

Iceland Weekend

February 27th - March 2nd 2015 Auroras, Geysers and Birds



Friday 27th February - it was a cold bright and crisp morning as we left home at 6.45am to head to Gatwick for our 3 hour flight to Iceland. On the way two Little Egrets flew towards Worth marshes and a Peregrine soared over the cliffs at Dover Harbour.

The flight to Reykjavik with WOW was delayed very slightly but we were soon in the air, having had plenty of time for a decent breakfast and coffee at the airport. The service and crew were friendly and efficient and it took less than 30 minutes after landing, to collect our bags and pick up our Toyota Landcruiser, which was an ideal 4x4 for our short adventure.

Keflavik is about 40 minutes drive west of the capital, Reykjavik and was set in a vast expanse of volcanic rock partly covered in snow. We quickly loaded the car as it was -2 degrees and headed for the coast to try and find our first birds.

Flocks of EUROPEAN STARLINGS greeted us in the town of Keflavik and then as we approached a look-out point over the harbour we saw a mass of white-winged gulls. We jumped out the car and started scanning the cold waters below us, quickly finding good numbers of NORTHERN EIDER, BLACK GUILLEMOT, RAZORBILL, SHAG, CORMORANT, FULMAR (including the odd Blue Phase birds), RED-BREASTED MERGANSER, RED-THROATED DIVER, GLAUCOUS, ICELAND, BLACK-HEADED, HERRING AND GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULLS. Then John spotted the wintering AMERICAN WHITE-WINGED SCOTER right below us with the rafts of Eider Duck. It had been barely 20 minutes since we

had left the airport and we watching this excellent transatlantic vagrant. We also saw at least one KUMLIEN'S GULL amongst the mass of gulls below us. Moving on towards the Capital, we stopped briefly at another harbour, where we found big flocks of sea duck and 3 GREAT NORTHERN DIVERS and a single LONG-TAILED DUCK.



Iceland Gull

We followed Katie the Sat-Nav's instructions to our hotel; the Arctic Comfort and saw a handful of RAVENS and FERAL PIGEONS on the way. After checking in we headed down to Reykjavik Harbour and found a small flock of PURPLE SANDPIPER. As we headed to a restaurant for dinner a couple of EURASIAN BLACKBIRDS were seen heading to roost. We went to an excellent restaurant recommended by the Hotel. Species Total 22

Saturday 28th February 2015 - We met at 8.30am and headed out for Reykjavik Harbour in bright sunshine. It was crisp and very cold and the roadsides and pavements thick with ice. We scanned the gulls and sea ducks and after about 45 minutes, we located the recently found GLAUCOUS-WINGED GULL - our second transatlantic MEGA! We watched this with the Iceland and Glaucous Gulls and also found a nice group of roosting Purple Sandpipers.



Glaucous-winged Gull

We enjoyed a superb breakfast at an authentic Harbourside cafe (the Kafevatnn) and then headed out west in the sunshine towards Keflavik. On the way we stopped and watch a MERLIN sheltering from the wind and a flock of about 50 SNOW BUNTINGS. We also came across a small party of PINK-FOOTED GEESE and GREYLAG GEESE as well as REDSHANK and WHOOPER SWANS.

Here too were EURASIAN TEAL and WIGEON and MALLARD DUCKS. We explored the coastline and made our way to Garsur where we enjoyed good views of white-winged gulls, Long-tailed Duck, GANNET, KITTIWAKE, RUDDY TURNSTONE and a single COMMON SCOTER.



Northern Eider

With the sun shining out of a cloudless blue sky, we headed to the nearby BLUE LAGOON. This is a huge geothermal spring with great facilities. We paid the 35

Euro entrance fee and donned our swimwear and quickly entered the beautifully hot waters. The experience is outdoors in the cold air, but we were submerged to our necks and took advantage of the swim up bar, consuming our sparkling wine or Gull Beer In my case!

After trying the mud pack and working our way through the thick steam and mist, we tried out the a high-pressure thermal shower and found various super-hot spots.

After this exhilarating experience we drove south to Grundavik where we had a quick coffee and bite to eat before checking out the small harbour and exploring the wild coastal road. The late afternoon sunshine was beautiful over the wild snowy landscape. Abandoned houses, old farms and brightly painted lighthouses were dotted along the coast.

It was here that we found a wonderful spot in the tidal surf amongst the kelp and rocky shore, where 7 stunning HARLEQUIN DUCK swam close to us. Behind rafts of Northern Eider and Long-tailed Duck completed a wonderful scene.

But it was time to head back to Reykjavik where we enjoyed an excellent Icelandic Indian meal, before heading to our hotel for our 7.30pm rendezvous with the tour bus, hoping to see the Northern Lights.

Our driver was very optimistic as we headed inland, high into the National Park and away from the city lights to reach complete darkness. There was a hum of excitement in our coach as before long ribbons of green light shimmered high in the sky, either side of our coach. The driver brought us to a halt in a snowy pull off and everyone piled out to marvel at the truly phenomenal spectacle. It was a cloudless night and the stars and moon shone brightly. Over the next two hours the Auroras gave a wonderful show, changing shapes, colours and intensity. It was a high level of activity (grade 7) and was apparently the best display of the entire winter. We felt very lucky as we headed back to our hotel to celebrate over a nightcap! Species total 37.

1st March 2015 - we started at the same time but this morning was overcast and cold. We visited some ponds near the city centre and saw good numbers of TUFTED DUCK and Whooper Swan. We also found a nice flock of ICELANDIC REDWING.

Nearby we spent a short while searching more ponds for unusual ducks, but instead witnessed a superb GYRFALCON power over the lakes and head inland.

We had a long day ahead of us and so we stopped for a decent breakfast and coffee, before heading off-road along tracks to a lake complex. It was here we found a superb male HOODED MERGANSER, another transatlantic vagrant. Several GOOSANDER also gave good views.

We set off again as the winds picked up, blowing snow across the road in front of us. After 40 minutes we approached a wide river and pulled over at the roadside to scan for ducks. We were in luck as we saw three, then a further nine BARROW'S GOLDENEYE including several stunning drakes. The first of two GREY HERON's flew over as we drove north-east to the small settlement of Geysir, where we stopped and visited the world famous Geysir site.

The most impressive and active is STROKKUR which 'blows' every 6-12 minutes. The water which can be over 100 degrees Celsius erupts in a billowing mass of water and steam, vertically and up to 15-20 feet.

Next we drove the short distance to Gullfoss, the famous site of the biggest waterfall in Iceland. The steps down to the viewing point took about 10 minutes, but the wind which is funnelled along the river and between the rocky cliffs, reaches near 'katabatic' strength and was incredibly cold!

We got some good photos, and then raced back to the warmth of the car. It was a scenic drive back through the National Park and we were glad to return to the warmth of our hotel for a cup of tea.

In the evening we went to an authentic Icelandic restaurant for a superb meal and bottle of wine to celebrate another great day. Although we were prepared to drive out to find the Northern Lights again, it turned out that there was too much cloud cover and so we had an early night. Species total 44.

Monday 2nd March 2015 - once again we met at 8.30am and headed for the city ponds. Here it was fairly quiet and so we drove to the harbour lighthouse and searched the sea and ponds. A smart drake Long-tailed Duck was on a roadside pond with about 20 Whooper Swans and on the shoreline excellent numbers of Purple Sandpipers shower well with EURASIAN OYSTERCATCHER and Turnstones.



We ate breakfast at our favourite cafe by the harbour, watching Razorbills and Red-breasted Mergansers as we enjoyed our eggs, bacon and coffee!

It was time to head home and so we checked out at 11am and then headed for the airport. We stopped briefly after a snow storm, to view the harbour and area North of Keflavik. There was no sign of the reported King Eider or indeed the White-winged Scoter! But we did see hundreds of Iceland Gulls, Glaucous Gulls and an adult Kumlien's Gull and 3 COMMON GULL.

We drove to the nearby airport, filled up and returned our hire car and checked in at 11.30am for our flight back to Gatwick. It had been a fantastic long weekend with some superb Icelandic birds, a few vagrant birds, great scenery, spectacular geysers and waterfalls, not to mention the incredible auroras on the Saturday night. We liked the friendly people, quality food and the interesting architecture. Next time we may go for a week or two and explore the whole island. We saw 46 species in total.

Participants:

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