

# **Iceland in Winter**

**Thursday 3 – Monday 7 December 2009**

**Leader:**

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## **Introduction**

Travelling in Iceland during the winter months is exhilarating. The landscape provides a spectacular backdrop to the harsh, wintry conditions that wildlife must endure to survive this tough period. What follows is a brief diary of the places visited on The Travelling Naturalist's December trip to Iceland. Also included is a full list of the birds we encountered.

## **Thursday 3 December 2009**

We arrive in Iceland to find the countryside snow-covered, and the weather cold and rather blustery. We drive along the Reykjanes peninsula and learn about the mid-Atlantic ridge and how the two crustal plates are moving apart, creating the new volcanic landscapes around us. Geologically speaking we undertake an 'intercontinental journey' as we leave the plate carrying the north American continent and cross onto the European one. The skies are clear as we approach our hotel and we look for the northern lights.

We soon reach our hotel, located on the flanks of the mid-Atlantic ridge, amidst the wonderful scenery of south Iceland. After settling in we are grateful for the delicious dinner served to us. Later we learn a little more about Iceland and our plans for the days ahead. We also take a moonlit walk in the hope of seeing an auroral display. No luck with the aurora but we do see four ptarmigans and also find the Andromeda galaxy, Jupiter and its Gallilean moons, and lots of other stars in the clear sky.

## **Friday 4 December 2009**

We head off before dawn. The day looks promising – bright spells though generally cloudy with a strong wind. It's not long before we are searching for the Iceland race of winter wren near Seljalandsfoss. The area is stunningly beautiful, a dramatic waterfall, high cliffs and a broad glacial outwash valley. We hear the wren but don't manage to find it. We botanise on the slopes and discover several different moss species, lots of lichens and the remains of the summer's flowering plants.

In the meadows adjacent to the road we find several large groups of grey lag geese. In one of the groups are two pink-footed geese. We speculate about whether these geese are about to migrate southwards.

The dramatic waterfall at Skógafoss is our next stop and after another unsuccessful search for the elusive Iceland wren we head to the glacier of Sólheimajökull. It's very windy here but in the shelter of the glacier's snout we learn of Iceland's glaciation, how the ice-caps form and how the land is sculpted by the ice. We are able to stand on the ice itself and see the sculpted iceforms of pillars, arches and crevasses.

On then to the coast near Reynishverfi and Vík for some sea-watching. The wind has increased considerably and we are buffeted as we leave the vehicle and walk towards the shore. Conditions for birdwatching are poor so instead we shelter in the lee of some co-

lumbar basalt cliffs and watch the storm offshore. The scenery is breathtaking and the power of the waves awe-inspiring.

At Vík we warm up with some coffee before starting our return journey. Thick clouds cover the sky and we aren't optimistic of seeing the northern lights tonight.

### **Saturday 5 December 2009**

It's raining as we set off but the forecast is for better weather so we decide to visit first the rivers and lakes of a drainage system called Sogi\_. There are many streams and pools and we have good views of two male and two female goosanders in one of them. Further upstream we strike lucky and see a group of Barrow's goldeneye. They are on a small lake and the males are very distinctive. As we drive further upstream we see several others and estimate a total of perhaps 12 or more of this rather special species. We see another two goosanders, many tufted ducks, and several whooper swans. We walk a little way along the track and find more tufted ducks accompanied by several red breasted mergansers.

The weather has improved considerably and we have our picnic lunch admiring the very distinctive volcanic crater of Keri\_. There are ravens in the area and we also record redwing.

Next we visit Geysir. There are few birds in evidence as we stroll around the geothermal area but the erupting geyser more than makes up for this as we spend an enjoyable hour or so exploring the hot springs and other phenomena. We learn about the special type of rock here, formed from the springs themselves, and attempt to photograph the various spoutings of a geyser called Strokkur.

Next we head for the glacial river of Hvítá and visit the spectacular waterfall of Gullfoss. It really is an incredible sight. We walk to where we can overlook the partly frozen cascade and are amazed at the scale of the falls. We keep our eyes peeled for gyrfalcons which are known to visit the nearby canyon but no luck today. Again, ravens are in attendance and as we walk back to the vehicle in the gathering gloom they let us have some very close views.

We visit the historic settlement of Skálholt on our return. The skies have cleared and we postpone dinner to enjoy an auroral display. The northern lights have appeared above the mid-Atlantic ridge and we marvel at the shifting patterns of luminescence. The display fades but we hope for another later on. It's been a great day.

### **Sunday 6 December 2009**

It's cold but bright as we head towards \_ingvellir and the great lake of \_ingvallavatn. \_ingvellir is on the UNESCO World Heritage Site list, as it is the location of the old viking parliament from AD 930. We stop on the edge of the magnificent rift valley where a constructive plate boundary separates, geologically, America from Europe. We take a walk near the old parliament and encounter both the Icelandic race of winter wren and, a little more dramatically, white-tailed eagle.

We have our lunchtime sandwiches in a sheltered spot near the edge of the lake and see more Barrow's goldeneyes, red-breasted mergansers, tufted duck and greater scaup.

We cross the watershed to reach the coast at Hvalfjör\_ur. Our journey takes us down a spectacular valley and we see several frozen waterfalls. We reach the coast and admire the large eider flocks on the fjord. We record many long-tailed ducks, and remark on their very distinctive calls. We see glaucous gulls, some red-breasted mergansers and a flock of 50 or

so wigeon sheltering on the sea near the head of the fjord. We also note black guillemot. There are several oystercatchers as well and we enjoy this productive spell of birdwatching. We search for a white-tailed eagle which another bird watcher tells us had recently been seen nearby but this time without success.

We warm up with some tea and biscuits and watch a splendid sunset as the short winter's day comes to an end. With clear skies we keep a look out for the northern lights as we drive home but with no luck this time.

After another delicious dinner a weak auroral display is seen. A fitting end to another splendid day.

### **Monday 7 December 2009**

We travel along the north coast of Reykjanes and at a small harbour have a good spell of birdwatching when we see many Iceland and glaucous gulls at close range and are able to have good views of their identifying features. We also note long-tailed duck, red-breasted merganser, lots of cormorants and the ubiquitous eider ducks.

On the west of the peninsula we see a gyrfalcon perched on a lava pinnacle. We have wonderful views of this magnificent raptor. Back at the coast we have a very productive spell of birdwatching and record both red-throated and great northern diver, harlequin ducks, ruddy turnstone and common redshank and unusually, and for the first time on a Travelling Naturalist trip, Eurasian curlew. We have good views of the harlequins, the first time we have seen this species on the trip.

We need to keep an eye on the clock but there's time for a quick visit to the Blue Lagoon and the chance to relax in the therapeutic, mineral-rich, geothermal water before it's time to travel to the airport for our return flight to London.

Thanks for your company and I hope we'll meet up on another Travelling Naturalist trip again soon.

**Andy Jones, 2009**

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### **Birds recorded**

**Rock ptarmigan** *Lagopus muta*  
Near Hlí\_ on 3 December.

**Whooper swan** *Cygnus cygnus*  
Recorded each day.

**Greylag goose** *Anser anser*  
Recorded near Skógar on 4 December.

**Pink-footed goose**  
Two with a flock of greylag geese near Skógar on 4 December.

**Mallard** *Anas platyrhynchos*  
Recorded each day.

**Wigeon** *Anas penelope*

50+ at Hvalfjör\_ur on 6 December.

**Tufted duck** *Aythya fuligula*

Recorded at several sites.

**Greater scaup** *Aythya marila*

Sogi\_ on 6 December.

**Eider** *Somateria mollissima*

Large flocks in Hvalfjör\_ur on 6 December and Reykjanes on 7 December.

**Harlequin duck** *Histrionicus histrionicus*

Group of eight at Reykjanes on 7 December.

**Barrow's goldeneye** *Bucephala islandica*

At Sogi\_ on 5 December and \_ingvallavatn on 6 December.

**Goosander** *Mergus merganser*

Recorded on 5 and 6 December.

**Red-breasted merganser** *Mergus serrator*

Seen each day.

**Long-tailed duck** *Clangula hyemalis*

At Hvalfjör\_ur on 6 December and at Reykjanes on 7 December.

**Red-throated diver** *Gavia stellata*

One at Reykjanes on 7 December.

**Great northern diver** *Gavia immer*

One at Reykjanes on 7 December.

**Gannet** *Morus bassanus*

Several offshore at Reykjanes on 7 December.

**Great cormorant** *Phalacrocorax carbo*

At several coastal and inland sites.

**White-tailed eagle** *Haliaeetus albicilla*

One at \_ingvellir on 6 December.

**Gyr falcon** *Falco rusticolus*

At Reykjanes on 7 December.

**Ruddy turnstone** *Arenaria interpres*

At Reykjanes on 7 December.

**Eurasian curlew** *Numenius arquata*

Two on Reykjanes on 7 December.

**Common redshank** *Tringa totanus*

Two on Reykjanes on 7 December.

**Oystercatcher** *Haematopus ostralegus*

At Hvalfjör\_ur and Reykjanes on 6 and 7 December.

**Herring gull** *Larus argentatus*

At Hvalfjör\_ur and Reykjanes on 6 and 7 December.

**Great black-backed gull** *Larus marinus*

At Hvalfjör\_ur and Reykjanes on 6 and 7 December.

**Glaucous gull** *Larus hyperboreus*

Several noted in various places during the trip.

**Iceland gull** *Larus glaucoides*

At Reykjanes on 6 and 7 December.

**Black-headed gull** *Larus ridibundis*

Offshore at Reykjanes on 7 December.

**Black guillemot** *Cepphus grylle*

At Hvalfjörður on 6 December.

**Raven** *Corvus corax*

Recorded each day.

**Winter wren** *Troglodytes troglodytes islandicus*

At Þingvellir on 6 December and Reykjanes on 7 December. Also heard at other sites.

**Common starling** *Sturnus vulgaris*

Recorded each day.

**Redwing** *Turdus iliacus*

Individuals seen most days.

**Common redpoll** *Carduelis flammea*

At Þingvellir on 6 December.

**Snow bunting** *Plectrophenax nivalis*

Large flock of 60 or more near Geysir on 5 December. Smaller flocks seen on 6 and 7 December.