowdy school party had beaten us there and as we were short of time we bought take-aways and checked out the harbour. There were only Common Eider on the low tide and the usual gulls patrolling past so we continued around the peninsula until we arrived at Sandvik.

The Reykjanes peninsula lies on a major plate boundary, the Mid-Atlantic Ridge where many photos were taken from above and below the footbridge over a major fissure which separates the North American and Eurasian tectonic plates and are gradually pulling apart.

It had been a very successful trip with incredible sightings of Orca and the Aurora Borealis as well as a few most-wanted species amongst the most stunning scenery Iceland has to offer.

We arrived at the airport with a little over two hours before the scheduled flight and news coming from the UK of snow - concerning for those in the group with a distance to drive back home, unlike here in Iceland which had remained relatively free of heavy snow apart from a few short and sharp downfalls. Quite tame by Iceland standards. We said our goodbyes with some of the group vowing to return to this magical country in spring to see the birds in breeding plumage -and an altogether different Iceland.



Icelandic Horses by Ivor Pether

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## Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

		March 2023				
Common name	Scientific name	4	5	6	7	8
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓		✓		
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	30	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓	6			
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>			✓		
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>			✓	✓	2
Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>				3	
Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>				2	
Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>		✓			
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	7	7			
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	2	2			
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>			4		
Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>				2	
Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>			✓	✓	
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓				
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓	✓		
Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>			✓	✓	✓
Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>	1		✓	✓	
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>			✓	✓	
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>			10		
Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>			1	2	
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>			✓		
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			✓		
European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>			✓	✓	

		March 2023				
Common name	Scientific name	4	5	6	7	8
White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>		2	1	1	1
Gyr Falcon	<i>Falco rusticolus</i>			1	1	
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓				
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		1			

## Mammals

Common Seal (*Phoca vitulina*) 4 on 7<sup>th</sup> March

Orca (*Orcinus orca*) 40 + on 7<sup>th</sup> March