

# THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

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## ICELAND

### Harlequins & Northern Lights in Winter

17 – 22 March 2016

#### TOUR REPORT

**Leader: Trausti Gunnarsson**

##### **Thursday 17th March 2016**

*SE light to moderate breeze, overcast and 6°C.*

After meeting and greeting at Keflavik airport we headed for the fishing town of Sandgerði. En route we noted several gulls, including great black-backed, some newly arrived lesser black-backed gulls and herring gulls. There were many Iceland gulls and a few glaucous gulls and we got an excellent chance to compare these two species. In addition, a few eider ducks and a few oystercatchers. On a nearby pool we added some tufted ducks to our list. In Keflavik we got excellent views of many eiders and fulmars feeding close to shore and spotted a female merlin perched on a rock that flew and then alighted briefly on an information sign before moving on. In Njarðvík we had close views of whooper Swans and wigeon.

Now it was time to head for Hveragerði, which was our base for the next four nights. We enjoyed a delicious dinner of Arctic charr and then decided to head out in search of the Northern Lights. It was cloudy in Hveragerði but the forecast indicated that it would be brighter inland. Despite our best efforts we only managed to find very small gaps in the clouds that didn't give us views of the Auroras.

##### **Friday 18th March 2016**

*SE light to moderate breeze, overcast and 5°C.*

As we drove up to Geysir this morning we could see Eyjafjallajökull volcano looming in the distance. We walked around in the geothermal area, learnt about the activity and enjoyed several spouts in Strokkur Geyser. We noted our first redpoll in the area, before having coffee in the woodland in Haukadalur where we got very good views of redpoll and heard goldcrest and wren. Gullfoss waterfall is magnificent where it cascades into the gorge below, there were impressive ice formations in the waterfall.

We then drove to Lake Laugarvatn and enjoyed our picnic at the edge of the lake while watching nearly 50 Barrow's goldeneye, busy with a courtship and their characteristic head bobbing display. There were also two drakes - common goldeneye that were nice to compare to the Barrow's, and we also noted a few goosander.

We then headed for the coast to take a walk at Knarrarósviti lighthouse. On the way we noted several large groups of whooper swans that have just arrived from Britain. There were four red-throated divers on the

lake, ravens playing in the wind around the Lighthouse, and offshore we noted many gulls, eiders, cormorants and more red-throated divers flying past. Little was happening in the harbour at Stokkseyri apart from one grey seal, so we moved to Eyrarbakki for a productive spell of birdwatching with many eiders, cormorants, gulls and several long-tailed ducks that give us excellent views. We also noted a group of about 50 oystercatchers that flew in and settled on rocks offshore. We also stopped on the black sand beach at Óseyrartangi where gulls, fulmars, kittiwakes, gannets and several red-throated divers were passing. After dinner we did our log and discussed our plans for the next few days. It was overcast this evening so no chance of the Auroras.

### **Saturday 19th March 2016**

*SW light to gentle breeze, sunny intervals and 6°C.*

We spent the day exploring the south coast of Reykjanes peninsula. At Núpar we saw a grey heron and recorded our first teal. We spent a long time in the harbour at Þorlákshöfn, where there were many Iceland gulls, long-tailed ducks and eiders. We got great views of a pair of eiders displaying and mating. At Strandarkirkja in Selvogur we saw our first harlequin ducks and a great northern diver. A walk along the coast gave us better views of harlequins and several grey seals sunbathing on rocks near the shore. We had our picnic near the church before moving on to nearby Hlíðarvatn lake, where there were many scaup and long-tailed ducks and a few tufted ducks and red-breasted mergansers. The light was perfect and we got great views including several red-breasted mergansers showing courtship behaviour. We also noted our first purple sandpipers resting on a rock in the lake.

We then moved on to Grindavík where we got fantastic close views of several harlequins and noted several more great northern divers. In the harbour there were several Iceland gulls and a few herring- and glaucous gulls. Among the many eiders we saw a female king eider and got an excellent opportunity to compare the two species. We then moved on to Reykjanes through the lunar landscape that is the result of the recent volcanic activity here. The coastal cliffs are spectacular and kittiwakes were getting ready to breed. Gannets are passing offshore and we added black guillemot to our list. Offshore Eldey island was looming, holding the largest gannetry in Iceland. This is the place where the last great auks met their fate on the 3rd of June 1844. We took our photos by the memorial at this very scenic spot before we headed back to the guesthouse. It clouded up in the evening so there was no chance of Auroras tonight.

### **Sunday 20th March 2016**

*SW light to moderate breeze, rainy intervals and 4°C.*

We headed up along Sog river towards Þingvallavatn the largest lake in Iceland, noting goosander and tufted duck on the river.

Thingvellir is an UNESCO World Heritage Site and it was here that the old, open-air Viking parliament was formed in about 930AD. We headed for the site of the medieval assembly for a walk. We were in a rift valley, formed by the movement of the two crustal plates of North America and Eurasia and evidence of recent volcanic activity surrounds us. We enjoyed our picnic in the rift valley on the shore of the lake. We saw two male and a female goosander on the river; there is obvious rivalry between the males for the favours of the female. We saw redpoll and raven as well. Next we drove down to Hvalfjörður, a long fjord that has been carved into a plateau by glaciers during the ice age. The landscape on the fjord is magnificent. We drove around the head of the fjord with little stops in a few places. There were many eiders, several long-tailed ducks and hundreds of fulmars on the sea and we saw a group of about 100 oystercatchers.

We had afternoon tea and pastry at the picturesque church in Saurbær, overlooking the fjord, and then drove on towards the fishing town Akranes. Outside the harbour there was quite a spectacle going on. Thousands of eiders, we estimate about 3,000, fulmars, great black-backed-, glaucous-, herring- and Iceland gulls were on the sea by the lighthouses feeding on offal from the fish factories. It was an amazing sight to see all these birds in one place. We drove back through the tunnel under the fjord. In the suburbs of Reykjavík we saw a male merlin on a post and we all got great views. Dinner this evening does not

disappoint with Icelandic lamb shank and Skyr cake. It was overcast this evening so unfortunately there is no chance of the Auroras.

### **Monday 21st March 2016**

*W moderate to fresh breeze, mostly dry and 2°C*

We started by driving across the mountain to the vicinity of Reykjavík. We drove through Rauðhólar pseudo craters and stopped at Elliðavatn Lake. There were several species of ducks on the lake, including wigeon, teal, scaup and tufted duck, and a grey heron flies in. We then drove through Heiðmörk woodland to Þöll tree nursery where we got good views of Redpoll. We then drove down to the coast at Straumur and had coffee and carrot cake while watching the gulls on the water.

We then drove through rain to Sandgerði, but it soon cleared up and we have a good spell of birdwatching there. Apart from the usual gulls and ducks we noted six curlew, an uncommon but regular winter visitor to Iceland. There were also oystercatchers and turnstones. We had our picnic at Garðskagi lighthouse, where there were many gannets, fulmars and eiders passing, also cormorants and shag as well. Most of us got good but brief views of a wren here before we moved on.

In Keflavík we got excellent views of the immaculate eiders that showed perfectly in the afternoon sun. We then drove along the coast of Vatnsleysuströnd towards Reykjavík where we had our last spell of birdwatching. The famous duck pond in the centre of Reykjavík didn't disappoint with an impressive collection of wildfowl. There were whooper swans, greylag geese, mallards, tufted ducks, wigeons and red-breasted mergansers plus a single pink-footed goose. Lastly we visited Bakkatjörn a little lake at the end of the headland Reykjavík is on. Here we got great views of gadwall and teal, and there were several mallards, long-tailed ducks and red-breasted mergansers. Now it was time to head for the hotels for the last night in Iceland.

### **Tuesday 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2016**

We say our farewells. Thank you all very much for your excellent company and I hope we meet again soon on another Travelling Naturalist trip.

## ANNOTATED LIST OF BIRDS RECORDED

(Total number of species recorded by the group: 44)

Pink-footed Goose *Anser brachyrhynchus*

One seen on the duck pond in Reykjavík on the 21.

Greylag Goose *Anser anser*

Recorded on three days.

Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus*

Recorded each day most numerous on the coast on the 18. with about a 100 newly arrived birds.

Gadwall *Anas strepera*

Six seen in Reykjavík on the 21.

Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope*

Recorded on two days.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

Recorded each day.

Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca*

Small numbers recorded on two days.

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*

Recorded on four days.

Greater Scaup *Aythya marila*

Recorded on two days about 60 on lake Hlíðarvatn on the 19.

Common Eider *Somateria mollissima*

Many seen every day along the coast most notably about 3000 at Akranes on the 20.

King Eider *Somateria specabilis*

Close views of a female in Grindavík on the 19.

Harlequin Duck *Histrionicus histrionicus*

About 40 seen Selvogur and Grindavík on the 19., amazing views in Grindavík, three more at Akranes on the 20.

Long-tailed Duck *Clangula hyemalis*

Noted on 4 days great views at Eyrarbakki on the 18 and Þorlákshöfn on the 19.

Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula*

Two drakes with Barrow's Goldeneyes on lake Laugarvatn on the 18.

Barrow's Goldeneye *Bucephala islandica*

Nearly 50 lake Laugarvatn on the 18., great views.

Goosander *Mergus merganser*

Seen on two days inland on lakes and rivers all together 9 individuals.

Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator*

Recorded each day.

Red-throated Diver *Gavia stellata*

Several seen on the coast on the 18. and 19.

Great Northern Diver *Gavia immer*

Seven birds seen offshore on the 19. best views in Grindavík.

Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis*

Recorded each day.

Gannet *Morus bassanus*

Seen on the coast on three days.

Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*

Recorded each day, on the coast and inland on lakes and rivers.

Shag *Phalacrocorax aristotelis*

Seen at Garðskagi lighthouse on the 21.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*

One seen at Núpar on the 19. and another at lake Elliðavatn on the 21.

Merlin *Falco columbarius*

Brief views of a female perched and flying in Keflavík on the 17. and great views of a male in Reykjavík on the 20.

Curlew *Numenius arquata*

Six seen in Sandgerði on the 21.

Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*

Recorded each day.

Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*

About a dozen in Sandgerði on the 21.

Purple Sandpiper *Calidris maritima*

Four seen at lake Hlíðarvatn on the 19.

Redshank *Tringa totanus*

One seen on the coast on the 17.

Great Black-backed Gull *Larus marinus*

Recorded each day.

Glaucous Gull *Larus hyperboreus*

Recorded each day.

Iceland Gull *Larus glaucoides*

Recorded each day.

Herring Gull *Larus argentatus*

Recorded each day.

Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*

Recorded on three days.

Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*

Recorded on four days.

Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla*

Recorded on two days.

Black Guillemot *Cepphus grylle*

A few seen offshore from Reykjanes on the 19.

Feral Pigeon (Rock Dove) *Columba livia*

Recorded on four days.

Raven *Corvus corax*

Many seen every day.

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*

Heard in Haukadalur on the 18.

Wren Troglodytes *troglodytes islandica*

Heard in Haukadalur on the 18. and good but brief views of a bird at Garðskagi lighthouse on the 21.

Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*

Recorded each day.

Redpoll *Acanthis flammea islandica*

Recorded on three days, best views in Haukadalur on the 18. and Hafnarfjörður on the 21.

## **MAMMALS**

Grey Seal *Halichoerus grypus*

Recorded on 2 days.



