

# Iceland July 20<sup>th</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> 2023

Five days and seven species

Lars Michael Nielsen, larsmichael83(at)gmail.com

This trip was primarily a birthday gift from me to my partner to go and visit her friends in Reykjavik. Despite this wasn't a mammal or birdwatching trip (yep I'm one of those) I managed to squeeze in a whale watching tour with Láki Tours ([www.lakitours.com](http://www.lakitours.com)) and Orca Guardians Iceland (<https://orcaguardians.org/>) from Ólafsvík on one day, and we had a surprise encounter with Orcas and Humpback whales on another day. Despite not seeing Polar fox (*Vulpes lagopus*) I'm happy with result as my expectations was set after a "non all in nature trip" and we didn't do any night drives. For some reason, my camera wouldn't accept my SD-card, so I thought I was smart and borrowed one from our Icelandic friends. What I didn't realize was that it was a 32MB card not a 32GB card, so I didn't get many photos with that, and we had to use our cell phones. On the other hand, this made me (us) focus more on the experience instead of seeing it through a lens...

All wild mammals encountered was cetaceans. Apart from the wild animals we also saw domestic horses, cats, dogs and of course sheep. All wild animals and birds seen are marked with **BOLD** letters (not all birds seen are mentioned).

Itinerary:

**20<sup>th</sup>**: Arriving at Keflavik at 23.50 and drive to [Reykjavik](#).

**21<sup>st</sup>**: Touristing in Reykjavik.

**22<sup>nd</sup>**: Drive to [Ólafsvík](#) and whale watching in the waters around the Snæfellsnes peninsula.

**23<sup>rd</sup>**: Hike to the active volcano at [Litli-Hrútur](#) (Little ram).

**24<sup>th</sup>**: Short walk in Reykjavik and drive to Keflavik airport via Bridge Between Continents and Reykjanesbær/[Reykjanesviti lighthouse](#).



Figure 1: Iceland, ©Google

Day by day description:

**20<sup>th</sup>:** We arrived at Keflavik airport at 23.50 local time. My partner had a minor food poisoning erupting on the airplane spending most of the time on the toilet during the 3,5-hour flight. After arriving we got picked up by our friends and drove directly to their apartment, had a beer/drink, and went straight to bed. The only mammals seen was Dimma (darkness) and Grima (mask), our friends' cats.

**21<sup>st</sup>:** The day was spent seeing Reykjavik city, its historical points, Punk Museum of Iceland (made in an old public toilet) and eat Hákarl, Greenland Shark (*Somniosus microcephalus*) fermented for six to seven weeks in the earth. Many people say it's the worst they have ever tasted, but I didn't find it that bad despite it having an ammoniac taste to it. I remembered to cleanse my throat with Brennivín, an Icelandic schnaps.



Figure 2: Hákarl and Brennivín

In the evening we had a BBQ at our friend's place. Only mammals were the cats and dogs of Reykjavik.

**22<sup>nd</sup>:** This was the day I had been anticipating the most, this could be why I woke up at 5.30. The rest of the house kept on sleeping as I wandered off to the lighthouse at Gróttuviti. I hoped to see a whale, seal, or something in that category, but no mammal turned up. I saw lots of **Puffins (*Fratercula arctica*)** on the sea and the **Arctic Terns (*Sterna paradisaea*)** made false attacks to scare me off.

I decided to return home so that I could be there when the others woke up at around 8.30. I arrived a little late at 8.35, but in my mind, I'm excused as I went by the bakery and brought freshly baked bread and pastry home for breakfast...



Figure 3: Gróttuviti lighthouse

At 10.00 we set off for Snæfellsnes and Ólafsvík where we were going on a whale watching trip with [Láki Tours](#) (recommended by several members of the mammal watching community). The landscape on Snæfellsnes is extremely beautiful and gave breathtaking views. I hoped for a Polar fox (*Vulpes lagopus*) on the way but had to settle with **Ravens (*Corvus corax*)** and a **Rock Ptarmigan (*Lagopus muta*)**. One of our hosts wanted to go fishing so we drove through a moonlike landscape, and he got off at a good fishing spot on a river meandering through the harsh landscape. From there we saw a beautiful **Great Northern Diver (*Gavia immer*)**. The three of us continued towards Ólafsvík stopping at Kirkjufell on the way. Those of you who have seen Game of Thrones knows this as the place where the Night King has his origin, scary dude', well we weren't attacked by an Ice-Dragon and 15 minutes later we arrived at the harbor in Ólafsvík.



Figure 4: Kirkjufell, no Ice-Dragons around this time...

We checked in and my partner and her friend “wandered off” to go to the bathroom and check out the surroundings. Me on the other hand acted responsible, choose to enjoy the feeling of a bladder getting more and more full, and stayed in the vicinity of the shed, were Láki Tours handle out the warm blue “suits” to the participants on their trips so that I could be the first to board the boat and get the spot I wanted. I got my spot, the rest of the participants got on, somehow my partner got the spot beside me despite the sightseeing and we left the harbor for the waters of Breiðafjörður. We sailed for a while in calm weather, almost no wind and small waves, only seeing birds such as Fulmars (*Fulmaris gracialis*), Puffins (*Fratercula arctica*), Black-Legged Kittiwakes (*Rissa tridactyla*), Arctic Skuas (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) etc. Suddenly I saw a dolphin jumping out of the water in my binoculars, no one else saw it, we continued on and shortly after we encountered two White-Beaked Dolphins (*Lagenorhynchus albirostris*) we slowed down and enjoyed them for some minutes and continued on towards the end of Snæfellsnes we saw a Harbor Porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*) and a huge raft of hundreds of Red-necked phalaropes (*Phalaropus lobatus*). Shortly after a Minke Whale (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*) gave brief views as it surfaced several times and “steamed” on to the west. We rounded the tip of Snæfellsnes and the spotter, from [Orca Guardians Iceland](#), announced that “black fins” could be seen further ahead. Soon we were in company of a pod of “sea pandas” or Orcas (*Orcinus orca*) as they are usually called of nine to eleven individuals apparently from the “Butterfly group” as well as some other individuals including two bulls. I’ve wanted to see Orcas for a long time as I find them (and their biology) very fascinating and impressive but haven’t had the opportunity as Orcas and other large whales are rare in Denmark where I live, so seeing them up close was an amazing experience for me and my partner as well. The Orcas continued to the south-west, and we turned north towards

deeper waters. Another **Minke Whale (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*)** appeared briefly and disappeared just as quickly as it turned up. As I stood scanning the ocean with my binoculars, I spotted two blows from what looked like **Sperm Whales (*Physeter macrocephalus*)** in some distance, the crew spotted them as well and we sailed closer. Soon after a I and some of the other passengers in the front and the crew saw the fluke of a diving Sperm whale and the approach was cancelled as we didn't have enough time left of the tour to wait for these deep divers to resurface. We turned back towards Ólafsvík continuing to stay in the deep waters, suddenly splashes were seen first to the front/left of the boat then front/black and suddenly we were surrounded by 40+ **Long-Finned Pilot Whales (*Globicephala melas*)** and three **White-Beaked Dolphins (*Lagenorhynchus albirostris*)** jumping out of the water and taking a short bow ride, yet another great experience on this boat ride. We returned to Ólafsvík 45 minutes late but who cares when the delay is due to extra time for mammal watching... We drove home to Reykjavik happy and filled up with some of our dreams had come true seeing these magnificent cetaceans.



Figure 5: Female/immature Orcas (*Orcinus orca*), the waters around Snæfellsnes.



*Figure 6: Orca bull/male (Orcinus orca), the waters around Snæfellnes.*



*Figure 7: Long-Finned Pilot Whales (Globicephala melas) and Puffins (Fratercula arctica), the waters around Snæfellsnes.*

**23<sup>rd</sup>:** The only mammals of the day were the local cats, dogs, sheep, and horses of the Icelandic countryside, not much to write about but but but, the day was as exciting as the day before. The reason for statement in the previous sentence is because of our hike to the active volcano at [Litli-Hrútur](#) (Little ram). The 10 km hike took us through a harsh arid arctic landscape passing the lave flow from the latest eruption before we reached the viewpoint from where we watched the current eruption live. This was breathtaking (not only because of the gasses expelled) and something I

highly recommend trying if you get the chance. Just remember to follow the safety instructions from the authorities (in this case Safe travel Iceland, <https://safetravel.is/>), 1200 °C melting rock will roast you in a second and the gasses expelled from the volcano can suffocate you as well. The day ended with a BBQ in the garden.



*Figure 8: Active volcano at Litli-Hrútur or perhaps an Icelandic whale sized BBQ...*

**24<sup>th</sup>:** This was the day where we returned to Denmark. We hadn't made any plans, so our hosts decided to take us to a couple of known places on our way to Keflavik airport. As we drove off, we started at the "Bridge between Continents" and waved to each other standing on different tectonic plates. After this stop our host wanted to show us a keyboard used in the "Eurovision movie" standing next to the sea at Reykjanesbær/[Reykjanesviti lighthouse](#). As we approached the coast, I spotted something tall black pointing out of the sea next to a fishing vessel from the car. It looked like the dorsal fin of a bull **Orca (*Orcinus orca*)** to me, but I thought that I was probably wrong and that it was probably just a buoy. We parked the car and were told it was just a five-minute stop as we had a plane to catch. I noticed a small group of people watching the sea and I decided to go and have a look. When the sea below the cliffs opened, I saw more than 20 **Orcas (*Orcinus orca*)** feeding on fish, slamming their tails into the water and I shouted "orcas" to the others. Suddenly two **Humpback Whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*)** surfaced in the middle of a group of Orcas with their mouths wide open, obviously also feeding on some kind of fish. Again, I shouted, "there's also Humpback whales here" and our little party got even more excited about this amazing surprise encounter that we had not expected. It was a magnificent experience seen all these whales at one time and we felt extremely lucky almost forgetting the keyboard, but who wouldn't... Our five minutes stop became a 35-minute stop and we had to hurry a little to the airport, but we had been happy even if we missed the plane after this experience.



Figure 9: Some of the Orcas (*Orcinus orca*) seen from the coast at Reykjanesviti lighthouse.



Figure 10: Humpback whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) seen from the coast at Reykjanesviti lighthouse.



As mentioned in the beginning this was not a “mammal watching only trip” but a “family trip” with “a touch of nature.” I’m very pleased with the result and Iceland is a place I recommend if you want to spend your vacation with your family and still be able to see marvelous mammals, there might not be a huge number of species as in the rest of the Arctic, but most of them are either cute, Polar fox, Seals and Reindeer or spectacular due to their size and biology such as the whales. It’s easy to get around by car and you probably won’t need a 4x4 to see them. The nature is spectacular all year round and the possibility of seeing an active volcano is a definite plus!

As other mammal watchers before me I highly recommend [Láki Tours](#). They are collaborating with [Orca Guardians Iceland](#) a NGO protecting Orcas and other whales and marine life around Iceland. Their trips are not as tourist’ish as those from Reykjavik and the drive to Ólafsvík is beautiful and the Snæfellsnes peninsula is a good place to look for Polar fox (*Vulpes lagopus*) especially the westernmost parts.

This was my first visit to Iceland, but it is definitely not my last...



Figure 11: My partner watching Orcas (*Orcinus orca*) and Humpback Whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) from the coast at Reykjanesviti lighthouse.