

**ORNITHOLIDAYS TOUR TO ICELAND**  
*Winter Wonderland*

**14 – 18 FEBRUARY 2013**



**Leader: Andy Jones**

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### A Personal Diary

#### **Introduction**

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 brief diary of the places visited and the wildlife highlights on Ornitholidays' February 2013 trip to Iceland. Also included is a simple list of the birds and mammals we recorded.

#### **Thursday 14 February 2013**

*Fine, bright and sunny. Temperatures are just below freezing.*

We assemble at Keflavík airport and are soon on our way. We stop at Njarðvík for a little birdwatching. Almost the first bird we see is a drake American Wigeon amongst a group of Eurasian Wigeon. There are Whooper Swans, Common Teal, Iceland Gulls, Great Black-backed Gulls and Common Eider, too. A little further on we see another drake American Wigeon.

The landscape is covered in snow and as we travel across the countryside 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. On the outskirts of Reykjavík there's a Merlin perched on a lamp-post.

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 go outside and see a faint aurora appearing in the northern sky. We grab coats, hats and scarves and drive to where we hope to be able to see it better. We are lucky and are treated to a delightful auroral display.

#### **Friday 15 February 2013**

*Another bright and sunny day though with a chill NE wind later. Temperatures around freezing but reach 3°C later.*

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 soon find what we're looking for — Barrow's Goldeneye. We have great views of this special bird of Iceland. As we watch the Goldeneyes, a White-tailed Eagle flies along the river — wonderful. Heading north we see a small flock of Common Teal and a Grey Heron, a vagrant in Iceland. On a larger pool there are at least 50 Barrow's Goldeneyes. They're in the distance but we get good views in the scopes. We also record Goosander here.

We reach the national park of Þingvellir. The scenery is spectacular and we have a wonderful walk along the edge of the American continent and learn of the Vikings and the parliament that they held here. There are several Common Ravens in the area. The edge of the lake is frozen but in some clear water beyond there's a small group of Red-breasted Merganser. We picnic between the continents at the edge of the lake.

We travel to the geothermal area at Geysir and enjoy strolling around the hot springs and geysers. We witness several eruptions of Strokkur, the active geyser. We reach the great glacial waterfall of Gullfoss. In the distance we see the Langjökull glacier, the source of the glacial river that flows over the falls. The scenery is incredible but the only bird we record is a single Common Raven.

The light is fading as we make our last stop of the day at the crater of Kerið. We see many more Common Ravens heading for their roost in the mountains. The clear skies after dinner bode well for the aurorae and we're not disappointed. Again we travel to a sheltered area and enjoy the light show. The display is not as powerful as the previous evening, however.

### **Saturday 16 February 2013**

*Another clear and bright day with a little cloud cover later. Temperatures range from - 2°C to 2°C.*

We first visit the hot springs in Hveragerði and record Common Redpoll of the Icelandic race as we walk around them. As we leave Hveragerði we ascend the flanks of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge and see the steam rising from the hot springs and streams. We head for Hvalfjörður and have a productive spell of birdwatching on the south shore of the fjord. There are lots of Common Eider, several Iceland Gulls, and, the bird we're searching for, Long-tailed Duck. There are a dozen or more of them offshore and we have some good views through the scopes. There is a small flock of Eurasian Wigeon, too. Nearby we make another stop and are rewarded with more Long-tailed Ducks, many gulls including Common, and a group of around 20 Slavonian Grebes in the middle of the fjord.

We have our lunchtime picnic in a sheltered spot on the north shore of the fjord and enjoy watching a Common Seal haul out on the skerry nearby. We also see Winter Wren of the Icelandic race here.

The foreshore at Borgarnes is ice-covered so there are few birds about. We drive across some lovely landscapes to the north coast of Snæfellsnes and stop to photograph the magnificent volcano and ice cap of Snæfellsjökull in the distance.

At Berserkjahraun we explore the edge of the lava field. Offshore there are lots of gulls, both Glaucous and Iceland, and an Atlantic Grey Seal. As we drive along the fjord we see a large group of around 150 Eurasian Oystercatchers on the shore.

In the fjord of Grundarfjörður we see some fins offshore. We soon identify the cetaceans as Killer Whales and have some great views. There are lots of birds here, too. Glaucous, Iceland and Great Black-backed Gulls are everywhere. The Killer Whales prey on the large herring shoals that come close inshore at this time of year and the gulls also take part in this feeding extravaganza.

It's another clear night and we're once again treated to a lovely display of the northern lights.

### **Sunday 17 February 2013**

*Strong NE winds, snow, sleet and later rain. Temperatures hover around freezing at first but climb to 4°C later.*

The weather turns for the worse as we start out this morning. Snow and sleet falls as we try and relocate the Killer Whales. We don't succeed in this but have some wonderful views of a playful group of Common Seals instead. They seem as interested in us as we are in them. We see a small flock of Black-headed Gulls as well. There are fewer gulls than yesterday so it seems that the herring have moved on. We do have some very good views of European Shags though.

We have the chance to see at close hand the differences between Glaucous and Iceland Gulls in the sheltered harbour at Ólafsvík. There are Black-legged Kittiwakes here, too. In the rough water outside the harbour we see Harlequin Ducks. There are three males and two females in the group and we get very good views. We travel along the coast and search the eider flocks for King Eider, sadly without success. We also comment on the large numbers of Northern Fulmars close inshore and see some patrolling the cliffs and even sitting on ledges.

We see a Snow Bunting at Skarðsvík where we stop for our picnic. We munch our sandwiches in the vehicle today as the weather is now very wet and windy.

We travel around the tip of the peninsula and as the sleet and rain has eased take a walk along the storm beach at Beruvík. We first hear, then see a Common Redshank. Offshore there's a steady passage of Northern Gannets and washed up on the beach are the remains of a Sperm Whale that stranded here. It was a large male and whilst the winter storms have strewn its bones along the beach we can nevertheless gain an impression of the size of the animal.

The weather is worsening as we travel to Arnarstapi and in the sheltered waters of its harbour see a solitary

drake Northern Pintail looking rather out of place with the Common Eiders on the shore. Northern Pintails are rare breeders in Iceland. We cross the spine of the peninsula via the Fróðárheiði pass and the cloud base is just high enough for us to see the magnificent views. There's a lot of snow but no birds on the tops today.

Descending to the shore at Ólafsvík we see three small waders feeding. They're Purple Sandpipers. A short distance further on we see many more scurrying along the edge of the sea with a group of Eurasian Oystercatchers. In Grundarfjörður there's a flock of a 100 or so Snow Buntings feeding in a garden.

Despite the awful weather it's been a great day's birdwatching and we enjoy our delicious dinner but there's no chance of seeing an aurora tonight!

### **Monday 18 February 2013**

*SE wind with sleet and drizzle at first but clearing later. Temperatures are above freezing.*

As we leave Snæfellsnes we search unsuccessfully for orcas before heading for Iceland's capital, Reykjavík. We break the journey at Borgarnes and watch Iceland Gulls and Common Eiders from the comfort of a coffee shop. At the mouth of Hvalfjörður we enjoy watching a group of perhaps 30 White-beaked Dolphins swim in and out of the fjord.

We make a quick visit to Iceland's capital before it's time to head along the Reykjanes peninsula towards Keflavík airport. At Hvassahraun we are very fortunate to see a Gyrfalcon perched on a lava cairn just 50 metres or so from us. We have some spectacular views. Further along the coast we see two Great Northern Divers, several Long-tailed Ducks and Red-breasted Mergansers, European Shags and the ubiquitous Iceland Gulls at our last birdwatching stop before it's time to head for the airport. We reach the airport, say our farewells and remark on what has been an excellent winter weekend's wildlife watching in Iceland.

### **Acknowledgements**

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

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## CHECKLIST OF BIRDS RECORDED

### SPECIES

Whooper Swan  
Greylag Goose  
Mallard  
Northern Pintail  
American Wigeon  
Eurasian Teal  
Tufted Duck  
Common Eider  
Harlequin Duck  
Long-tailed Duck  
Barrow's Goldeneye  
Red-breasted Merganser  
Goosander  
Great Northern Diver  
Slavonian Grebe  
Northern Fulmar  
Northern Gannet  
Great Cormorant  
European Shag  
Grey Heron  
White-tailed Eagle  
Merlin  
Gyr Falcon  
Eurasian Oystercatcher  
Purple Sandpiper  
Common Redshank  
Black-headed Gull  
Common Gull  
Herring Gull  
Iceland Gull  
Glaucous Gull  
Great Black-backed Gull  
Winter Wren  
Common Raven  
European Starling  
Common Redpoll  
Snow Bunting

### SCIENTIFIC NAME

*Cygnus cygnus*  
*Anser anser*  
*Anas platyrhynchos*  
*Anas acuta*  
*Anas americana*  
*Anas crecca*  
*Aythya fuligula*  
*Somateria mollissima*  
*Histrionicus histrionicus*  
*Clangula hyemalis*  
*Bucephala islandica*  
*Mergus serrator*  
*Mergus merganser*  
*Gavia immer*  
*Podiceps auritus*  
*Fulmarus glacialis*  
*Morus bassanus*  
*Phalacrocorax carbo*  
*Phalacrocorax aristotelis*  
*Ardea cinerea*  
*Haliaeetus albicilla*  
*Falco columbarius*  
*Falco rusticolus*  
*Haematopus ostralegus*  
*Calidris maritima*  
*Tringa totanus*  
*Larus ridibundus*  
*Larus canus*  
*Larus argentatus*  
*Larus glaucoides*  
*Larus hyperboreus*  
*Larus marinus*  
*Troglodytes troglodytes*  
*Corvus corax*  
*Sturnus vulgaris*  
*Carduelis flammea*  
*Plectrophenax nivalis*

### Mammals Recorded

White-beaked Dolphin\*  
Killer Whale  
Sperm Whale \*  
Common Seal  
Atlantic Grey Seal

*Lagenorhynchus albirostris*  
*Orcinus orca*  
*Physeter macrocephalus*  
*Phoca vitulina*  
*Halichoerus grypus*

\* *Stranded specimen seen at Beruvík*

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



All of these photographs were taken on the tour © Andy Jones