

WILDLIFE TRAVEL



Iceland 2013



Iceland species lists and trip report, 8th to 13th April 2013

Introduction

Travelling in Iceland during the winter time is exhilarating. The landscape provides a spectacular backdrop to the harsh, wintry conditions that wildlife must endure to survive this tough period. We timed our visit at the end of the season when the days are lengthening and there are signs that winter is losing its grip. What follows is a daily summary of the places we visited and the wildlife we encountered.

Monday 8 April 2013

Bright and sunny with a light south east wind. Temperatures a degree or two above freezing.

We assemble at Keflavík airport and are soon on our way. We stop at some coastal pools at Njarðvík and are treated to some very close-up views of an American wigeon swimming within a group of Eurasian wigeon. We also record whooper swan and Iceland gull here.

We travel to the west coast of the Reykjanes peninsula and at Hafnir discover a group of at least 12 great northern divers offshore. We also have wonderful views of harlequin duck and common eider.

We drive along the north coast of Reykjanes and see an enormous gull roost offshore. There are many Iceland gulls amongst the great black-backed and herring gulls in the flock.

We cross the Mid-Atlantic Ridge and learn a little about the vigorous geology of Iceland. In fact, we undertake an 'inter-continental' journey as we cross from the tectonic plate carrying the continent of North America onto the plate carrying Europe and Asia. The views are wonderful as we descend the ridge towards the small town of Hveragerði and we can see far in the distance the island of Surtsey which appeared in a submarine eruption in 1963.

We enjoy a delicious dinner in our comfortable guesthouse but sadly the clouds have rolled in. However we travel the short distance to a nearby valley in the hope that the aurora will shine through gaps in the cloud. We are able to determine a weak auroral band glowing through the clouds but this soon disappears after the clouds thicken.

Tuesday 9 April 2013

Light snow showers at first but brightening later. Temperatures between -3 and -5°C.

We begin the day by searching for wildfowl on the rivers and pools of Sogið. In the distance we can see the volcanoes of Hekla and Eyjafjallajökull. We note whooper swans and greylag geese in, and adjacent to, the river. Further north, on a small pool, we discover some goosanders and have good views of a male. Nearby is the species we are looking for — Barrow's goldeneye and we have some reasonable, if distant, views of both drakes and ducks.

We continue our journey to the national park at Þingvellir and have good views of ptarmigan on the way. The scenery is delightful and we have a very pleasant walk along the western edge of the rift valley. We explore the waterfall at Öxarárfoss and visit the site of the old Viking parliament. The botany here is also very interesting and we learn about the climax vegetation of the country and how so many of the woodlands of Iceland disappeared as the first settlers cut them down for fuel. We hear the 'Icelandic' wren here. It's a sub-species of the winter wren. We picnic in bright sunshine at the lakeside and have some wonderful views of Barrow's goldeneye just offshore. There are also some fulmars bathing in the lake.

We travel to the geothermal area at Geysir and enjoy strolling around the hot springs and geysers. We witness many eruptions of the geyser, Strokkur. We also see the Icelandic race of common redpoll here.

We reach the great glacial waterfall of Gullfoss and explore the area. We stand entranced at the edge of the falls and enjoy looking at the rainbow formed in the spray. There are several ravens in the area, too.

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On our return journey we stop at the crater of Kerið and learn more about the ways the volcanoes have shaped this part of Iceland.

The weather closes in this evening and it starts to snow so there'll be no chance of seeing an aurora tonight.

Wednesday 10 April 2013

Cold NE wind with temperatures around -5°C. Bright and clear.

We begin the day with a delightful walk along the south coast of Iceland near Stokkseyri. We learn about the large eruption which produced the lava reefs offshore and about isostatic rebound which left sea levels higher in the past than they are now. There are common seals offshore and we record Iceland, glaucous, herring, great black-backed, black-headed and lesser black-backed gulls. We also see some cormorants and gannets offshore. We hear a red-throated diver fly overhead.

At Eyrarbakki we have some very good views of Iceland gull and also see some black-tailed godwits with a group of oystercatchers on the sand.

We walk along the black sand beach at Óseyrartangi and comment on the thousands of eider ducks offshore.

We have our picnic at Þorlákshöfn and look out to sea in the hope of seeing some cetaceans but rough seas make viewing conditions rather difficult so no luck today.

We next visit the rocky coast at Selvogur and see some more common seals and, of course, lots more eider ducks. We see ptarmigan near here as well.

At Hlíðarvatn we see groups of greater scaup and long-tailed ducks and we also admire the large numbers of fulmars flying along the inland cliffs prospecting for nesting sites.

We see more harlequin ducks at Herdísarvík and enjoy exploring the block lava field and learn about the lichens and mosses which first colonise this new land. The *Racomitrium* mosses are particularly splendid.

A member of the group asks about the geothermal activity in this part of Iceland so we make a quick visit to the geothermal area at Krýsuvík and explore the colourful hot springs and bubbling mud there.

After another delicious dinner we head up the mountain in the hope of seeing an aurora. The sky is clear and we comment on the darkness and the myriads of stars visible. We see Jupiter and its satellites and remark on how high the Plough and Pole Star appear in these latitudes. There's a faint aurora over the northern horizon more easily seen in photographs than with the naked eye. It's -8°C and with the bitterly cold wind blowing strongly from the north we retreat for the night.

Thursday 11 April 2013

A bright if cold start to the day with snow showers later. Temperature of -5°C.

We begin the day by exploring the new geothermal area at Hveragerði. The hot springs developed along a fissure which formed after an earthquake in 2008. We hear and then see common redpoll in the area.

We travel to the coast at Hvalfjörður and enjoy the morning exploring the bays and coastline of the fjord. There are long-tailed ducks and we have wonderful close views of eider ducks. Amongst them is a solitary male scaup. Further along the coast we encounter some large groups of oystercatchers — recently arrived in Iceland and a sure sign that winter is beginning to lose its grip. We also record black guillemots in both summer and winter plumage.

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We enjoy our packed lunch in a sheltered spot on the north coast of the fjord and see many more common eider and long-tailed ducks offshore.

We visit the coast at Borgarnes but the frozen foreshore produces few birds so we continue our journey to Snæfellsnes.

We stop to explore the Berserkjakraun lava field and see a white-tailed eagle flying over the lava. There are whooper swans and more oystercatchers on the fjord itself. We see another eagle and have great views as it soars overhead. In Hraunfjörður we enjoy watching some Atlantic grey seals just offshore. They are splashing and playing and we enjoy their antics. We see three common redshanks flying over the fjord and learn about the plant succession on the new lava.

As we travel along the Snæfellsnes coastline we begin to see many glaucous gulls and further offshore see lots of northern gannets, too. There are shags and eider closer to us. We remark on the incredible number of birds that there are in the area. It's snowing as we arrive at Grundarfjörður which will be our base for the next two nights.

Friday 12 April 2013

Light snow at first but clearing to a lovely sunny day. Brisk NE wind with temperatures dropping to -5°C.

We begin the day by travelling along the north coast of Snæfellsnes. We see lots of glaucous gulls and learn how to tell them apart from Iceland gulls. There are harlequin ducks offshore and we also see some purple sandpiper.

We enjoy the magnificent scenery of Snæfellsnes and remark on the number of frozen waterfalls and icicle covered cliffs.

At Ólafsvík we watch a very obliging kittiwake in the harbour and record more harlequins and long-tailed ducks.

We walk along the shore at Skarðsvík and see several shags before heading for the western end of the peninsula. There are many seabirds offshore and as we watch some diving gannets see an orca surface amongst them. There's a group of perhaps 15 animals and we follow their progress along the coast. The coastal scenery is magnificent as we drive eastwards hoping the orcas will come closer inshore. We're in luck and the animals show off for us as they swim eastwards. We enjoy a wonderful picnic sitting in the warm vehicle sipping hot coffee or cocoa and watching the killer whales.

We decide to travel around the peninsula and are accompanied by some snow buntings which fly alongside us for a few moments.

At Berúvík we enjoy watching a white-tailed eagle which flies along the coast before heading inland towards the glacier. We comment on how small the ravens and great black-backed gulls look beside it. There's also the carcass of a sperm whale on the shore which stranded here about a year ago. We also see some droppings from an arctic fox but there's no sign of the animal that made them.

We explore the beach at Djúpalón and in the shelter of the cliffs enjoy the warm sunshine. There are fewer birds here than on the north coast though. As we return to the vehicle the cloud blows clear from the top of the ice cap leaving us with some truly amazing views.

We make a quick visit to Arnarstapi before travelling across the mountain pass of Fróðárheiði. The views are magnificent but the cloud has returned over the top of the glacier. We descend to the north coast and have a pleasant drive back to the hotel in the company of many thousands of gulls, fulmars and eider.

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Our hoped for aurora watching this evening comes to naught as snow returns to block out any hope of seeing the night sky.

Saturday 13 April 2013

A bright day with snow showers. Temperatures clamber up to 1°C.

It's a lovely drive across snow covered landscapes to Borgarnes where we break our journey by birdwatching from the windows of the town's bakery.

Near Hvalfjörður we see three white-tailed eagles soaring overhead. We travel to Reykjavík (with another white-tailed eagle seen flying over the city) and make a quick exploration of the city centre where we dutifully record feral pigeon and blackbird near the famous city pond. We have great views of whooper swan, tufted duck and wigeon here as well.

There's time for a last birdwatching stop near Vogar and we record brent goose along the shore.

All too soon it's time to travel to the airport for the return flight to London. We say our farewells and remark on what has been an excellent winter wildlife watching trip in Iceland.

Thanks for your company and I hope we'll meet on another Wildlife Travel trip again one day.

Andy Jones

April 2013

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Birds Recorded

Species	Scientific Name
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>
Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>
American Wigeon	<i>Anas americana</i>
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>
Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>
Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>
Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>
Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>
Rock Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus mutus</i>
Red-throated Diver (heard)	<i>Gavia stellata</i>
Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>
White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>
Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>
Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>
Common Gull	<i>Larus canis</i>
Lesser black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>
Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>
Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>
Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>
Black-legged kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>
Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>
Feral Pigeon/Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>
Winter Wren (heard)	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>
Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>
Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
European Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
Common Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>
Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>

Mammals Recorded

Species	Scientific Name
Sperm Whale ¹	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>
Killer Whale	<i>Orcinus orca</i>
Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>
Atlantic Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>
Arctic Fox ²	<i>Alopex lagopus</i>

1. The carcass of a stranded whale recorded at Beruvík on 12 April 2013

2. Fox droppings near Beruvík on 12 April 2013