

Iceland in Winter

Thursday 18 – Monday 22 March 2010

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 this late winter trip to Iceland. Also included is a full list of the birds we encountered.

Thursday 18 March 2010

Our flight's on schedule and after meeting and greeting one another at Keflavík we listen to a red-wing just starting to sing — a sure sign that winter's nearly over. 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. As we approach our hotel, which is actually situated on the flanks of the mid-Atlantic ridge, we gain an impression of the scale and grandeur of the volcanic scenery around us.

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. Later in the evening we are treated to a view of the aurora borealis but, sadly, after 20 minutes or so the luminosity reduces and we see no more of the northern lights this evening.

Friday 19 March 2010

As we drive south to the coast we notice a raptor perched on a grassy mound near the beach. It's a gyrfalcon and we have some splendid views of this magnificent raptor. On the coast near Eyrarbakki we have a productive spell of birdwatching and see our first Iceland and glaucous gulls, eider and red-breasted merganser and a grey seal. A little further on near a lighthouse we are treated to another view of a gyrfalcon — this time flying past. There are more seals as well.

We visit the rivers and lakes of a drainage system called Sogi_. There are many streams and pools and we have good views of a pair of Barrow's goldeneye, one of Iceland's special birds. We walk along the track and hear and glimpse some common redpolls as they fly overhead.

In the shelter of some nearby trees, we munch our lunchtime sandwiches and again see some common redpolls flying nearby.

We travel to the distinctive crater of Keri_ and learn about the way in which the volcanoes have shaped this part of Iceland.

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 cascade and are amazed at the scale of the falls. As we leave the area we admire a very obliging raven which flies very close to us.

We visit the historic settlement of Skálholt on our return. In the past this was a major ecclesiastical settlement. We examine the archaeological research that has uncovered so much information about the area in recent years. On our return drive we see a merlin as it zooms past.

Cloudy skies mean it's very unlikely we'll see the aurorae this evening.

Saturday 20 March 2010

It's a cloudy and misty start to the day but things brighten up considerably later on. Temperatures range from 2 to 5 degrees.

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 several wrens and have good views of one as it flits amongst the angelica stalks and flies into some juniper on the cliff face. Also evident are many thousands of northern fulmars prospecting for nesting sites along the cliffs. On the slopes we 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 some greylag geese, many more whooper swans, the seemingly ubiquitous ravens and flying overhead are unimaginable numbers of fulmars.

We see some oystercatchers near a small stream.

The dramatic waterfall at Skógafoss is our next stop and after admiring the waterfall we look upwards and are treated to some wonderful views of a white-tailed eagle soaring overhead. It dwarfs the fulmars and lesser black-backed gulls that are mobbing it.

We travel to the coast at the southernmost part of Iceland. Sadly, the weather has changed to driving sleet and rain but, no matter, we pull on our waterproofs and walk along the beach a little way to the shelter of a lava cave. From there we have a productive spell of seawatching across the stormy north Atlantic Ocean. We chuckle at the eiders 'surfing' in the high waves and note both glaucous and Iceland gull. We also see some kittiwakes. The power of the sea is tremendous — not surprising really when you consider that the next land south is the coast of Antarctica!

We warm up with some coffee in the nearby town of Vík. At Paradísarhellir we botanise at the base of the cliffs and find purple saxifrage in bloom. The weather has changed completely; now we feel the sun on our faces and take the opportunity to photograph some of the most amazing landscapes. The snow covered slopes of the ice-caps glint in the sun and we estimate it's possible to see 80 to 100km in the clear atmosphere.

It's been a wonderful day and we're grateful for a delicious dinner at our warm and comfortable hotel.

Sunday 21 March 2010

The day starts with a volcanic eruption! A small fissure opened up near the icecap of Eyjafjallajökull at about midnight and at breakfast we learn about the eruption and how the scientists think it will develop. From our hotel we can see towards the icecap and notice a dark smudge which we think is ash from the eruption. Sadly the conditions deteriorate and this is our last glimpse of the eruption site today. As we leave the hotel we see a merlin fly past.

We head towards _ingvellir and the great lake of _ingvallavatn. On the way we see several more Barrow's goldeneye. _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 open air parliament and are amused by the antics of a group of nearby ravens. We also record a long-tailed field mouse. On a nearby lake we record more Barrow's goldeneyes and red-breasted mergansers.

The scenery in this area is simply magnificent and we admire the snow covered mountains and volcanoes.

We cross the watershed to reach the coast at Hvalfjör_ur. Our journey takes us down a spectacular valley and we see many waterfalls. We reach the coast and admire the large eider flocks on the fjord. We record several long-tailed ducks, and remark on their very distinctive calls. A black guillemot is added to the list and we also note glaucous gull. We record many great black-backed and herring gulls, some red-breasted mergansers, wigeon and large flocks of oystercatchers as well. We enjoy this productive spell of birdwatching.

We warm up with some coffee and chocolate at a sheltered place on the fjord's north coast as we look at more eider and long-tailed ducks. We also see a common seal and common guillemot. On our journey back we see another white-tailed eagle and have a spectacular view as it flies across the road in front of us.

Another delicious dinner at our hotel and afterwards some group members take the chance to do their northern light watching (unsuccessful this evening) immersed in the hotel's warm geothermal hot pot!

Monday 22 March 2010

The day dawns bright and clear and at breakfast we are treated to a wonderful view of the continuing eruption. Through the telescope we can clearly see the ash column and craters forming. What a wonderful start to the day!

We travel to Iceland's capital, Reykjavík and have a brief visit to the city centre. On the famous city pond we record tufted duck. We visit a good spot to see over the whole city and admire the hills and mountains that surround Iceland's capital.

On the west of the peninsula we have two very productive spells of birdwatching before and after lunch with harlequin ducks being the undisputed winners in a line-up that included wigeon, oystercatcher, long-tailed duck, common redshank, glaucous gull, eurasian curlew, purple sandpiper, ruddy turnstone, northern gannet and black-legged kittiwake.

All too soon we need to be heading off to the airport and the flight back to London — irritatingly delayed by an hour and a half.

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

BIRDS RECORDED

Greylag goose *Anser anser*
Recorded most days.

Whooper swan *Cygnus cygnus*
Recorded each day.

Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope*
Several small flocks recorded on three days.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*
Recorded each day.

Tufted duck *Aythya fuligula*
Recorded Reykjavik on 22 March.

Common Eider *Somateria mollissima*
Large flocks at Hvalfjör_ur and on Reykjanes.

Harlequin duck *Histrionicus histrionicus*
Group of 20 or so at Reykjanes on 22 March.

Long-tailed duck *Clangula hyemalis*
At Hvalfjör_ur on 21 March.

Barrow's goldeneye *Bucephala islandica*
At Sogi_ on 19 March and _ingvallavatn on 21 March.

Red-breasted merganser *Mergus serrator*
Seen each day.

Northern fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis*
Many thousands along the south coast.

Northern Gannet *Morus bassanus*
Offshore Reykjanes on 22 March.

Great cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*
At several coastal sites.

Eurasian shag *Phalacrocorax aristotelis*
Single at Hvalfjör_ur on 21 March.

Merlin *Falco columbarius*
Near Gullfoss on 19 March and outside our hotel on 21 March.

Gyrfalcon *Falco rusticolus*
Two seen on south coast on 19 March.

White-tailed eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla*

One at Skógar on 20 March and at Hvalfjör_ur on 21 March.

Eurasian Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*

Many recorded.

Common redshank *Tringa totanus*

At Reykjanes on 22 March.

Ruddy turnstone *Arenaria interpres*

At Reykjanes on 22 March.

Purple sandpiper *Calidris maritima*

At Reykjanes on 22 March.

Eurasian curlew *Numenius arquata*

At Reykjanes on 22 March.

Great black-backed gull *Larus marinus*

At several coastal sites.

Glaucous gull *Larus hyperboreus*

Recorded at several coastal sites.

Iceland gull *Larus glaucooides*

Recorded at several coastal sites.

Herring gull *Larus argentatus*

At several coastal sites.

Lesser black-backed gull *Larus fuscus*

Near Eyrarbakki on 19 March.

Common Black-headed gull *Larus ridibundis*

At Eyrarbakki on 19 March.

Black-legged kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla*

At Reykjanes on 22 March.

Common guillemot *Uria aalge*

Hvalfjör_ur on 21 March.

Black guillemot *Cephus grylle*

Hvalfjör_ur on 21 March.

Rock dove/Feral pigeon *Columba livia*

At Paradísarhellir on 20 March.

Raven *Corvus corax*

Recorded each day.

Winter wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*

Seen at Seljalandsfoss on 20 March.

Common starling *Sturnus vulgaris*

Many recorded.

Redwing *Turdus iliacus*
At Keflavík on 18 March.

Common redpoll *Carduelis flammea*
Near Keri_ on 19 March.

Snow bunting *Plectrophenax nivalis*
Recorded at Eyrarbakki on 19 March.

We also recorded these mammals: Atlantic grey seal, common seal and long-tailed field mouse.

Andy Jones, March 2010

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