

# **Iceland in Winter**

**18 to 22 February 2010**

**Leader:**

Andy Jones

**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 February trip to Iceland. Also included is a full list of the birds we encountered.

**Thursday 18 February 2010**

We arrive in Iceland to find the weather bright, 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. As we approach our hotel we can see way offshore the volcanic Westman islands including Surtsey, the island that formed in a submarine volcanic eruption in 1963.

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. The skies are partly clouded and we look for the northern lights outside but sadly no luck this evening.

**Friday 19 February 2010**

We head off at dawn. It's rather overcast, cold with an air temperature of -5 degrees. We visit first the rivers and lakes of a drainage system called Sogi\_. There are many streams and pools and we have good views of three 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. We see more 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.

We travel to the distinctive crater of Keri\_ and learn about the way in which the volcanoes have shaped this part of Iceland. In the shelter of some nearby trees we munch our lunchtime sandwiches and note some common redpoll flying nearby.

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. As we leave the area a gyrfalcon flies across the road and disappears behind a ridge. A reasonable glimpse of this majestic bird but sadly missed by some in the group.

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. There are many ravens watching us as we watch them!

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

### **Saturday 20 February 2010**

The day looks promising – bright and clear though 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. No wrens today but instead we see many thousands of northern fulmars prospecting for nesting sites among the icicle covered cliffs. 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 a large group of greylag geese.

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 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. The surrounding landscape is quite remarkable.

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 challenging so instead we shelter in the lee of some columnar basalt cliffs and watch for what flies past offshore. The scenery is breathtaking and the power of the waves awe-inspiring. We record a small flock of common guillemot, Iceland and herring gulls, black-legged kittiwakes and lots of eider ducks. Further away we are amazed at the incredible numbers of fulmars that are flying to and fro. Tens of thousands we estimate. Much closer to us offshore and just behind the breakers we see two Atlantic grey seals.

It's a lovely journey back and we all enjoy the spectacular colours of the sunset.

Clear skies after dinner have us outside looking for an auroral display. There's the faintest glimmer of an auroral band in the northern sky but this does not develop any further. However, ice crystals in the upper atmosphere have created several spectacular 'halos' around the moon. It's been another great day.

### **Sunday 21 February 2010**

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 are amused by the antics of a group of nearby ravens. We also hear common redpoll.

We have our lunchtime sandwiches in a sheltered spot near the edge of the lake and see more Barrow's goldeneyes, red-breasted mergansers and a hardy little flock of mallard.

We cross the watershed to reach the coast at Hvalfjörur. 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. A white spot in the distance is suggested to be putative glaucous gull, or indeed a dodo! It turns into a whooper swan on closer examination. We record many great black-backed and herring gulls, some red-breasted mergansers and a flock of 50 or so wigeon sheltering on the sea near the head of the fjord. There are several oystercatcher flocks as well and we enjoy this productive spell of birdwatching.

We warm up with some tea and chocolate at a sheltered place on the fjord's north coast as we look at more eider and long-tailed ducks. We also search this area for common seals that are known to occur here but no sign of them today. and watch a splendid sunset as the short winter's day comes to an end.

Another delicious dinner at the hotel and hardy souls brave the cold night hoping for an auroral display but sadly no luck this evening.

### **Monday 22 February 2010**

We travel via Iceland's capital, Reykjavík to the north coast of Reykjanes and at a small harbour try for glaucous gull. There are none here but we do have good views of long-tailed duck, red-breasted merganser, several cormorants and the ubiquitous eider ducks.

On the west of the peninsula we have a very productive spell of birdwatching with harlequin ducks being the undisputed winners in a line-up that included wigeon, oystercatcher, long-tailed duck, common redshank and glaucous gull.

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.

## **BIRDS RECORDED**

**Whooper swan** *Cygnus cygnus*

Recorded each day.

**Greylag goose** *Anser anser*

Recorded near Skógar on 20 February.

**Mallard** *Anas platyrhynchos*

Recorded each day.

**Wigeon** *Anas penelope*

50+ at Hvalfjör\_ur on 21 February and again at Reykjanes on 22 February.

**Tufted duck** *Aythya fuligula*

Recorded at several sites.

**Eider** *Somateria mollissima*

Large flocks in Hvalfjör\_ur and offshore at Vík.

**Harlequin duck** *Histrionicus histrionicus*

Group of ten at Reykjanes on 22 February

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

At Sogi\_ on 19 february and \_ingvallavatn on 21 February.

**Goosander** *Mergus merganser*

Recorded on 19 February.

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

Seen each day.

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

At Hvalfjör\_ur on 21 February and at Reykjanes on 22 February.

**Northern fulmar** *Fulmarus glacialis*

Many thousands along the south coast on 20 February.

**Great cormorant** *Phalacrocorax carbo*

At several coastal sites.

**Gyrfalcon** *Falco rusticolus*

At Gullfoss on 19 February.

**Common redshank** *Tringa totanus*

Two on Reykjanes on 22 February.

**Oystercatcher** *Haematopus ostralegus*

At Hvalfjör\_ur and Reykjanes on 21 and 22 February.

**Herring gull** *Larus argentatus*

At several coastal sites.

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

At several coastal sites.

**Glaucous gull** *Larus hyperboreus*  
At Reykjanes on 22 February.

**Iceland gull** *Larus glaucoides*  
At Vík on 20 February.

**Black-headed gull** *Larus ridibundis*  
Reykjavík on 22 February.

**Black-legged kittiwake** *Rissa tridactyla*  
Near Vík on 20 February

**Common guillemot** *Uria aalge*  
Small flock at Vík on 20 February

**Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon** *Columba livia*  
At Vík on 20 February.

**Raven** *Corvus corax*  
Recorded each day.

**Common starling** *Sturnus vulgaris*  
Several recorded.

**Common redpoll** *Carduelis flammea*  
Near Keri\_ on 19 February and heard at \_ingvellir on 21 February.

**Snow bunting** *Plectrophenax nivalis*  
Small flock in Ölfus on 22 February.

We also recorded two Atlantic grey seals *Halichoreus grypus* at Vík on 20 February.

**Andy Jones, February 2010**  
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