

Iceland - 30th November to 3rd December 2018

A birding and sightseeing trip

Wilton Farrelly



Aurora from Grotta Lighthouse, Reykjavik

This was a four day break with my wife (a non birder) and was to include whatever birding I could get in between the 'sightseeing'. There was however only to be one birding target for me – Gyr. I was hoping to lay the disappointment of Finland in 2001 to rest when I had spent 3 hours at a Gyr nest site to later find out that the reason we did not see one was that one of us misread the directions and the current nest was actually a further mile up the road..... The opportunity to lay that ghost to rest, the Aurora Borealis, the scenery, a few nice supporting birds and doing something different were the lure of Iceland in December.

From reading previous trip reports from winter, the challenges were clear. There was only the 5 hours of daylight, the changeable and at times intense weather and finally the travel conditions. We flew EasyJet from Belfast to Reykjavík and pre-booked a car with Budget. We had three nights in country and stayed in self catering accommodation the first two nights and finally a hotel in Reykjavik for the last night.

Day 1 - Friday 30th November

Our flight took off on time at 7am and arrived at 09:15. It was however still dark as sunrise was due at 10:25.

One of the advantages of a trip in winter is that the international airport in Iceland is at Keflavik on the Rekjanesaer Peninsular (about 40 minutes west of Reykjavík). This is the peninsula that a number of Gyrfalcon (mainly juveniles) winter on and was therefore my target area on day one. This was likely to be the only area that I could see one during the trip. The Gyr in Iceland are not as white as

the Greenland birds but are paler than the grey Scandinavian birds. However I also knew that I needed luck to see one...

Arrival in the airport was very efficient and then we went to get the hire car. We were out of the airport by 10:15 and light was just starting to break. However it was blowing a very strong northerly gale and there were constant but light snow flurries. Outside the airport I tried to scan the surrounding areas for Ptarmigan as they have previously been reported from here. However with nothing to see but the odd Raven, we headed south east from the airport (towards Reykjavík) to try some lagoons and coastal areas before back-tracking to the west again. I dropped Louise at a Bonus Store to get us some food essentials and I headed out to the point just beyond 'Viking World'. I had plenty of Eider, the first Iceland Gulls and then when heading back to collect Louise, a Gyr flew no more than 20m in front of me as it made its way along past Viking World. I probably had no more than 10 seconds with it but what a beast. It was 10:50 and I had the target in the bag, I could not believe my luck!!

We then headed towards Gardour Lighthouse out to the west. We stopped in a few bays / harbours to look for the American White-winged Scoter that was still about. However in the huge sea swells and bitter winds I could not locate it although some nice close Northern Eider were stunning.

Northern and Common Eider:



We made our way up to Gardour Lighthouse and then south along Road 45 via Sanderoi Harbour. The conditions were however now awful with gale force winds and snow making visibility poor. I did not even try to find any Wren on the seashore at Gardour. Best birds along the route were numerous Iceland and Glaucous Gulls along with Raven and feral Greylags in the area. I also had Long-tailed Duck and Great-Northern Divers.

We continued south to Hafnir which is a regular wintering site for Harlequin. I scoped a pair in challenging conditions (it felt like -10 and I struggled to keep the scope still without any shelter). A pair was good enough for the trip list and I could not find the stamina to look for any more! From here we headed south to the 'Bridge between the Continents'. We then continued on to Grindavik where we were staying at the Harbour View chalets. We arrived around 3:30 so I had about 30 mins around the harbour. Again loads of Iceland Gulls, lesser numbers of Glaucous and a few Kumliens. So

many of the Iceland Gulls were adults which is in contrast to watching the species in Ireland when most birds are sub-adult. I also had about 60 Snow Bunting feeding in the inner harbour. (About a week afterwards this sit held an adult Ivory Gull and a Little Grebe).

That was the extent of the birds for the day but we had a 5pm visit to the Blue Lagoon booked in advance. Whilst it was at the time booked for Louise's benefit, I have to say that it was a superb experience in the cold, the falling snow and the dark.

Day 2 - Saturday 1st December

We woke about 8:30 and the snow had stopped and whilst cold (generally -4) and windy, the day was to mark the start of good weather for our trip.

We managed to leave Grindavík around 9:30 to head west towards Selfoss. There was some impressive scenery along this desolate road but a highlight was stopping at Strandakirkja Church. This was a really scenic church and offshore I scoped numerous Eider and another pair of Harlequin. Onwards we went to Thorlakshofn Harbour. Here there were loads more white winged Gulls and a nice flock of close Long-tailed Ducks.

Then we headed north east on route 38 and then North on route 1, into the hills in the hope of a Ptarmigan or another Gyr. We only went about 5 mins north of Hverageroi. We stopped at a viewpoint but no birds were visible at all so we turned around and went towards Selfoss before heading north east on route 35. A stop at a bridge / viewpoint to look for Barrows Goldeneye was unsuccessful with Goosander the best. Our next stop was the Kerid Crater.

We decided to walk around the crater (about a 10 minute walk) and within a few minutes we had 4 Ptarmigan which allowed extremely close approach. We left them and continued the walk around the crater only to see the two pairs of birds come into the crater to drink. A great experience all round.

Ptarmigan at Kerid Crater:



We then continued north to Geysir and stopped at a few places along the river in the hope of a Barrows Goldeneye but again no luck. When we did reach Geysir, we stayed out in the bitter cold for a few 'eruptions' of the current geyser, Strokkur. However there were absolutely no birds to be seen in the area.

Waiting at Geyser in the cold:



We then headed on to Gullfoss and visit the huge waterfall (actually two waterfalls). It had begun to freeze over and was a great sight. A few Ravens were the only birds to be seen.

We then headed to Uthlid, our accommodation for the night and arrived there around 4 pm. The Aurora forecast was 'High' and we set the alarm for 12 to get up to have a look. At 12 we could see an Aurora behind us but the lights from the surrounding cottages made it difficult to see. We headed down the road about 2 miles and in the dark we could see the Aurora. After about 45 mins we left and headed back to our cottage.

Altogether a good day and whilst very windy, we were glad of the good visibility.

Aurora from Uthlid:



Day 3 - Sunday 2nd December

We left Uthlid Cottages at 9:30 am. It was -12! We headed towards Thingvellir and the first stop for me was Laugarvatn Lake to look for Barrows Goldeneye. This site is close to the road and a few trip reports have had them there. However most of the lake was frozen although there were about 15 Goosander and a few Whoopers about. I then had a very distant Merlin. Also present were a few flyover Redpoll and a Wren (Icelandic sub-species). I had missed the latter at Gardour on day 1.

From the lake we drove south down route 37 and my plan was to reach the River Sog and then head north on route 36 upriver looking for Barrows until we got to Thingvellir. The first few stops along the river produced no Barrows. There was the ever present Goosander though. There were now only two 'reliable' sites for Barrows left to check. The first was next to the power station at Ljosafosstod where route 360 meets route 36. However there were none to be seen there but I did have a superb adult White-tailed Eagle fly close by. Also new for the trip, I had quite a few Red-breasted Mergansers on the lake.

We then moved north along the road to the next site of route 36 at Steingrimstod Power Station. Straight away in the sheltered bay under the power station I was looking at 30+ Barrows Goldeneye....at last. Also present were 150+ Tufted Duck.

Barrows Goldeneye:



From there we went north on route 36 to Thingvellir. First stop was the Oxararfoss Waterfall. Then the lakeside where there were a few secretive Redpoll. We went up the visitor centre and then walked the Fault line to Logberg, the site of the first Viking Parliament and then down to Thingvellir Church. Raven was the only other bird I could see here and the northern end of the Lake was surprisingly devoid of any wildfowl.

From there we headed north along route 48 to Hvalffjordur Fjord about 30 miles north east of Reykjavík. Unfortunately on the way there, a stone from a passing car hit the car window and the small chip in the glass was to lead to a £400 charge which I subsequently had the hassle of trying to recover from my car hire excess insurance company.

As for the Birding along the Fjord, I had hundreds of Eider and plenty of Wigeon but little else. The scenery on the road there and along the Fjord was superb and we joined route 1 towards Reykjavik. We ended up arriving at our Hotel in Reykjavik for 4pm - the 22 Hill Hotel - which was a good value hotel that met all off our needs during our one day stay.

That evening, we had reserved a table at a traditional Icelandic restaurant and had the most expensive meal that we have ever had - and that was without any wine! However about 9:30pm we headed to Grotta, the Lighthouse just outside Reykjavík which seemingly is a good location to look for the Aurora. On arrival, it was clear that many tourists with a car had the same idea! Unfortunately some did not have appreciation on how to view the northern lights by eg keeping their car lights going or walking in front of cameras. However we were treated to a great display (better than the night before). The Aurora forecast for the evening was 'Active' and the sky's were largely clear. A lot of people cleared off after the early showing but we decided to hang on and around 11pm were treated to a further superb and amazing display as the lights quickly jumped around the sky. It really was an awesome display that will live long in the memory.

Day 4 - Monday 3rd December

This was to be a day largely spent in and around Reykjavík. We had a 'Free' City Walking Tour booked for 10:30 and met in the centre opposite the Icelandic Parliament. The following two hours were a good way to learn about Icelandic culture and history. There were plenty of tame Redwings

in the City but it was -5 and I was wondering how they could survive the winter in such challenging conditions.

During the walk, I quickly got on to a couple of Redpoll which looked to be 'Greenland' types. The walk also included Tjornin Park where the pond was largely frozen over. There were 30+ Whoopers and a few Tufted Duck but no other notable birds. At the end of the walk, I had a quick look around the harbour area and had plenty of Iceland Gulls flying about along with a few Glaucous as well as the ever present Eider.

From there we headed out again to Grotta Lighthouse for a picnic lunch and a half hour walk. No sign of a Gyr but about 40 Snow Buntings flew past and there were numerous (calling) Long-tailed Ducks as well as plenty of Whoopers, Glaucous and Iceland Gulls.

After Grotta we headed back along the coast to Keflavík. We stopped at a couple of sites which included the Rio Tinto Aluminium Plant which had good numbers of Gulls and Wigeon and was easy to view. We also stopped at Vogar and the shoreline around Keflavík. The areas were full of birds but light was now fading. However two trip species were added - at Keflavík Harbour, a pair of Black Guillemot were with a flock of Eider. One of the birds was already in summer plumage. The last species to be added to the trip list was a single Razorbill.

As the light had gone (it was now after 4pm) We headed to a local Bonus store for some edible gifts to bring home. I also spent 15 mins trying to top up the diesel in the car....Having found everything in Iceland to be very efficient, the self service fuel pumps are a challenge!

I arrived back at the car hire where I had to settle up on the window screen chip. Our EasyJet flight to Belfast was due to leave at 19:15 flight and took off about 30 mins late.

All in, a really enjoyable trip. It was certainly not all about the birding. The scenery, the Aurora, the smell of sulphur, the Blue Lagoon and that Gyr will all last in the memory!

Cost

Flights - £130 each

Car Hire - £180 (the £400 window screen damage was reclaimable as I had a CDW insurance excess policy). Fuel - £60

Accommodation - £110 to £140 a night

Food - we only ate out one night and this cost us £140 in total in a nice restaurant. We had brought our own ready made meals from home and bought daily essentials in Bonus Stores.

Blue Lagoon - £70 each

Tourist attractions - the only one with charges was Kerid Crater with an entry fee of £3 each.

City Walking Tour - This was a voluntary donation but we made sure that our guide had enough for a few beers....

Aurora - Free!

Invaluable

What we regarded as invaluable were car hire insurance, a flask, thermals, snow boots, Google Maps, small tripod and a phone car charger.

If you would like any other advice, please feel free to email me: wilton dot farrelly 'at' live dot co dot uk

Resources

Cloudbirders for previous Iceland trip reports. <https://www.cloudbirders.com/>

Birding Iceland for general birding advice and news. <https://notendur.hi.is/yannk/index-eng.html>

Aurora: <https://en.vedur.is/weather/forecasts/aurora/>

General Iceland info, news and culture, Iceland Monitor: <https://icelandmonitor.mbl.is/news/>

Adult Glaucous Gull:



Bird List (notable birds in bold):

Ptarmigan (*Lagopus muta*)
Greylag Goose (*Anser anser*)
Whooper Swan (*Cygnus cygnus*)
Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*)
Eurasian Wigeon (*Mareca Penelope*)
Tufted Duck (*Aythya fuligula*)
Common Eider (*Somateria mollissima*)
Barrows Goldeneye (*Bucephala islandica*)
Harlequin Duck (*Histrionicus histrionicus*)
Long-tailed Duck (*Clangula hyemalis*)
Goosander (*Mergus merganser*)
Red-breasted Merganser (*Mergus serrator*)
Great Northern Diver (*Gavia immer*)
European Shag (*Phalacrocorax aristotelis*)
Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*)
White-tailed Eagle (*Haliaeetus albicilla*)
Merlin (*Falco columbarius*)
Gyrfalcon (*Falco rusticolus*)
Oystercatcher (*Haematopus ostralegus*)
Redshank (*Tringa totanus*)
Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*)
Purple Sandpiper (*Calidris maritima*)
Common Gull (*Larus canus*)

Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*)
Glaucous Gull (*Larus hyperboreus*)
Iceland Gull (*Larus glaucoides*)
Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*)
Black-headed Gull (*Larus ridibundus*)
Razorbill (*Alca torda*)
Black Guillemot (*Cepphus grylle*)
Rock Dove (Feral) (*Columba livia* 'feral')
Raven (*Corvus corax*)
Eurasian Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*)
Common Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*)
Blackbird (*Turdus merula*)
Redwing (*Turdus iliacus*)
Common Redpoll (*Acanthis flammea*)
Snow Bunting (*Plectrophenax nivalis*)

The only Mammal species that was seen was Grey Seal.

Grindavik Harbour, an excellent site for White-winged Gulls:



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December 2018