

Iceland – Northern Lights & Winter Wildlife

Naturetrek Tour Report

8th – 12th March 2023



Gullfoss



Northern Lights



Black Guillemot



Whooper Swans

Tour report by Dave Jackson and images by Clive Pickton



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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, joined a whale-watching trip and witnessed the hardy birdlife around Snæfellsnes, before returning to the Reykjavik and came away with incredible memories and photographs of this amazing country.

Day 1

Wednesday 8th March

Heathrow to Keflavik - Hotel Kriunes. Clear skies -2°C

The flight from Heathrow Airport was late arriving although there was enough daylight for a stop at lagoons outside Keflavik where five days earlier the water was unfrozen and was now almost completely frozen over. Greylags with seemingly darker plumage than those in the UK fed on discarded bread and cinnamon buns with Whooper Swans on the ice. These birds are most likely Icelandic breeders who've chosen not to migrate south, or at least away from Iceland.

A tail-less raven flew over the road as we made our way to our first hotel and we were all allocated rooms after an initial mix up. The leader wouldn't be sleeping in the minibus after all! We enjoyed dinner of cod, spinach lasagne, cake and sorbet depending on our dietary requirements before discussing camera settings in anticipation for the showing of the Northern Lights. We met outside where the moon glistened over the frozen lake but there was no activity before we retreated to our warm rooms. It wasn't long before a knock and the sound of doors opening and closing told us that the lights were showing.

We were treated to a good 30 minute's display giving plenty of time to adjust camera setting to capture this natural lights display in all its glory. What an amazing start to this short tour!

Day 2

Thursday 9th March

Geysir - Gullfoss – Thingvellir, cloudy -2°C

Breakfast was served at 8am so we left the hotel at 9am for our tour of the Golden Circle. We started on our journey in a south-easterly direction to approach Thingvallavatn from the south at the river Sog where one immature drake Barrow's Goldeneye showed at a distance close to a flock of six Goosander. Several birds were seen from the minibus on an open stretch of water and after a quick U-turn we were watching several Barrow's Goldeneye drakes displaying and mating before a final count of 40 birds, possibly the same flock that was seen on the lake a few kilometres to the north by the previous group four days earlier.

We carried on through the barren landscape and stopped at Geysir in a biting cold wind. The original Geysir is now dormant although Strokkur erupts approximately every 10 minutes, and we watched it blow several times with Icelandic Redpoll timing their flight over between eruptions.

The next stop was Gullfoss, meaning Golden Waterfall which is situated in a deep canyon of the Hvítá River and comprises two fast flowing, wide drops falling 32m in all. The view of the partly frozen falls from the top tier was breath-taking and with the wind increasing and temperatures dropping we sought sanctuary in the café with warming soup and fresh bread rolls for lunch before venturing out to the lower level for more spectacular views.

We arrived at Þingvellir (Thingvellir) National Park, the site of Iceland's first parliament, just over an hour from Geysir. It's 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. The group walked between the tectonic plates and along the river below with its picturesque church built in 1859. The area seemed birdless with no visible life on the lake other than the ubiquitous Ravens and a few gulls flying over as we returned to the bus thankful for the Thermos flasks we'd made up at breakfast.

A Merlin was sighted from the bus on the outskirts of Reykjavik as we returned to base for an early evening meal. The Aurora forecast was very low so not much hope of seeing this phenomenon again tonight but we put our room numbers down in the hope of another show. There was faint shimmer of the aurora at around 10.30pm for those who braved the cold night but nothing to match the first night's display.

Day 3

Friday 10th March

Leave Reykjavik – Snæfellsnes, -10°C rising to -7°C

We met for breakfast at 8am ready for our departure at 9am with the temperature dropping overnight to -10°C as we headed out of Reykjavik and along Route 1 until we reached the Hvalfjörður Tunnel. The temperature rose 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 and made a stop at services about half an hour before Sykkishólmur where a snow storm could be seen at a distance.

We arrived at the hotel and dropped our luggage before buying our lunch from the café to eat on the way to Ólafsvík for the whale-watching trip. A sign in the café read "We do not have Wi-fi. Talk to each other. Pretend it's 1995".

We headed west along the Snæfellsnes peninsula passing frozen waterfalls and stunning scenery stopping at 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'. An adult and an immature White-tailed Eagle gave spectacular views as they soared over the mountain. On the other side of the road Kirkjufellsfoss (church waterfall) appeared to be completely frozen.

We pulled into an almost full car park at Ólafsvík harbour where we were soon kitted out in overalls before boarding the boat for our three-hour whale-watching trip along the coast and out into the bay. Long-tailed Ducks dived in the harbour along with two Black Guillemots and many Eiders. We were a little way out before Clive spotted dorsal fins and shouted to the crew to stop. A pod of White-beaked Dolphins of all sizes were surfacing near the boat raising anticipation for more cetacean sightings.

We'd been out for more than two hours without further sightings although many gulls including Kittiwake, Glaucous and Iceland, Shags and Fulmars kept the photographers busy. No whales had been seen before a voice over the Tannoy announced that we were heading back to harbour, much to the relief of some on board who'd found the conditions to be too cold and choppy from the start. The sighting of another or the same dolphin pod raised little interest in the increasingly cold wind as we approached land.

We struggled to free ourselves of the overalls and handed them back before calling in to the nearest services for welcome hot drinks before returning to the hotel and the warmth of our bedrooms.

The aurora forecast was low with no visible sign before cloud covered the sky creating a snow shower at 11pm. Time for bed.

Day 4

Saturday 11th March

Sykkishólmur - Ólafsvík – Arnarstapi, windy -9°C

A White-tailed Eagle scattered the gulls at a very blustery Sykkishólmur harbour before drifting over the rooftops and out of sight. A herd of Icelandic horses huddled together a little way out of town as we stopped for photographs. These horses are selectively bred for their different traits e.g. riding, draft work and also for meat as seen on the hotel menu!

A few stops were made along the peninsula with flocks of Oystercatchers, Redshank and small flocks of Purple Sandpipers seen, while a first winter Glaucous Gull with its two-toned pink and black bill had ice forming on its feathers as it patrolled the surf before we reached Búlandshöfði Viewpoint. A brief look out to sea yielded no cetacean sightings in increasingly hostile conditions, so we opted for a hot drink at Ólafsvík after stopping for photos at Kirkjufell which looked very dramatic draped in snow.

A large flock of Snow Buntings landed on the roof of a house where the resident proudly looked out over his bird table as a few of the flock dropped down to feed. He didn't mind as we tried to photograph the birds and we exchanged friendly waves as we drove off. Iceland and Glaucous Gulls of various ages sheltered in the harbour while a Black Guillemot and two of the six Long-tailed Ducks remained from the previous day.

All the gulls took to the air as we drove down to Rif harbour but the cause of their disturbance went unseen although Gyr was highly likely. The next stop was in the self-proclaimed Street Art Capital of Iceland at Hellisandur with many murals painted on walls in this otherwise quiet coastal village. A flock of Common Starlings fed in front of a house while a larger flock of Snow Buntings circled round but refused to land.

We checked out the bay but there was no sign of any dorsal fins in the heavy squall as we retreated back to the bus for our journey around the head of the peninsula, passing lava fields and the glacier with its own micro-climate before reaching our slightly late lunch stop at Arnarstapi.

Invigorated by our lunch, we walked down to cliffs in a snow storm where Northern Fulmars had displaced the Black-legged Kittiwakes from their ledges and they now formed a colony on another cliff edge away from the aggressive Fulmars. A large flock of Harlequin Duck scattered as Mike got them in his 'scope. A smaller flock of

three drakes rose to five, actively displaying and flying around and landing back on the water with their tails cocked. Snow was coming down harder as the birds separated and flew off in different directions after photos were taken, delighting the group with this much-wanted species.

Next stop Ytri Tunga where whale bones on the beach couldn't be identified to species and Harbour Seals posed in a banana posture on rocks. Large ice-covered pebbles looked like giant hailstones along the sandy beach as more tourists arrived in the hope of seeing the seals.

We had a quick look around Sykkishólmur harbour with Black Guillemot being the only notable bird before returning to the hotel to pack and complete the checklist before dinner.

Ali marked seeing Harlequin Duck with a celebratory cocktail as we reflected on the sightings over the last few days and while the aurora forecast was low, those who stayed up were treated to another lightshow in the night sky.

Day 5

Sunday 12th March

Sykkishólmur – Borgarnes – Reykjavik – Keflavik, -11°C

It was the coldest morning of the tour as we set off from Sykkishólmur on the journey to Reykjavik in a snowstorm. It was a bitterly cold morning as we stopped at Borgarnes services to choose our lunch and a hot drink. Ice was very much in evidence on the rivers as we continued through the tunnel where temperatures rose and fell slowly as we approached the exit.

Clive and Janine staying on in Reykjavik gave us the opportunity to visit Sun Voyager, a stainless-steel sculpture that resembles a Viking long-ship symbolizing light and hope, where many photos were taken against a backdrop of snowy mountains across the bay. We then drove the short distance to Seltjarnarnes and Grotta where a group of three Sanderlings and a flock of around 30 Dunlins were new birds for the trip. We had lunch in the minibus before checking out the partially frozen lake where Turnstones and Whopper Swans showed well before driving into Reykjavik to drop off our two guests.

The journey to the airport was straight-forward and we arrived in good time to catch our Icelandair flight back to the UK where the tour concluded with some of the group vowing to return to Iceland in the spring or summer months to see what further delights it has to offer.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

		March 2023				
Common name	Scientific name	8	9	10	11	12
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>				15	
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		1			
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>			✓	✓	
Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>				✓	
Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>			6	2	
Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>		40	✓		
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		7			1
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>			8		
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	H		100	✓	
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>				2	✓
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>					
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>					
Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>			✓	✓	
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>			✓		
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 glaucoideus</i>			✓	✓	
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>				2	✓
Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>			2	2	
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>			✓	✓	
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			✓	✓	✓

European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>			✓	✓	✓
White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>			3	1	
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		1			
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>					1
Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>			70	100	2

Mammals

		March 2023				
Common name	Scientific name	8	9	10	11	12
Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>				1	
Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>				10	✓
White-beaked Dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus albirostris</i>			10		



Arch at Arnarstapi and Kirkjufell