

Iceland July 2024 – Ben Balmford & Marina Altoè

These are short notes on looking for mammals (plus some birds) in Iceland.

Logistics

Everything needs to be booked well in advance given that there is not very much in the way of accommodation, and an awful lot of demand for it.

Renting a car is straightforward. We used Budget (through booking.com) and they were fine. It is worth looking at rentals from downtown Reykjavik (there's a straightforward bus from Keflavik airport into the city) as well as looking at picking up/dropping off the day after/before your flight in/out. Doing both of these things saved us ~30% vs picking up from the airport for the whole trip.

For travelling, it is worth checking the "Safe Travel Iceland" app each day for road conditions, which can vary somewhat. The best site for road planning in advance is <https://vegasja.vegagerdin.is/eng/> which shows the whole road network, and if they're tar, dirt, or F-roads (4x4 only, and closed for quite an extended period over the winter). Finally, there is no real public transport around Iceland – although hitch-hiking seemed quite doable – but there is in Reykjavik. There, it is easiest to get tickets through the app "Klappid".

Cetaceans

It is worth joining the facebook group "Iceland Whale Sightings" on Facebook for up-to-date sightings.

As far as we could find, Laki Tours (operating out of Olafsvik on the Snæfellsnes peninsula) was the best place on the island for **white beaked dolphin** and **killer whale**. We went out with them on a morning trip, and had really nice views of **humpback whale** but neither of those species (but they were both seen the previous trip – 4 days earlier owing to storms – and the afternoon trip). At the end of the Peninsula, Öndverðarnesviti and Svörtuloft lighthouses are good for looking from land (we saw the **humpbacks** from both, and four harlequin duck – a bird – at the former). That afternoon, we had **white beaked dolphin** from the Lóndrangar lookout (where there is also a habituated **arctic fox** – see notes below).

Outside of the Snæfellsnes peninsula, Reykjavik is a good place to look for **white beaked dolphin**. We went out with Elding whale watch, who seemed quite good. Although we only saw **humpback whale** with them, but most of their trips were seeing **dolphins** too. In the north, Eyjafjörður is the only place with an even remote chance of **northern beaked whales** and Arctic Sea Tours, out of Dalvik, seem like the best operation in the area. There's also a decent look out point here: <https://maps.app.goo.gl/Q7aQptWMN2UBfHpd7> on to the area of sea. We didn't see them, but there was a group seen there three times in the two weeks we were in Iceland.

Arctic fox

We booked to go to Heydalur hotel owing to the **arctic fox** that regularly visited the hotel, however, unfortunately that fox has died. We saw two on the Snæfellsnes peninsula. The first was a "properly" wild one, here <https://maps.app.goo.gl/p6ZnkSbYkGT4wc648>. The second, was one that was clearly habituated at the car park for Lóndrangar.

Other activities

Weirdly, non-wildlife activities – which were also great on their own – proved the best way to see rare birds. On a horse ride from Polar Hestar, we saw a ptarmigan and a corncrake (vagrant in Iceland), and then had a gyrfalcon flyover in the Myvatn baths.¹ Other things we'd recommend are the free walking tour in Reykjavik (with City Tours) and the Silfra snorkelling with Dive.is.

¹ In general, Gyrfalcon sites should not be publicised, but the Myvatn area is widely publicised online, and there was no indication this bird was near a breeding site.