

WILDLIFE TRAVEL



Iceland 2013



Iceland species lists and trip report, 3rd to 8th April 2013

LIST OF TRAVELLERS

Leader

Andy Jones



Front: Gyrfalcon and (inset) Northern Lights
Above: group in the snow; Harlequin; Orcas off shore

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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 time 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.

Wednesday 3 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 greylag goose here.

We travel to the west coast of the Reykjanes peninsula and at Hafnir discover a group of at least 35 great northern divers offshore. We also see red-breasted merganser, common eider and common seal.

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 which will be our base for the next few days.

We enjoy a delicious dinner but the clouds roll in and there'll be no chance of seeing the northern lights tonight.

Thursday 4 April 2013

A bright and sunny day with temperatures around freezing.

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 — a drake Barrow's goldeneye and we have some reasonable, if distant, views.

We continue our journey to the national park at Þingvellir. 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 see the 'Icelandic' wren here. It's a sub-species of the winter wren. We also record ptarmigan in the area.

We picnic in bright sunshine at the lakeside and have some wonderful views of Barrow's goldeneye just offshore.

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 remains calm and clear and after dinner we are treated to a grand display of the aurora borealis. We drive a short distance away from the lights of the town and watch the light show overhead. On checking the photographs afterwards we see we have also captured the Andromeda galaxy and comet Pan-Starrs. Fabulous.

Friday 5 April 2013

Overcast at first with sleet and snow showers later. Temperatures are just below freezing.

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 offshore.

At Eyrarbakki our bird watching is interrupted by some enthusiastic schoolchildren who want to practice their English. We also have some lovely views of harlequin duck here. The ducks are just a short distance away and the photographers in the group are delighted.

We enjoy our packed lunch at Óseyrartangi and stroll along the black sand beaches of this part of Iceland. There are many common eiders offshore and we also see red-throated divers flying overhead.

We next visit the rocky coast at Selvogur and see some more common seals and, of course, lots more eider ducks. The weather has deteriorated though with squalls of sleet and light snow blowing in from the sea. 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.

The waves are high at Herdísarvík and we have a great time watching harlequin ducks surfing in the waves. We enjoy exploring the block lava field and learn of the lichens and mosses which first colonise this new land. The Racomitrium mosses are particularly splendid.

A member of the group asks if it's possible to see lave tubes in the area so we make a brief diversion to Raufarhólshellir and examine the entrance to one of the lava tunnels. The tube extends more than a kilometre underground.

Falling snow means there'll be no chance of seeing the aurora this evening.

Saturday 6 April 2013

A bright if cold start to the day with snow showers later. Temperatures are a degree or two below freezing.

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 travel to the coast at Hvalfjörður and enjoy the morning exploring the bays and coastline of the fjord. On the south shore we have some wonderful views of a white-tailed eagle perched on a sea stack. There are long-tailed ducks here, too. Further along the coast we encounter some large groups of oystercatchers — newly arrived in Iceland and a sure sign that winter is beginning to lose its grip.

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We see another white-tailed eagle soaring over the northern shore of the fjord. 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 Berserkjahraun lava field and see two white-tailed eagles flying over the lava. There are whooper swans and more oystercatchers on the fjord itself. In Hraunfjörður we enjoy watching some Atlantic grey seals just offshore.

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.

We soon reach Grundarfjörður which will be our base for the next two nights.

Sunday 7 April 2013

Snow at first but clearing to a lovely sunny afternoon. Cold with temperatures dropping to -4°C.

We begin the day by seeing orcas offshore! They are some distance from us sadly and soon swim out of sight westwards. To the east, however, there's a large group of 40 or more white-beaked dolphins and we enjoy watching their antics.

We decide to head westwards in the hope of seeing the orcas but are delayed when we discover a group of half a dozen male harlequins just a few metres from us.

We scan the sea for signs of the orcas but don't manage to relocate them but a larger cetacean, possibly minke whale, is seen by some group members.

Heading westwards we see another white-tailed eagle flying overhead. We watch where it lands and get some great views through the telescope.

It's snowing heavily now but this doesn't deter some flocks of snow buntings that we see flying alongside the vehicle. We trudge through the snow to the coast at Írskrbrunnar in the hope of seeing the orcas but the conditions are hopeless for seeing out to sea though we do record a black guillemot sheltering in the calmer waters closer to shore.

We decide to return to Grundarfjörður in the hope that the killer whales are there and on our way see a gyrfalcon perched on a post. At Grundarfjörður the whales are very close inshore and through the falling snow we get some great views of the animals. The snow shower passes and brighter, clearer weather follows and now we get to see the killer whales at their best. The orcas are now very close to the sea wall and we have some splendid views in the sunshine. There are lots of birds feeding as well and at one stage it appears to be 'raining gannets' as the birds dive amongst the feeding whales. Their prey is herring and it's because the herring shoals come very close inshore at this time of year that this feeding bonanza occurs. We are lucky to witness it as well as we do.

We travel a little further eastwards and see another perched gyrfalcon. Nearby are three more eagles and countless thousands of gulls, fulmars, gannets and eiders.

We return to the killer whales and spend the last of the afternoon in their company.

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After a delicious dinner and as the light fades we stand on the side of the fjord and watch the whales swim out to sea. In the calm conditions we can hear their exhalations as they travel. There's a small flock of purple sandpipers feeding along the rocky shore as well. Magnificent.

Monday 8 April 2013

Overcast at first but brightening later to a lovely day. Temperatures hover around freezing.

There's no sign of the orcas this morning but we are treated to another white-tailed eagle as we leave Snæfellsnes. The scenery is magnificent as we drive across the snowy landscapes to Borgarnes where we break our journey by birdwatching from the windows of the town's bakery.

We make a quick exploration of the city centre of Reykjavík where we dutifully record feral pigeon 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 common redshank 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

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Birds Recorded

Species	Scientific Name
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</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	<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>
Gyr Falcon	<i>Falco rusticolus</i>
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>
Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</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>Cephus grylle</i>
Feral Pigeon/Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>
Winter Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</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
Minke Whale*	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>
White-beaked Dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus albirostris</i>
Killer Whale	<i>Orcinus orca</i>
Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>
Atlantic Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>

* A larger whale seen offshore on the morning of 7 April was likely this species but identification not confirmed