

Tour Report

Iceland – Arctic Fox Photography

20 March – 26 March 2024

Blue-morph Arctic fox



Arctic fox



Ptarmigan



Blue-morph Arctic fox



Compiled by Bret Charman

Day 1:**Wednesday 20 March 2024**

London Heathrow to Keflavik

We were catching a lunchtime flight to Keflavik with Icelandair from London Heathrow. I met with the group at the departure gate, and we were soon on our way to Iceland. We enjoyed a smooth flight before landing on the barren peninsula where Keflavik Airport is situated. We had hoped to see the erupting volcano on our way in, but unfortunately the cloud cover was too low.

After picking up our luggage, we were met by our driver and whisked toward the capital of Iceland, Reykjavik. The country's largest conurbation, Reykjavik, is a bustling, albeit small city, and we were soon checked into the Sunna Guesthouse and agreed to meet downstairs in reception and head down the hill to a popular Italian restaurant we often use on the first night.

Having enjoyed an excellent meal, we wandered back up the hill, past the impressive Hallgrimskirkja church and back to the guesthouse for a good night's sleep.

Day 2:**Thursday 21 March 2024**

Reykjavik

This morning, we met down outside the hotel for our short drive to Reykjavik Airport and our domestic flight to Ísafjörður. However, I had been keeping an eye on the weather forecast and knew that there was a chance our flight would be delayed due to the weather. Unfortunately, it was confirmed pretty quickly that all flights would be cancelled today, and it was likely (due to the inclement weather) that tomorrow's would also be cancelled.

And so, suddenly, we had an unexpected free day in Reykjavik. We arranged rooms in the guesthouse for the night and we would have to try again tomorrow. Having checked back into our rooms, we agreed to meet again for lunch.

We wandered down into the city centre and found a gourmet food hall, allowing everyone to choose different cuisines and enjoy each other's company. Having heard that the following day's flights were also likely to be cancelled, we had made provisional arrangements for a driver to take us up north to the Westfjords and I kept the group informed of our options.

After another excellent meal, we parted ways, agreeing to meet once more for dinner. After reading a number of reviews for Reykjavik's eateries, we settled on heading to a local Thai restaurant for dinner. Despite the delay, everyone was still in good spirits, and we agreed to meet for breakfast, where I would be able to update the group on the day's travel plans.

Day 3:**Friday 22 March 2024**

Reykjavik to Ísafjörður

All of us reconvened at breakfast as we were working on plan 'B'. Today's flights were also due to be cancelled so we decided our best option was to drive north. I informed the group that we were still waiting for the details and that we could enjoy a late check-out until the vehicle was ready to take us into the wintry wilds of the Westfjords.

Meeting in reception, we checked out of our rooms and waited for our driver to pick us up. We were greeted by Rally Palli – a former Icelandic rally champion – and his modified minibus. It wasn't long before we were winding our way north, out of Reykjavik and finally getting closer to the Arctic foxes of Hornstrandir Nature Reserve. Palli was a fabulous driver. We were in the best hands possible as we drove towards the wilder conditions. There were still a number of the main roads closed due to the extreme weather. Snow ploughs were struggling to clear the immense snow drifts and icy roads. Palli braved blizzard conditions and he loved every minute as he drove us all the way to the village of Hólmavík. Here, we were able to disembark

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and settle in the wonderful surroundings of the village's only restaurant. What an absolute gem of a place and the friendly hosts provided us with a fantastic meal.

From here, we had another three and a half hours to Ísafjörður. We were picked up by a second driver, and so we started the final leg (in the dark) to Ísafjörður. What an adventure we had. Huge snow drifts had been cleared, and the road was passable (just). We arrived just before midnight, after a further weather-related delay, and checked into our hotel rooms in the town centre. After such a long day of travel, everyone headed straight to bed.

Day 4:

Saturday 23 March 2024

Ísafjörður to Hornstrandir

After a much-needed sleep, we reconvened in the hotel dining room for breakfast. The group were eager to see their first foxes, and it wasn't long before we had everything loaded onto the boat, and we departed the harbour and out of the fjord. Long-tailed, harlequin and common eider ducks rafted in the sheltered fjord while porpoise and a trio of white-beaked dolphins made an appearance out in the open waters. Black guillemot, glaucous and Iceland gulls, as well as northern fulmars, were busy feeding as we neared Jökulfirðir and then in towards Hornstrandir and Kviar Lodge.

We arrived in the calm waters, with the land providing shelter from the northerly wind, to be greeted by the previous group and a couple of blue-morph Arctic foxes. With the luggage unloaded from the zodiac and the group all ashore, I urged them all to get on and photograph the foxes while I hauled the luggage up to the house. With all the luggage up I headed out and joined the group for our first photography session. We couldn't quite believe it when a white fox turned up (these are rarely seen here). It came running towards us, although it was obviously not habituated, running right past the house before disappearing into the river gully.



What an incredible start! With that first excitement and stunning photography opportunities, it was time to enjoy our first lunch in the comfort of the lodge. With a delicious homemade soup, I showed everybody to their rooms, and people had the chance to unpack some of their things and, more importantly, their camera bags. It wasn't long before we were all outside again, making the most of the incredible conditions. There was so much snow – huge snow drifts surrounded the house and the surrounding snow fields were the

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deepest I had seen them.



Being in such a remote area (the peninsula is completely uninhabited in winter), there are no sounds bar that of the eiders, the wind and the occasional calls of the resident female fox. It has a magical feel and offers unrivalled photographic opportunities – it really is the most magical of winter destinations. We photographed all afternoon, building up quite a collection of imagery.



With an action-packed first day, memory cards were filled and batteries drained, we retreated into the warmth of the house and were able to shed our layers and spend an evening discussing our adventures so far. There is no mains electricity here and so charging is only done in the evenings when the generator has been switched on for a couple of hours through dinner. We were treated to a delicious meal before retreating to our rooms for a much-needed rest.

Day 5:
Hornstrandir

Sunday 24 March 2024

We awoke to a cloudy morning after a good night's sleep in the cosy rooms, meeting up for tea and coffee,

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before breakfast was served in the dining room. Kviar Lodge is a traditional farmhouse, and the rooms are simple but comfortable (single beds), while the living room, dining room and kitchen exude historical charm and character. It's a fabulous base for our time photographing the foxes. Today was noticeably colder, and despite our many layers, the cold eventually seeps in. The important thing to remember is to go in before you get cold.

Breakfast was, as per usual, delicious and the perfect way to start the day. The group was soon fully dressed in their winter gear and outside with the resident young female fox. When I came in 2023, my group affectionately named her 'Whinger', due to her frequent vocalisations and submissive nature. However, this year, she was more confident and not at all nervous about our presence; alas, her name evolved to 'Scrounger'. It is important to note that we do put a little dried cod out for the foxes, but they come and go as they please.



In fact, there can be periods where the foxes disappear for a few hours and we are left enjoying the magical surroundings, the soft cooing of the eiders and the odd call from snow buntings. This sense of isolation only makes the experience all the more enjoyable, there really is nowhere else quite like it.

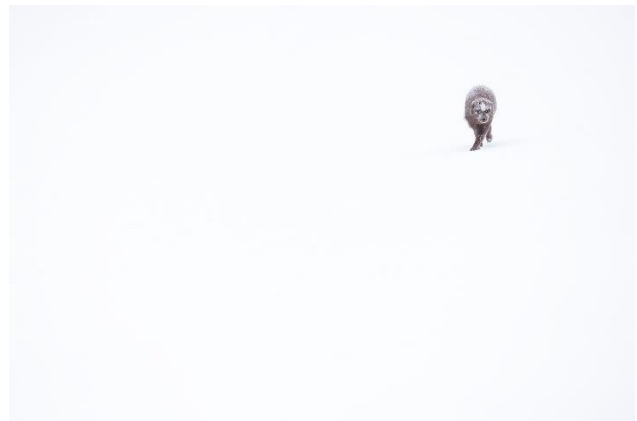
Over the course of the day we were able to add an incredible array of imagery to our portfolio, quickly stacking up thousands of beautiful images of these charismatic Arctic foxes. It's hard to get across just how rewarding your time in Hornstrandir can be – you'll just have to come and experience it for yourself.

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All of these images were taken within 50 yards of the house. It just goes to show that, despite the freezing conditions, the photographic rewards are truly exceptional. You don't have to cover huge distances to quickly form a striking portfolio of stunning imagery. Throughout the day we enjoyed several rounds of hot drinks (to get warm) and another fabulous lunch.



With two full days of photography and heavy cloud cover, the temperature had dropped and so we retreated indoors for the evening. You will never go hungry in Iceland, particularly staying at Kviar Lodge, and this evening was no different. We were treated to a huge leg of lamb, potato gratin and vegetables – a veritable feast. Unfortunately, with the overcast conditions, we were unlikely to see the aurora during our stay.

Day 6:

Hornstrandir, Ísafjörður to Reykjavik

Monday 25 March 2024

After a great couple of days, today would be our last on Hornstrandir. With the delays, we had only two nights at Kviar Lodge, but we were blessed with fantastic weather and spent the majority of our time outside enjoying the time with the Arctic foxes. Our boat ride back to Ísafjörður wouldn't be until after lunch, so we had plenty of time yet to pack up our things and, more importantly, photograph our vulpine friends.

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As well as the foxes, there can be the opportunity to photograph some of the other wildlife that inhabits this beautiful landscape. On many visits, the group headed down to the beach and photographed the eiders and the harlequin ducks, but with huge snow drifts, the beach was not the easiest place to situate one's self. We were instead blessed with remarkable views of ptarmigan and a certain pesky fox which decided to herd them into the tops of the trees poking through the deep snow. We were rewarded with some fabulous imagery, though, as they moved across the open snow field to the side of the house.



Despite, the distraction of the ptarmigan, there were still plenty of opportunities to add further imagery to our fox portfolios. This plethora of time out in the field means that people can do as much or as little photography as they like, without feeling like they are missing out. I don't know any other destination that provides the sheer number of opportunities as Hornstrandir.

What a fabulous few days in this hidden corner of Iceland. A wintry wildlife wonderland and a photographer's dream. With our bags all packed and ready to go, we cut some steps in the snow down to the beach and lowered the bags on sleds, before slowly descending ourselves and waiting for the zodiac to whisk us to the larger boat and onto Ísafjörður. Of course, it wouldn't be right, if we hadn't been accompanied by a fox. In fact, 'Scrounger' stayed with us until it was time to depart, at which point she followed an individual staying on back up to the house.

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It's always sad to say goodbye to these gorgeous mammals, but we know that they will be there again next year thanks to the stringent conservation regulations in Hornstrandir Nature Reserve. Our boat crossing back to Ísafjörður was very smooth and we soon found ourselves at the airport waiting for our flight back to Reykjavik. There was no delay, and we were soon aboard and flying south towards Iceland's capital.

By popular demand, it was decided we would head back to the Thai for dinner and spend an evening reminiscing about our time with the Arctic foxes around Kviar Lodge. We had a fabulous time, despite the weather-related delays and I can't wait to be back leading there again in 2025.

Day 7:

Tuesday 26 March 2024

Reykjavik to the UK

This morning it was an early start for the majority of the group. We had a couple of different flights back to the UK, leaving at the same time. We arrived at Keflavik with plenty of time to spare, and despite a slight delay with check-in, we were soon waiting to board our flights back home.

The London Heathrow flight left promptly and we enjoyed a smooth flight across the north Atlantic, touching down roughly on time. There were no queues at passport control and within only a couple of minutes, our luggage was rolling out on the belt. We said our goodbyes and made our independent journeys home.

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Checklist for Iceland – Arctic Fox Photography



	Common Name	Scientific Name	
	BIRDS	AVES	
1	Whooper swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	✓
2	Common eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓
3	Harlequin duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>	✓
4	Long-tailed duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>	✓
5	Black guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>	✓
6	Glaucous gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓
7	Northern fulmar	<i>Fulmaris glacialis</i>	✓
8	Rock ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus muta</i>	✓
9	White-tailed eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>	✓
10	Snow bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>	✓
	MAMMALS	MAMMALIA	
1	Harbour porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>	✓
2	White-beaked dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus albirostris</i>	✓
3	Harbour (common) seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>	✓
4	Arctic fox	<i>Vulpes lagopus</i>	✓

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