

ORNITHOLIDAYS TOUR TO ICELAND
Winter Wonderland

28 November - 02 December 2013



Leader: Andy Jones

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A Personal Diary

Travelling in Iceland during the winter months is an exciting experience. The landscape provides a spectacular backdrop to the harsh, wintry conditions that wildlife must endure to survive this tough period. What follows is a diary of the places visited and the wildlife highlights on Ornitholidays' late November early December 2013 trip to Iceland. Also included is a list of the wildlife we recorded.

Thursday 28 November 2013

Overcast with sleet showers. Temperature around freezing.

The flight's on time and we assemble at Keflavík airport and are soon on our way. The light is fading fast as we stop at Njarðvík for a brief spell of birdwatching. We note Whooper Swan, Eurasian Wigeon, Mallard and the first of the Iceland Gulls that we were to see so many of in the days ahead.

Darkness falls and as we drive we learn a little about the geology of the area. In fact we undertake an intercontinental journey as we leave the tectonic plate carrying the continent of North America and cross to the European one.

We soon reach our guesthouse located on the flanks of the mid-Atlantic Ridge amidst the wonderful scenery of south Iceland. After a delicious dinner we discuss our plans for the days ahead. Overcast skies means there's no chance of seeing the northern lights tonight.

Friday 29 November 2013

Bright at first but cloudy later with snow and sleet in the afternoon. Temperatures below freezing.

We start the day with a walk around Hveragerði searching for the Icelandic race of Common Redpoll. We have some very good views of this species. We also hear a Winter Wren and see a male Common Blackbird — this species is a recent coloniser of Iceland. We explore the new hot springs which appeared after an earthquake in 2008. The sunrise is spectacular and we see the atmospheric phenomenon of the '*belt of Venus*'.

As we travel to the Sogið area in search of wildfowl we see the lower flanks of the volcano, Eyjafjallajökull and also Hekla, arguably Iceland's best known volcano. The river and pools in the area often hold good numbers of wintering wildfowl and we record Goosander, Tufted Duck, Mallard and Whooper Swan. We see our first Barrow's Goldeneye, a female on the river, and then further upstream have good views of a dozen or so more. There are Red-Breasted Merganser here as well.

We visit Þingvellir. The scenery is spectacular and we explore the northern edge of the large lake. We see several Long-tailed Ducks, a single Great Northern Diver and three Slavonian Grebes on the lake. As we eat our picnic lunch we see more Barrow's Goldeneyes. Þingvellir was home to the old Viking parliament and we learn of the Vikings and the importance of this area to them.

As we travel along the slippery roads to the geothermal area at Geysir we learn about the eruption that occurred in 2010 at the Eyjafjallajökull volcano but sadly the visibility prevents us from seeing the volcano now. At Geysir we enjoy strolling around the hot springs and geysers. We witness several eruptions of Strokkur, the active geyser.

The light is fading as we reach the great glacial waterfall of Gullfoss. Light snow falls but this doesn't spoil the view of the magnificent scenery. Several Common Ravens patrol the area.

The short winter's day is over and we travel back to our guesthouse through falling snow.

Saturday 30 November 2013

Sleet at first but turning to rain showers later. Brisk westerly winds with temperatures just above freezing.

As we leave Hveragerði we ascend the flanks of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge and see the steam rising from the many hot springs and hot streams in the area.

We head for Hvalfjörður and have our first productive spell of birdwatching on the south shore of the fjord. We shelter under some low cliffs and note many hundreds of Common Eider, a few Long-tailed Ducks, Iceland and Glaucous Gulls, Great Cormorants and a small group of Eurasian Oystercatchers feeding on the shore. We note two Common Gulls and there's also a Red-throated Diver here but it's difficult to see in the choppy water. We stop at several places around the fjord and at one of them record several Snow Buntings. A pipit flies overhead. We can't be sure of its identity but think it is a Rock Pipit, a good record at this time of year.

We have our lunchtime picnic in a sheltered spot on the north shore of the fjord and see several more Long-tailed Ducks and many Common Eiders.

We stop at Borgarnes but there are few birds to be seen. We drive across some lovely landscapes to the north coast of Snæfellsnes and near Berserkjahraun explore the edge of the lava field. We search for White-tailed Eagles but there's no luck for us today though we enjoy watching some Common Seals in the fjord.

At Kólgrafafjörður we are amazed at the number of birds. There are thousands of Common Eiders, Glaucous and Iceland Gulls with fewer great Black-backed and Herring Gulls amongst them. The fjord seems to be alive with birds. The Snæfellsnes landscapes are lovely and we enjoy the drive to our hotel in the small harbour settlement of Grundarfjörður.

We are treated to a fine display of the *aurora borealis* this evening. The bright aurora even illuminates a large group of Iceland Gulls roosting on the fjord. Fabulous!

Sunday 1 December 2013

Strong westerly winds with heavy rain and hail showers. Warm with temperatures well above freezing.

In blustery conditions we have a gull identification session and it's not long before we are able to tell the differences between Glaucous and Iceland Gulls. We see some Black-legged Kittiwakes and a single Black Guillemot offshore as well. There's a large group of Purple Sandpipers in the area and we also have good views of Snow Buntings.

We travel along the north coast of the peninsula searching for Harlequin Ducks and it's not long before we encounter a small group of four of them near the small town of Ólafsvík. It's difficult holding the scopes steady in the strong wind but in the harbour itself we watch a group of a dozen or so Harlequin Ducks the comfortable way from inside the vehicle. We have some wonderful views of this special bird of Iceland.

We walk along the coast out Írskrabrunnur searching offshore for Orcas. There's no luck for us here though. We debate whether to stay on the relatively sheltered north coast or drive around the southern, more exposed coast of the peninsula. We opt for shelter and this is an inspired decision as in the fjord of Grundarfjörður we see a pod of half a dozen or so Orcas very close to shore. We munch our sandwiches in the company of the whales. There are lots more Purple Sandpipers and a few Ruddy Turnstone together with another pair of Harlequin Ducks.

We try again for White-tailed Eagle but there's no luck for us in the blustery conditions today. Some more coastal bird watching produces several Eurasian Shags offshore and, as usual, we comment on the sheer numbers of gulls and eiders. At the coast near Berserkjahraun we enjoy watching five Atlantic Grey Seals which seem as interested in us as we are in them.

The short winter day draws to a close but overcast skies mean there's sadly no chance of another aurora tonight.

Monday 2 December 2013

Clear with snow showers. Temperatures around -4°C.

It's a clear start to the day and as we drive away in the darkness see a faint auroral display behind the low cloud on the northern horizon. Later, as we travel, we see another atmospheric phenomenon called the *zodiacal light*.

We're heading for Iceland's capital, Reykjavík and enjoy the snowy landscapes of western Iceland as we journey southwards. We see many Common Ravens as we drive and we break our journey at Borgarnes by watching Iceland Gulls from the comfort of a coffee shop.

There are lots of birds offshore at Reykjavík and we have a quick tour around the city noting Whooper Swans, Tufted Ducks and Greylag Geese on Tjörnin, the well-known city pond. We visit the viewpoint at Perlan before heading along the north coast of Reykjanes for the last birding of the trip. Along the sheltered shore we see many of the familiar Common Eider and Iceland Gulls together with fewer Long-tailed Ducks and a single Great Northern Diver. A group of small ducks fly past and we reckon they are Eurasian Teal. We make a quick visit to Njarðvík for our last birdwatching stop and have the best views of Whooper Swans and Iceland Gulls of the trip!

We reach the airport, say our farewells and remark on what has been an excellent winter weekend wildlife watching in Iceland.

Acknowledgements

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

Andy Jones
Ornitholidays
29 Straight Mile
Romsey
Hampshire
SO51 9BB
Tel: 01794 519445

December 2013



Barrow's Goldeneye



Orca

CHECKLIST OF BIRDS SEEN DURING TOUR

No of days recorded

1 2h means seen on 1
day and heard on 2
other days

Abundance Scale (max. seen on 1 day)

1 = 1 – 9 individuals
3 = 10 - 99
4 = 100 – 999
5 = 1,000+

SPECIES	No of days recorded	Abundance Scale	SCIENTIFIC NAME
Whooper Swan	4	3	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>
Greylag Goose	1	3	<i>Anser anser</i>
Eurasian Wigeon	2	3	<i>Anas penelope</i>
Eurasian Teal	1	3	<i>Anas crecca</i>
Mallard	4	4	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Tufted Duck	2	4	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>
Common Eider	3	5	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>
Harlequin Duck	1	3	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>
Long-tailed Duck	2	3	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>
Barrow's Goldeneye	1	3	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>
Red-breasted Merganser	3	4	<i>Mergus serrator</i>
Goosander	1	1	<i>Mergus merganser</i>
Red-throated Diver	1	1	<i>Gavia stellata</i>
Great Northern Diver	2	1	<i>Gavia immer</i>
Slavonian Grebe	1	1	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>
Northern Gannet	1	1	<i>Morus bassanus</i>
Great Cormorant	3	4	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
European Shag	1	3	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>
Eurasian Oystercatcher	2	4	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>
Purple Sandpiper	1	4	<i>Calidris maritima</i>
Ruddy Turnstone	1	1	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>
Black-headed Gull	3	4	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>
Common Gull	1	1	<i>Larus canis</i>
Herring Gull	3	4	<i>Larus argentatus</i>
Iceland Gull	4	5	<i>Larus glaucooides</i>
Glaucous Gull	3	5	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>
Great Black-backed Gull	3	4	<i>Larus marinus</i>
Black-legged Kittiwake	1	1	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>
Black Guillemot	1	1	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>
Feral Pigeon/Rock Dove	2	3	<i>Columba livia</i>
Rock Pipit ¹	1	1	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>
Winter Wren	- 1h	1	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
Redwing	3	3	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>
Blackbird	2	1	<i>Turdus merula</i>
Common Raven	4	4	<i>Corvus corax</i>
European Starling	4	4	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
Common Redpoll	1	3	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>
Snow Bunting	2	3	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>

MAMMALS

Killer Whale	<i>Orcinus orca</i>
Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>
Atlantic Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>

¹ A pipit briefly seen at Hvalfjörður was probably this species though we cannot be certain.

This list represents those birds and other species as seen by members of this tour.