

THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

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ICELAND Winter Orcas & Auroras 6 – 11 March 2014

TOUR REPORT

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Travelling in Iceland during the winter months is an exciting adventure — particularly so this time as we had some first hand experience of severe weather conditions! The landscape provides a spectacular backdrop to the harsh, wintry conditions that wildlife must endure to survive this tough period.

Thursday 6 March 2014

NE wind with snow. Temperatures around -2°C

We assembled at Keflavik Airport after a slight delay in landing as the plane circled to allow the runways to be swept of snow. We were soon on our way travelling across the volcanic landscapes of the Reykjanes peninsula. We saw some ravens as we drove and learnt a little about the geology of the area. We undertook an 'intercontinental journey' as we left the tectonic plate carrying the continent of North America and cross to the European one. We noted Iceland gull and greylag goose on the journey

We soon reached our guesthouse located on the flanks of the mid-Atlantic ridge amidst the wonderful scenery of south Iceland. After a delicious dinner we discussed the days ahead and debated the possibility of seeing the northern lights this evening. It was very overcast and the outlook wasn't good but we hoped for clearing skies which sadly do not materialise.

Friday 7 March 2013

Light snow at first but becoming heavier later. Brisk NE wind with temperatures below freezing

We set off to Sogið in search of Barrow's goldeneye and, remarkably, almost the first birds we saw were 40 or so of them! They were sheltering against the river bank in water that was largely ice free and we had a great time watching their antics. The males were beginning to display to the females. There was a small flock of Eurasian teal in the area and we also recorded goosander here. It was a great start to the day.

We explored more pools and lakes and found more Barrow's goldeneyes but they were much further away this time. There were several cormorants perched on the ice, a few red-breasted mergansers and a lone great black-backed gull.

We reached the national park of Þingvellir. The scenery was spectacular and we had a wonderful walk along the edge of the American continent and learnt of the Vikings and the parliament that they held here. We

had great views of the Icelandic race of common redpoll as we walked. We enjoyed a picnic near the edge of the frozen lake and saw more redpolls. We learnt about the vegetation in the area and how the plant succession develops on these new volcanic landscapes.

On our way to the geothermal area at Geysir we saw the volcanoes of Hekla and Eyjafjallajökull though sadly the top of the latter was obscured by clouds. We enjoyed strolling around the hot springs and geysers at Geysir, and witnessed several eruptions of Strokkur, the active geyser. There were more redpolls in the area. It was snowing heavily as we reached the great waterfall of Gullfoss. The scenery was incredible and enlivened by several ravens patrolling the cliffs. We walked along the canyon rim and commented on the magnificent landscape around us.

Our return journey was enlivened by a glimpse of a flying gyrfalcon, landing on boulders beneath the cliffs, and we saw it is a very pale bird. Falling snow obscured our view and as we drove to find a better location, the bird flew away and we couldn't relocate it. There were more common redpolls in Hveragerði and we also noted a white wagtail near our guesthouse.

After dinner the skies partly cleared and we set off in search of the Aurora. There's was no luck for us tonight, though. We identified several constellations and looked at the four Galilean satellites of Jupiter before the clouds returned and obscured the sky.

Saturday 8 March 2014

Merely strong NE winds at first but increasing after midday to severe gales with driving snow. Temperatures a little below freezing

The weather forecast was dire but we grabbed the chance to visit Iceland's south coast before things started turning really nasty. As we drove we commented on the numbers of fulmars we saw prospecting the cliffs for nesting sites. Near Selvogur we found a little shelter behind some old lava-walled buildings, set up our 'scopes, and scanned offshore. We were in luck, as in the small bay we saw several small flocks of harlequin ducks. There were 20 or more in total and we had some fine views of this special bird of Iceland. Offshore we saw both shag and cormorant, a flock of 50 or so Eurasian wigeon, many common eiders and a few Iceland, herring and great black-backed gulls. We followed some ptarmigan tracks in the snow but there was sadly no sign of these birds. However, wherever else we looked there were birds. They're mostly fulmars, in their tens of thousands, and we commented on how spectacular they look flying along the snow covered cliffs and mountains.

It started to snow heavily and the tracks were deeply covered but we had a sturdy Land Rover and took a diversion around an ice-covered lagoon. We found both tufted duck and greater scaup near a lead of open water winding through the ice. We also had some great views of whooper swan here.

The wind increased in strength and we headed for the relative shelter of Þorlákshöfn harbour. There we found a flock of 150 or so Iceland gulls and we had some great views of this species. They were accompanied by some common eider and we also saw a few glaucous gulls.

It was now snowing heavily and the wind was gusting to 25 m/s, so it was time to beat the retreat and return to our guesthouse in white-out conditions (although we did manage to see snow bunting as we drove). We ate our picnic lunch indoors today, battened down the hatches and learnt about the eruption at Eyjafjallajökull in 2010.

There's no chance of the northern lights this stormy night.

Sunday 9 March 2014

Light SW winds with temperatures around freezing

Thankfully the storm passed and it's a bright start to the day. We began by exploring the new hot springs of Hveragerði which formed following an earthquake in 2008. We got good views of more common redpolls and saw a fieldfare as well.

We had a very enjoyable morning birding around Hvalfjörður. The light was excellent and in the still waters of the fjord we got great views of long-tailed ducks. We estimated that there were at least 200 of them here. We also noted black guillemot and great northern diver and there were, of course, large numbers of common eider and even more fulmars as well. We recorded two common redshanks before we had our picnic sandwiches in a sheltered spot on the north coast of the fjord before heading for Snæfellsnes.

We drove across some spectacular volcanic landscapes to reach the north coast of the Snæfellsnes peninsula. As we reached the coast, we saw some oystercatchers and at least 10 common seals offshore. A flock of smaller waders flew past and we recognized them as purple sandpipers.

As we approached Kolgrafafjörður we saw thousands upon thousands of birds — fulmars, glaucous gulls, eiders, shags, great black-backed gulls, red-breasted mergansers, all feeding in the calm waters of the fjord. Suddenly the dorsal fin of a large male orca broke the surface. We clambered down the shingle beach and had an exhilarating spell of wildlife watching. There were perhaps a dozen orcas in the fjord. They are busily feeding (they prey on herring) and we had some wonderful views. There were three white-tailed eagles perched on the fjord's bank and we watched one swoop low over the water as it unsuccessfully attempted to pluck a fish from the surface. There were eagles and orcas in the same telescope view! We were also amused by several Atlantic grey seals patrolling the shore; they seemed as interested in us as we were in them. The orcas stopped feeding and swam swiftly towards us. We watched entranced as they swam under the bridge we were standing on towards the open sea. How cool is that! We spent more time birdwatching in Grundarfjörður and found a very smart king eider accompanying a large group of common eiders.

We settled in to our comfortable hotel but the clouds had blown in and the weather deteriorating. Sadly there's no chance of an aurora tonight.

Monday 10 March 2014

SW gales at first backing to hurricane strength SE winds later. Sleet and rain with temperatures a little above freezing

We set off in sleet and strong winds with another poor weather forecast for later in the day. There was no sign of yesterday's king eider but we did see at very close quarters lots of purple sandpipers, accompanied by a ruddy turnstone. Once again, offshore, there are simply thousands and thousands of birds. We got great views of glaucous gulls and, whilst there are fewer Iceland gulls here, we did get the chance to compare these sometimes difficult-to-tell-apart species. The road along the north coast of Snæfellsnes is scenically very attractive and we enjoyed the drive to Ólafsvík. We were searching for harlequin ducks but there was no luck for us here. It was a different story further along the coast at Hellisandur, however, and we got some great close-up views of four male harlequins pursuing a female along the rocky coast. Further west we watched more harlequins 'surfing' in the large waves crashing on the shore. The birds, like us, seemed to be enjoying themselves.

We headed back to Grundarfjörður in worsening weather and after lunch returned to Kolgrafafjörður in the hope of seeing more orcas and eagles. Not a chance! The wind had whipped the fjord into a frenzy, and driving rain and sleet made it very difficult to see anything at all. We returned to the shelter of Grundarfjörður and visit the Whale Centre to learn more about orcas, this time by watching a film.

The weather worsened and it was a very stormy night. We later learnt that wind speeds reached 44 m/s near Grundarfjörður. That's more than 98 mph — hurricane force winds under the old Beaufort scale

where, incidentally, hurricane force is described as being greater than 32.7 m/s. We weren't hopeful for an auroral display this evening!

Tuesday 11 March 2014

Light SW winds with temperatures around freezing at first but climbing to 5 °C later

The storm had blown itself out and we set off in pleasant weather after breakfast. In what must be one of the most surreal journeys to an airport we began the day by once again watching white-tailed eagles and orcas in Kolgrafafjörður. The orcas swam under the road bridge and we had some brilliant views of them as they headed for the open sea.

We saw some glaucous and Iceland gulls at Borgarnes before heading for Reykjavík, Iceland's capital. There was just time for a quick spell of birdwatching here, adding black-headed gull and pink-footed goose to the list, before having a bite to eat and heading for the airport for the return flight.

SPECIES LISTS

Birds

Species	Scientific name	Notes
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	B 4. Small groups seen most days.
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	B 2. Recorded near Reykjavík on 6 March, 9 March and 11
Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>	A 1. Recorded at Reykjavík on 11 March.
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	B 3. Good views off the south coast of Reykjanes on 8 March.
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	A 1. Small flock at Sogið on 7 March.
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	C 5. Recorded most days.
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	B 2. At Hlíðarvatn on 8 March and Reykjavík on 11 March.
Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>	A 1. Around 5 at Hlíðarvatn on 8 March.
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	D 2. Common offshore.
King Eider	<i>Somateria spectabilis</i>	A 1. Single male at Grundarfjörður on 9 March.
Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>	B 2. Great views along the south coast on 8 March and
Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>	C 2. Recorded several times with around 200 at Hvalfjörður
Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>	B 1. Great views at Sogið on 7 March.
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	C 4. Recorded at several locations.
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	A 2. Good views at Sogið on 7 March.
Rock Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus mutus</i>	Tracks recorded near Selvogur on 8 March but no birds seen.
Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>	A 1. Recorded offshore at Hvalfjörður on 9 March.
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>	A 1. Recorded Snæfellsnes on 10 March.
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	C 4. Many seen offshore. Four seen perched on ice at
European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	C 3. Great views in breeding plumage at Snæfellsnes on 9
White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>	A 2. Great views of 3 at Kolgrafafjörður on 9 March and
Gyr Falcon	<i>Falco rusticolus</i>	A 1. Near Reykholt on 7 March.
Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>	C 2. Noted several times around the coast of Snæfellsnes
Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	A 1. At Reykjavík on 11 March.
Common Gull	<i>Larus canis</i>	A 1. At Selvogur on 8 March.
Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	C 3. Many off the south coast on 8 March.
Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	A 1. Recorded on Snæfellsnes on 10 March.
Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>	D 3. Wonderful views from several locations throughout the
Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>	C 2. Many recorded offshore particularly on Snæfellsnes.
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	C 3. Seen on most days.
Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>	A 1. A single bird recorded at Hvalfjörður on 9 March.
Feral Pigeon/Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	B 1. In Reykjavík on 11 March.
White Wagtail	<i>Montacilla alba</i>	A 1. In Hveragerði on 7 March.
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	A 1. One in Hveragerði on 7 March.
Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	A 1. In Hveragerði on 9 March.
Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	C 5. Seen each day.
European Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	C 5. Seen each day.
Common Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>	B 3. Good views at Þingvellir on 7 March.
Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>	C 3. Flocks in Hveragerði and Grundarfjörður.

Mammals

Species	Scientific name	Notes
Killer Whale	<i>Orcinus orca</i>	B 2. Great views at Kolgrafafjörður on 9 and 11 March
Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>	A 1. At Snæfellsnes on 9 March.
Atlantic Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>	A 1. At Snæfellsnes on 9 March.

The alpha numeric code in the Notes column for birds and mammals summarises the relative abundance and the frequency species were noted.

Relative Abundance

A = fewer than 10 individuals noted during the trip

B = 10 to 100 individuals noted during the trip

C = Between 101 and 1000 individuals noted during the trip

D = More than 1000 individuals noted during the trip.

Frequency Seen

The numbers refer to the number of days on the trip a species was recorded