

Iceland in Winter 25 - 29 November 2010

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 and Limosa Holiday's November trip to Iceland. Also included is a list of the birds and mammals we encountered.

Thursday 25 November 2010

We arrive in Iceland in good weather though it's very cold. 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. No luck at the moment but Jupiter with its Galilean satellites is rising and provides a wonderful sight in the eastern sky.

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. Some more astronomical observations take place after dinner and we're able to train our scopes on the Andromeda Galaxy. No sign of the northern lights before bedtime but one member of the group is rewarded by a weak display in the early hours of the morning.

Friday 26 November 2010

Fine, bright weather blustery at first becoming calmer later. Cold with temperatures falling to -10°C

We head off before dawn having ticked both Venus and Saturn before we leave. The day looks promising – bright weather though a rather blustery wind. We first visit the coast near where we stay and have a productive spell of birdwatching as we wait for the sun to rise. We see red-throated divers, red-breasted mergansers, large flocks of eider and both Iceland and glaucous gulls. We find some long-tailed ducks and a few harlequin ducks but they are ignored when suddenly we see the fins of some dolphins offshore. They're white-beaked dolphins and we have some great views. Blows from larger whales appear and we see two humpback whales as well. It's a real treat to be able to see these magnificent animals as the sun starts to rise.

Nearby we see our first flocks of snow buntings and a group of gulls allows us the chance to hone our identification skill and sort out the differences between glaucous and Iceland gulls.

We travel inland and explore a river system not too far from the town of Selfoss. As we walk along the frozen tracks we first hear then see common redpoll and goldcrest but our thoughts are on the river and what we might find there. We see lots of mallard and a single greater scaup and it's not long before we find what we've been looking for — Barrow's goldeneye. We have good views and as we approach we find a male common goldeneye as well.

We picnic amidst some conifers and hear several more common redpolls as they fly overhead.

We visit a nearby crater before travelling to one of Iceland's best known sites — the hot springs and geysers at Geysir. On the way we see a flock of geese in a field. They're greylag geese but we do see a solitary pink-footed goose amongst them. The geysers at Geysir never disappoint and we enjoy strolling around the geothermal area.

The light is fading as we visit the wonderful glacial river waterfall at Gullfoss. The falls are starting to freeze, as indeed we are, so after warming ourselves with a hot drink we start travelling back to our hotel. On the way there's just time for a quick visit to the historic site of Skálholt. Faint luminescence in the sky suggests an auroral display but it doesn't amount to anything so we return to our hotel in time for a delicious dinner.

Saturday 27 November 2010

Another fine day with temperatures around -8°C

We leave before first light on what promises to be another bright day. We first visit the new hot springs at Hveragerði and hear a winter wren in full song nearby. On some lakes nearby we find more Barrow's goldeneye and goosander.

Next we head towards Þingvellir and the great lake of Þingvallavatn. Þingvellir 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. On the lake we see many red-breasted mergansers and, very unusually, some cormorants. We walk into the eroded lava and scrub vegetation in the hope of finding some ptarmigans. Sadly, we're unsuccessful but are compensated with a wonderful view of winter wren instead.

We have our lunchtime sandwiches in a sheltered spot near the edge of the lake and see more Barrow's goldeneyes, red-breasted mergansers, cormorants and possibly great northern diver. As we walk around the historic site both redwing and waxwing are recorded.

We cross the watershed to reach the coast at Hvalfjörður. 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. Perched on the ground we discover a gyrfalcon not 75 yards from us. We have some exceptional views of this magnificent raptor. There are many oystercatchers as well and we enjoy this productive spell of bird-watching. A distant gull puzzles us and we discuss the possibility of it being an American herring gull. It's far away and in the fading light it's not possible to make an accurate identification.

We warm up with some cocoa 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 and are rewarded with a display not too far from the hotel. With mounting excitement we watch as the display develops and are treated to the swirls and movement of a fine auroral show. The display lasts much of the evening — fabulous.

Sunday 28 November 2010

Bright at first with increasing cloud cover later. Temperatures -5 to -10°C

We start the day with a visit to the coast at Stokkseyri. It's bitterly cold but bright as we look out to sea. There are a few gannets offshore, some whooper swans nearer in, and a steady stream of gulls flying past. They're mostly great black-backed gulls, but we do see herring, Iceland and glaucous as well. The sea's too rough to have any chance of cetaceans today.

We then drive to the site of the Eyjafjallajökull eruption of earlier this year. The scenery is remarkable. We make a brief stop at the waterfall of Seljalandsfoss before negotiating the rough track in the direction of the volcano. We see the glacier, Gígjökull, through which the floodwater released by the eruption burst. The scale of the landscape is immense and we are clearly able to see the new craters formed during the initial phase of the eruption which caused so much disruption to travellers in Europe.

We walk around the area, collect some 'ash samples' and have a busy spell of photography in the area. There are ravens here and we also see snow buntings, too.

Later we travel in the valley itself and see many more snow buntings — flocks of a hundred or more. As we explore a rock outlier we see a gyrfalcon approach. We lose sight of it behind a bluff but locate it again and have a brief view before it flies away northwards.

It's now very cold so we're grateful for the chance to warm up and sip cocoa in the service centre at Hvolsvöllur before travelling back to our hotel.

There's a weak auroral display this evening — nothing like the splendour of last evening's showing — so between aurora checks we learn more about the recent eruption and see pictures from the event.

Monday 29 November 2009

Increasing SW wind bringing sleet and later rain. temperatures range from -5 to + 3°C

We travel along the south coast of Reykjanes in sleet and as the day dawns have a spell of birdwatching on the coast and see flocks of wigeon, eider and a few gulls. We also record Atlantic grey seal and as we leave we see flitting amidst the seaweed on the strand line the Icelandic race of winter wren.

Further west we see lots of fulmars, several gannets and another gyrfalcon. Offshore we see the island of Eldey and learn of the demise and extinction of the last great auks that were killed there.

The sleet has turned to freezing rain and the roads are very slippery as we visit the west coast of the peninsula. We have a very productive spell of birdwatching and record great northern diver, harlequin ducks, ruddy turnstone and Eurasian curlew. We have good views of the harlequins and the winter plumage great northern diver is most obliging as he swims just a few yards from where we stand. There's also a flock of purple sandpiper.

Our last birdwatching stop on the tip of the peninsula allows us views of razorbills, kittiwakes, common redshank, purple sandpiper and both glaucous and Iceland gulls.

It's time to make the short journey to the airport for the return flight to London. All agree it's been a great trip. Thanks for your company and I hope we'll meet up on another trip again soon.

Andy Jones

November 2010

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Birds recorded

Whooper swan *Cygnus cygnus*

Recorded each day.

Greylag goose *Anser anser*

Recorded near Geysir on 26 November and on Reykjanes on 29 November.

Pink-footed goose

One with a flock of greylag geese near Geysir on 26 November.

Eurasian wigeon *Anas penelope*

50+ at Hvalfjör_ur on 27 November and on Reykjanes on 29 November.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

Recorded each day.

Tufted duck *Aythya fuligula*

Near _ingvellir on 27 November.

Greater scaup *Aythya marila*

Sogi_ on 26 November.

Common eider *Somateria mollissima*

Large flocks off the south coast and in Hvalfjör_ur on 26 and 27 November and Reykjanes on 29 November.

Harlequin duck *Histrionicus histrionicus*

Near Eyrarbakki on 26 November and at Reykjanes on 29 November.

Long-tailed duck *Clangula hyemalis*

Recorded on three days.

Common goldeneye *Bucephala clangula*

At Sogi_ on 26 November.

Barrow's goldeneye *Bucephala islandica*

At Sogi_ on 26 November and _ingvallavatn on 27 November.

Goosander *Mergus merganser*

Recorded on 26 and 27 November.

Red-breasted merganser *Mergus serrator*

Seen each day.

Red-throated diver *Gavia stellata*

Several near Eyrarbakki on 26 November.

Great northern diver *Gavia immer*

Possibly at _ingvallavatn on 27 November, at Reykjanes on 29 November.

Northern fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis*

Several offshore at Reykjanes on 29 November.

Gannet *Morus bassanus*

Several offshore at Reykjanes on 29 November.

Great cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*

At several coastal sites and at _ingvallavatn on 27 November.

European shag *Phalacrocorax aristotelis*

At Reykjanes on 29 November.

Gyr falcon *Falco rusticolus*

At Hvalfjör_ur on 27 November, Markarfljót on 28 November and on Reykjanes on 29 November.

Eurasian oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*

At Hvalfjör_ur and Reykjanes on 27 and 29 November.

Purple sandpiper *Calidris maritima*

Reykjanes on 29 November

Common snipe *Gallinago gallinago*

At Hverager_i on 27 November

Eurasian curlew *Numenius arquata*

At Reykjanes on 29 November.

Ruddy turnstone *Arenaria interpres*

At several coastal sites.

Common redshank *Tringa totanus*

At Reykjanes on 29 November.

Great black-backed gull *Larus marinus*

At many coastal sites.

Glaucous gull *Larus hyperboreus*

Several noted in various places during the trip.

Iceland gull *Larus glaucoides*

Many seen offshore.

Herring gull *Larus argentatus*

Many seen offshore.

Common gull *Larus canus*

At Eyrarbakki on 26 November and Reykjanes on 29 November.

Black-headed gull *Larus ridibundis*

At _ingvallavatn on 27 November and offshore at Reykjanes on 29 November.

Black-legged kittiwake *Larus tridactyla*

At Reykjanes on 29 November.

Common guillemot *Cepphus grylle*

Offshore near Eyrarbakki on 26 November.

Razorbill *Alca torda*

Offshore at Reykjanes on 29 November.

Raven *Corvus corax*

Recorded each day.

Winter wren *Troglodytes troglodytes islandicus*

At _ingvellir on 27 November and Reykjanes on 29 November. Also heard at other sites.

Common starling *Sturnus vulgaris*

Recorded each day.

Waxwing *Bombycilla garrulus*

At _ingvellir on 27 November.

Redwing *Turdus iliacus*

Individuals on two days.

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*

Sogi_ on 26 November.

Common redpoll *Carduelis flammea*

At several sites on 26 and 27 November.

Snow bunting *Plectrophenax nivalis*

Recorded each day. Large flock of 100 or more near Eyjafjallajökull on 28 November.

Mammals recorded

Atlantic grey seal *Halichoerus grypus*

Off the south coast on 26 November and Reykjanes on 29 November.

White-beaked dolphin *Lagenorhynchus albirostris*

A group of 12 to 15 off the south coast on 26 November.

Humpback whale *Megaptera novaeangliae*

Two off the south coast on 26 November.