

## Iceland in Winter 17 to 21 February 2011

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

### Thursday 17 February 2011

We arrive in Iceland in good, bright weather with wonderful visibility. 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. On the way we see several common ravens which will become so familiar to us in the days ahead.

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 clear and we are hopeful for a display of the northern lights but sadly there's no luck for us this evening. However, Jupiter with its Galilean satellites is rising and provides a wonderful sight overhead.

### Friday 18 February 2011

*Fine, bright weather blustery at first becoming calmer later. Rather warm for the time of year with temperatures around freezing.*

We head off at dawn, about 9am at this time of year. 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 the sun rises. We see red-breasted mergansers, large flocks of eider and both Iceland and glaucous gulls. Through the telescope we can see the differences between these sometimes confusing species of gulls. We also see two common seals offshore; seemingly taking as much interest in us as we are in them! Along the strand line lots of small fish have been washed up and we see a raven carrying away a fish in its beak. As the day brightens it won't be long before the gulls notice this sudden windfall, too.

Nearby we see our first flock of snow buntings accompanied by a solitary common redpoll. We have some very close views of this delightful passerine. We see four whooper swans on some partially thawed small pools. Most swans leave Iceland for warmer climes in the winter but some will over winter here and we were to see several more during the trip.

We travel inland and explore a river system not too far from the town of Selfoss. As we walk along the frozen tracks we hear common redpoll but our thoughts are on the river and what we might find there. We see lots of mallard when suddenly a large raptor flies overhead and

very close to us. It's a white-tailed eagle and we have a wonderful, if brief view, before it flies away into the distance. Further upstream we find what we've been looking for — Barrow's goldeneye. We have good views of both a male and a female. The low sun illuminates the scene spectacularly and through the scopes we can see the iridescent sheen in the plumage of the drake.

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. 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. A single raven is the only sign of life in the area but our minds are on the amazing sight of the partially frozen waterfall.

On the way back there's just time for a quick visit to the historic site of Skálholt and we learn a little about the first settlers in Iceland and how this place was important for them. Faint luminescence in the sky after dinner suggests an auroral display but it doesn't amount to anything so sadly it's another evening without seeing the aurora borealis.

### **Saturday 19 February 2011**

*Overcast at first but brightening later. Rain showers in the late afternoon. Relatively mild with temperatures reaching 3°C.*

We leave in overcast conditions but with the promise of some brighter spells later. We first visit the new hot springs at Hverager\_i which were formed after an earthquake in 2008. As we explore the area we first hear, then see, a winter wren. We record a male goosander flying upstream on a nearby river and see some whooper swans accompanied by pink-footed geese. On some lakes nearby we find more Barrow's goldeneye, we count at least 35 of them, and also record tufted duck and red-breasted merganser.

Next 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. On the lake we see some more 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 the wonderful views of this very special area compensate.

We have our lunchtime sandwiches in a sheltered spot near the edge of the lake and are grateful for the steaming thermos of hot soup provided by the hotel. Suitably fortified we explore the historic site of the old viking parliament and learn about the rudimentary democracy that was introduced by the first Viking settlers. The ecology and geology of the area is most interesting and we feel very privileged to see this place in such wonderful conditions. There's a lot of clicking of shutters as we look across the valley from the viewpoint on the 'American' side of the rift.

We cross the watershed to reach the coast at Hvalfjörður. Our journey takes us down a spectacular valley and we see several frozen waterfalls high on the mountainsides on the way. We reach the coast and admire the large eider flocks on the fjord. We scan the fjord to try and see long-tailed ducks which are often seen here but with no success today. Instead we note a flock of 50 or more common wigeon seeking shelter in the less blustery coves of the fjord. The wind has increased considerably and it's difficult to keep the tripod steady as we scan along the foreshore and see more glaucous gulls.

We find a sheltered spot on the north side of the fjord and warm up with some coffee and biscuits as we make another unsuccessful attempt to locate long-tailed duck.

It starts to sleet and rain as we return to the hotel and with the lowering clouds it doesn't look like we have any chance of seeing the northern lights this evening. No matter, we enjoy another delicious dinner, write up the log and discuss plans for the next day.

### **Sunday 20 February 2011**

*Overcast at first with some light rain but brightening to turn into another wonderful day with long sunny periods and very mild temperatures for the time of year.*

We travel eastwards across the great Þjórsárhraun lava plain heading towards the Eyjafjallajökull ice cap. Light rain soon disappears, the visibility improves dramatically and we are treated to some wonderful views of the mountains, volcanoes and ice caps of southern Iceland. We see many ravens on our journey and it's not long before we reach the waterfall of Seljalandsfoss where we search for, and see very well, the Icelandic race of winter wren. However, the birds which attract attention here are northern fulmars, the relatively mild weather has brought them ashore in their thousands to prospect the cliffs for suitable nesting ledges. They are wheeling and soaring all around us and are an amazing sight. Also on the cliffs we see several pigeons looking very much like rock doves. However, after some discussion we see other characteristics which lead us to conclude they are in fact feral pigeons.

We spend some time searching crags for the hopeful glimpse of a gyrfalcon but without success and then picnic in the sunshine on the slopes of the hill. We have great views of the Westman islands offshore.

We then drive to the site of the Eyjafjallajökull eruption of 2010. The scenery is remarkable and the unusually mild conditions have left the track clear of snow. This means it's possible to drive far up the valley and we're able to get very close to the eruption site. The visibility is wonderful and we are also able to see the still steaming lava from an earlier phase of the eruption together with the two new craters which formed at this time. We are close to the area where the glacier burst, or Jökulhlaup, occurred when the heat from the volcano melted enormous quantities of ice and the floodwater poured down the valley. It's a very raw, awe-inspiring landscape. We walk around the area, collect some 'ash samples' and have a busy spell of photography here. The only bird we see is a mallard, rather bizarrely flying out of the shelter of a small cave! Later we travel in the lower valley and see many more snow buntings. We also manage to fit in a quick visit to one of the saga sites of the area and learn a little of the tale of Njáll and how he met his end in a burning farmhouse exactly one thousand years ago.

As we journey back we are treated to the sight of many ravens, we estimate a hundred or more, flying to their roost high in some crags.

Another splendid dinner, the taste of some Icelandic delicacies, a slideshow of the 2010 eruption and, at last, a display of the northern lights round off a lovely day.

### **Monday 21 February 2011**

*Increasing NE wind bringing rain at first but brightening to weak sunshine later in the morning. The brisk wind making it feel very cold though temperatures were actually still above freezing.*

We first make a quick visit to Iceland's capital, Reykjavík. Offshore near the harbour we stop and see rafts of common eider and a few red-breasted mergansers. We also record redwing near the city centre and on the pool note whooper swans, tufted duck, greylag geese and mallard.

The morning has brightened as we visit the west coast of the peninsula. We have a very productive spell of birdwatching and record great northern diver, harlequin duck, long-tailed duck, glaucous and Iceland gulls and the only waders we saw on the trip — common redshank and oystercatcher. We also see several common seals hauled out on the offshore skerries. The harlequins are wonderful, in total there are more than thirty of them spread out along the bay and we have some splendid views. The winter plumage great northern diver is most obliging as he swims just a few yards from where we stand!

Our last birdwatching stop on the tip of the peninsula allows us final views of all our old friends — the eiders, gulls and mergansers that have become so familiar to us these past few days. We also see northern gannets fly past far out to sea.

There's just time for a bite to eat before we 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**

**February 2011**

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## Birds recorded

### **Whooper swan** *Cygnus cygnus*

Recorded each day.

### **Greylag goose** *Anser anser*

Recorded near Sogi\_ on 19 February and on Reykjanes on 21 February.

### **Eurasian wigeon** *Anas penelope*

50+ at Hvalfjör\_ur on 19 February.

### **Mallard** *Anas platyrhynchos*

Recorded each day.

### **Tufted duck** *Aythya fuligula*

Near \_ingvellir on 19 February.

### **Common eider** *Somateria mollissima*

Large flocks off the south coast and in Hvalfjör\_ur on 18 and 19 February and Reykjanes on 21 February.

### **Harlequin duck** *Histrionicus histrionicus*

At Reykjanes on 21 February.

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

Recorded on Reykjanes on 21 February.

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

At Sogi\_ on 18 February and \_ingvallavatn on 19 February.

### **Goosander** *Mergus merganser*

Recorded on 18 and 19 February.

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

Seen each day.

### **Great northern diver** *Gavia immer*

At Reykjanes on 21 February.

### **Northern fulmar** *Fulmarus glacialis*

Many thousands seen prospecting for nest sites near south coast on 20 February.

### **Gannet** *Morus bassanus*

Several offshore at Reykjanes on 21 February.

### **Great cormorant** *Phalacrocorax carbo*

At several coastal sites and at \_ingvallavatn on 19 February.

### **European shag** *Phalacrocorax aristotelis*

At Hvalfjör\_ur on 19 February.

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

At Sogi\_ on 18 February

### **Eurasian oystercatcher** *Haematopus ostralegus*

At Reykjanes on 21 February.

**Common redshank** *Tringa totanus*

At Reykjanes on 21 February.

**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 glaucooides*

Offshore on 19 and 21 February.

**Herring gull** *Larus argentatus*

Many seen offshore.

**Common gull** *Larus canus*

At Eyrarbakki on 18 February.

**Feral pigeon/Rock dove** *Columba livia*

Near Seljalandsfoss on 20 February.

**Raven** *Corvus corax*

Recorded each day. A large flock exceeding 100 seen flying to roost on 20 February.

**Winter wren** *Troglodytes troglodytes islandicus*

At Hverager\_i on 19 February and Seljalandsfoss on 20 February.

**Common starling** *Sturnus vulgaris*

Recorded each day.

**Redwing** *Turdus iliacus*

Individuals on two days.

**Common redpoll** *Carduelis flammea*

At several sites on 19 and 20 February.

**Snow bunting** *Plectrophenax nivalis*

Recorded each day. Large flock of 100 or more near Eyrarbakki on 19 February.

**Mammals recorded**

**Common seal** *Phoca vitulina*

Off the south coast on 19 February and Reykjanes on 21 February.