

**WILDLIFE TRAVEL**



# **Iceland**

# **November 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 visit at the start of winter when the days are still long enough for us to enjoy seeing the winter wildlife and the dark nights increase our chances of witnessing the aurora borealis. What follows is a daily summary of the places we visited and the wildlife we encountered.

### **Thursday 7 November 2013**

*Overcast with brighter intervals. Cold NE wind with temperatures around -2°C*

Our flight arrives on time at Keflavík airport and we are soon on our way. The light is fading but there's enough of it to make a quick visit to the west coast of Reykjanes for some birdwatching. The first bird we see offshore is a great northern diver and beyond it are two male and three female harlequin ducks. We enjoy good views through the 'scope. There are red-breasted mergansers and a few common eider ducks as well. Further away we see a group of around 20 common seals hauled out on a rocky skerry. Great black-backed gulls and a single glaucous gull fly overhead.

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. Night has fallen as we descend the ridge towards the small town of Hveragerði which will be our base for the next few days.

We enjoy a delicious dinner and learn of our plans for the days ahead. The skies clear and we travel a short distance to witness a display of the northern lights. We see the auroral arc or band and some auroral curtains shine through the light cloud. It's a weak display and we enjoy the spectacle though it's very cold.

### **Friday 8 November 2013**

*Cold NE wind with brighter intervals. Temperatures below freezing all day.*

It's a crisp, cold start to the day. We head first for the rivers and pools of Sogið in the hope of encountering some of the winter wildfowl in the area. We have good views of red-breasted merganser, mallard and a few tufted ducks. There are around 30 whooper swans and behind them we find what we're looking for — Barrow's goldeneye. We have distant views of two males and four or five females. We see ravens flying overhead.

We travel further upstream and it's not long before we find some more Barrow's goldeneyes and also have some good views of goosander on a large pool.

There are more Barrow's goldeneyes when we reach Þingvallavatn and we also see a great northern diver here. Þingvellir is a spectacular area, geographically, geologically, historically and ecologically and we enjoy wandering around the area of the old viking parliament. We learn of the viking times and the dynamic geology of the area. We see crowberry, bilberry, bog bilberry and bearberry though their berries have frozen in the chill temperatures.

We enjoy our picnic overlooking the lake and see more Barrow's goldeneyes and some long-tailed ducks. There's another great northern diver, too.

We head for the geothermal area of Geysir and have a pleasant stroll around the geothermal springs. We witness many eruptions of the geyser, Strokkur and record common redpoll and redwing around the hot springs.

We travel to nearby Gullfoss and enjoy the spectacular views of the waterfall. The scenery is incredible and in the clear visibility we see the ice-cap of Langjökull in the distance. Two ravens accompany us as we walk along the canyon rim.

The light is fading but we've time to make a quick visit to another waterfall called Faxi. We look for ptarmigans here but there's no luck for us today.

Cloudy skies interfere with our aurora watching plans so no luck tonight.

### **Saturday 9 November 2013**

*A bright clear day with good visibility. Temperatures just below freezing*

It's a gorgeous start to the day — bright, sunny and still as we begin by travelling eastwards towards the Eyjafjallajökull volcano. As we drive we see the first of many goose flocks that we were to see during the day. Most of them were greylag geese but we did record some pink-footed geese, too.

We admire the waterfall at Seljalandsfoss and record the distinctive Icelandic sub-species of winter wren in the area. There are several rock doves here as well.

In the shadow of the volcano we stop for photographs and learn about the eruption of 2010 which caused flight travel chaos worldwide.

We explore the coastline at Dyrhólaey and stop for close views of the large geese and whooper swan congregations. The birds will be migrating south soon. We record common snipe here and also note a large flock of snow bunting. The offshore views are magnificent and we comment on the numbers of northern fulmars flying past. It's a great place for our picnic lunch. As we munch our sandwiches we watch a group of 15 or so whooper swans fly out to sea. They're heading in a south easterly direction towards Scotland. Pulses quicken as we leave the area as a gyrfalcon flies past. It's a brief but good view.

At Vík we stroll on the black sand beach and have a productive spell of birdwatching. There are a few Iceland gulls around and in the still water behind the surf we see a red-throated diver and at least two slavonian grebes diving for food. There are long-tailed ducks and common eider as well. We also see an Atlantic grey seal.

We visit the snout of the Sólheimajökull glacier and learn about glaciation and glacial landforms in Iceland. We are able to stand on the edge of the ice. The scenery is magnificent.

We call at the large waterfall at Skógarfoss before travelling back to our guesthouse.

After dinner we are treated to a lovely display of the northern lights. The skies are partly cloudy but the developing aurora shines through and when the skies clear we enjoy the wonderful light show.

### **Sunday 10 November 2013**

*Overcast at first but sleet, snow and rain later. A stormy afternoon and evening.*

It's overcast and the wind strengthens as we head for the south Iceland coast at Stokkseyri. We see many ravens as we travel and once again record several flocks of greylag geese. At Knarrarósviti we take a blustery walk along the shore. There are some Iceland gulls flying past and we see red-breasted merganser. We learn about the large lava flow of Þjórsárhraun and find lyme grass, oysterplant and wild thyme along the shore.

We warm up with coffee and hot chocolate at Stokkseyri before travelling further west along the coast. It's snowing but in the lee of our minibus we have a very productive spell of birdwatching at Eyrarbakki. There are three great northern divers sheltering close to us, some long-tailed ducks further away, a flock of a

dozen or so purple sandpipers and a few turnstone on the sea wall. There are also common eider ducks and we see an enormous flock of at least 500 birds bouncing on the waves far out to sea. There are some snow buntings and a winter wren as well

We travel westwards in worsening conditions and birdwatch from inside the vehicle at Óseyratangi. We see lots of Iceland gulls and some eider ducks sheltering in the lee of the shingle bank. At Selvogur the wind increases dramatically, the snow turns to rain and we have our packed lunch inside the minibus. We contrast today's weather with the wonderful calm conditions of the day before.

The strong wind and driving sleet and rain at Þorlákshöfn doesn't prevent us from enjoying some great views of both long-tailed ducks and Iceland gulls. We beat the retreat and over coffee and cake in Hveragerði discuss Iceland's natural history and geology.

Just before the light fails some of us take a very blustery stroll around the new hot springs that formed in Hveragerði in 2008. We have some great views of the Icelandic race of common redpoll sheltering from the wind in a small stand of birch trees. It's a wild and stormy night.

### **Monday 11 November 2013**

*Very windy with heavy rain showers. Much warmer with temperatures reaching 5°C*

Last night's storm has abated but it's still very windy as we leave for Iceland's capital city, Reykjavík. We travel across the mountains of the mid-Atlantic ridge and see the geothermal power station of Hellisheiði.

At Perlan we have some wonderful views across the city from the visitor centre and then travel to the coast near the city centre. In the harbour we see many more Iceland gulls and a single black guillemot accompanying a small flock of eider ducks.

At Grótta we have a spell of seawatching and see lots more long-tailed ducks, red-breasted mergansers, common eiders and mallard. There are several cormorants flying past and one seems to be almost 'hovering' as it failed to make progress against the strong headwind.

We explore the city centre and do a little more birdwatching on Tjörnin, the well known pond and a prominent city landmark. We say goodbye to two members of our group who are staying in Iceland for a few more days before driving along the north coast of Reykjanes for our final spot of birdwatching.

All too soon it's time to head for the international airport and the return flight to London.

Thanks for your company, I hope you enjoyed this winter visit to Iceland and perhaps we'll meet here again one day.

**Andy Jones**

**November 2013**

## Species

Species	Scientific name	Notes
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	C 5
Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>	B 1
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	D 5
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	B 1
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	A 1
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	C 5
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	B 2
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	D 4
Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>	A 1
Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>	B 3
Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>	B 1
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	C 3
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	A 1
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>	A 1
Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>	A 3
Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>	A 1
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	D 2
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	B 2
Gyr Falcon	<i>Falco rusticolus</i>	A 1
Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>	B 2
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	A 1
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	B 1
Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	B 3
Common Gull	<i>Larus canis</i>	A 1
Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	B 2

<b>Species</b>	<b>Scientific name</b>	<b>Notes</b>
Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucooides</i>	C 3
Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>	B 3
Great black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	C 3
Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>	A 1
Feral Pigeon/Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	B 1
Winter Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	A 2
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	B 4
Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	C 5
European Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	C 4
Common Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>	B 3
Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>	C 3

<b>Species</b>	<b>Scientific name</b>	<b>Notes</b>
Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>	B 2
Atlantic Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>	A 1

The alpha numeric code in the **Notes** column for birds and mammals summarises the relative abundance and frequency of species recorded.

### **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**

The numbers reference on how many days of the trip a species was recorded