

Tour Report

Iceland – Arctic Fox Photography

22-28 March 2023

Arctic fox



Arctic fox



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Compiled by Bret Charman

Day 1: London Heathrow to Reykjavík

Wednesday 22 March 2023

This is the second year that we have run our dedicated Arctic fox photography tour in Iceland, with five intrepid travellers ready to come face-to-face with some of the most charismatic mammals on Earth.

I met the majority of the group after passing through airport security and it wasn't long before we were on our way with Icelandair. We enjoyed a smooth flight across the North Atlantic and after a few hours landed at Keflavik. This huge airport is a transatlantic hub and we bumped into another member of the group just after passing through passport control. Our luggage didn't take too long to arrive and we were soon out in arrivals. After meeting our driver and finding the final member of the group, we set off for the 40-minute drive to Iceland's capital, Reykjavik.

We arrived at the Sunna Guesthouse in the late afternoon and agreed to meet for dinner after we had had time to freshen up. We walked down the hill, past Hallgrímskirkja (an impressive church at the top of the hill) and into the centre, where we enjoyed dinner at an Italian restaurant.

With a busy day ahead of us, we headed back to the guesthouse for a good night's sleep.

Day 2: Reykjavík to Ísafjörður; boat to Kviar Lodge

Thursday 23 March 2023

This morning we left the guesthouse before breakfast to head to the local airport in Reykjavik. As it is only a five-minute drive we were soon there and unloading our bags at departures. As we were nice and early there was plenty of time to get a snack and a cup of coffee from the café for breakfast.

Flights to Ísafjörður are often cancelled as the airport there has a very short runway and is set at an angle across a fjord. Today, however, we were invited to check in our luggage (which is always promising) and then just had to wait to see if we would go. The staff called the flight and we boarded quickly. It's only a short flight – around 45 minutes – and we descended from the clouds into the fjord north of Ísafjörður. We then turned into the fjord, flying over the town before making a sharp turn and touching down on the airstrip. The pilot's skills were exceptional – what an amazing piece of flying!

We were met by our guide and host for the next few days: Brendan, an American who lives here and was accompanying us to Kviar Lodge. We had a couple of hours until the boat was due to depart, so we headed to a café in the town centre for a hot drink and a snack. It wasn't long before we were on our way to the harbour, where we boarded the boat (our luggage had already been loaded).

The wind was picking up but as we set off the water was relatively calm, however it soon started to snow and visibility was limited. The boat is an impressive piece of kit and we made good progress northwards across the fjord towards Hornstrandir Nature Reserve. With such limited visibility we were reliant on the radar and GPS to keep on track. After around an hour on the water, the skipper reduced speed and Kviar Lodge appeared through the snow above a steep snow bank. We ensured that all the luggage that wasn't waterproof was in bin liners (to protect it) and loaded up the Zodiac with as much as we could. Once the luggage was ashore, we ferried the group to the jetty then helped load the luggage of the group that was leaving. They were soon on their way, by which time we were busy hauling our luggage and supplies up to the house through strong winds and hard snow. Kviar Lodge perches above the coastline of the fjord surrounded by wilderness. In fact, we would be the only people on Hornstrandir for the majority of our stay. The area supports a thriving population of Arctic foxes and these wonderful mammals would be the focus of our efforts over the coming days. In fact two were already there to greet us. Once everyone had got their luggage to their rooms and was able to access their luggage, several of the group were quick to head out for our first photography session.

The wind really was fierce, driving snow hard into our faces unless we turned our backs. Foxes, of course, are far better adapted to these extreme conditions and have no need to wear multiple layers, gloves or warm winter boots!





The heavy snow and strong wind made it very challenging to get focus lock, but provided some incredible photo opportunities. It was, without a doubt, the perfect start to our stay at Kviar and the group managed to capture some stunning imagery. Whether you use wide angle or telephoto lenses, the foxes are very cooperative and make perfect subjects. They are just the most wonderful species!

After such a successful first day in this wild corner of Iceland, we retreated to the warmth of the house and were treated to the first of many exceptional meals. One of the great delights of this remote spot is that there is limited or no phone signal at all so it is easy to immerse yourself entirely in this wild world.

Day 3: Kviar Lodge

Friday 24 March 2023

This morning we woke to snow falling outside and reconvened in the dining room for our first breakfast. As other people had been staying over the past few days, the house was lovely and warm. It is absolutely essential when photographing the foxes that you come back inside regularly to warm up in front of the fire and enjoy a cup of tea or coffee. After breakfast, we donned our gear and headed outside for another session with the foxes.

Today provided a wealth of opportunities. The wind was noticeably weaker than the day before, which meant we could photograph the foxes in heavy snowfall. We were photographing a young fox when another fox that was nearby suddenly came charging in and a fight broke out. This ended as quickly as it began, but we were in the perfect position to photograph this aggressive behaviour.



As the day went on, we were able to add to our portfolios, building up an array of images with a clean white background, as well as using the rich blues of the water in the fjord. It was a great day to be out in the snow and watch the foxes going about their business.



This evening after dinner the sky cleared a little and we could see a very faint aurora in the sky. It wasn't really enough to head out for a photography session, but it was lovely to see it nonetheless.

When we woke the weather had changed completely: there was only a very light wind and the sun was rising over the mountains. It was a glorious day which provided us with yet another set of conditions to enjoy and make the most of with the foxes.

Another huge breakfast was laid out for everyone, and there was little doubt what we would do after lunch, we were, of course, going to capture a range of striking images of our Arctic fox friends. With big blue skies and cooperative foxes, we had an excellent start to the day.



There was a huge amount of activity today with numerous foxes showing up at different times throughout the morning and on into the afternoon. As we were watching one fox, which had just dug up a sea urchin that it had obviously buried, we heard a commotion and turned to see another two foxes - one pursuing the other. The fox with the urchin turned tail and sprinted off over the horizon and another fox (affectionately known as Whinger) also made a quick getaway.

We weren't too sure what was going on but, with the sun losing its strength over the fjord, we headed over to where Whinger had stopped and kept himself out of trouble. He was sitting a couple of hundred metres from the lodge and we managed to capture some beautiful images in a completely white world. The fox followed us back towards the house and it soon started to snow again.

We spent the afternoon and evening around the lodge, photographing this young male in heavy snowfall. Another fabulous day on Hornstrandir had provided us with yet another set of images that were completely different from the previous couple of days.



After another good night's sleep we woke to a morning of heavy snow - the outside world was full of deep snowdrifts and looked like a winter wonderland. The wind had picked up again overnight, which had not been forecast, and along with the snow this made a challenging set of conditions. The strong winds made it feel much colder than the previous couple of days and it was a real challenge to spend prolonged periods sitting or standing still. The alpha female had been calling this morning, but she kept her distance from the house and sheltered from the wind in the snow-laden 'forest'. The female continued to call from her snow mound, but no fox replied or came to her - she seemed all alone in this harsh world.



The day's weather had one constant: the wind. The only spot with any shelter was beside the house, but for most of the morning we had to photograph away from that shelter and as a result were blasted by the gusts and the snow they whipped up. Both lenses and people got quickly covered in snow and it was important that everyone went inside regularly to warm up. Although the heavy snowfall eased off as the day progressed, deep pockets of snow were now scattered across the landscape. This made it difficult to get around so our range was limited without breaking our way through the drifts.

The female disappeared after a while, heading up the hill by the lodge, so we were left without any subject for a while. We spent a little more time indoors today as we made sure we kept our body temperatures up, and ventured out only when there were good photographic opportunities. We spent much of the afternoon and evening photographing a fox right by the lodge, battling with the spindrift whipped up by the winds. When lying on the ground, with snow building up on any crease in your clothing or on any patch of exposed skin, it's impossible not to wonder how such a small creature can survive a winter here.

Another excellent day around the lodge provided us with more images with a different feel, and once again gave us an appreciation of this remote peninsula's brutal winter weather.



This morning was our last at Kviar and in Hornstrandir Nature Reserve. We had spent a marvellous few days here in all types of weather, which had in turn created all sorts of opportunities for photography. The weather today was much calmer than the previous day, with only light cloud cover.



After breakfast we made sure all our bags (except our cameras) were packed and our rooms cleared in preparation for our lunchtime departure. We spent the morning enjoying the calmer weather and captured a few more images of Whinger, who had seemingly come to say goodbye. And so we added these final images to our portfolio as we waited for the boat to arrive.

When we sighted the boat on the horizon, we started hauling the luggage down to the beach using sleds to move it through the deep snow. It wasn't long before the boat was anchored offshore and the Zodiac was coming to pick us up along with our luggage up. The water on the fjord was flat calm and we couldn't have asked for better conditions as we made our way back towards Ísafjörður. On the way we saw hundreds of harbour porpoise, northern fulmar and a few black guillemots.

Upon arrival at the harbour, we unloaded the luggage and hopped aboard the minibus for the short journey to the café in the town centre, where the group were able to enjoy a cup of coffee before we continued to the small airport on the outskirts of the town. The flight landed a little late, but we boarded quickly and took off for Reykjavik.

As we had another early start next morning we went for an early dinner in the city before retiring to our rooms for our final night's sleep in Iceland.

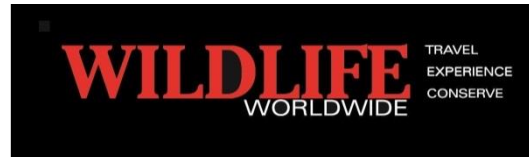
Day 7: Reykjavik to London

Tuesday 28 March 2023

We were picked up very early so that we would arrive at Keflavik Airport with plenty of time to spare. We enjoyed a smooth transfer to the airport, but arrived to find that the majority of the group had to check in their bags as oversized luggage (because the bags had straps – how bizarre!). There was a large queue at the oversized luggage drop-off, which delayed our progress through the airport. However once everyone had checked their bags in, we were able to proceed through security and find something to eat. We moved on to passport control and were soon at the gate waiting to board our flight back to the UK.

The flight was smooth and we touched down in London safely. Here, our progress through the airport was very smooth and we were soon in the luggage hall waiting for our bags. There was a slight delay with the luggage arriving, but soon enough we all said our goodbyes and made our respective journeys home.

Checklist



	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 histri onicus</i>
4	Purple sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>
5	Black guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>
6	Glaucous gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>
7	Lesser black-backed gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>
8	Northern fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>
9	Great cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
10	Snow bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>
	MAMMALS	MAMMILIA
1	Harbour porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>
2	Harbour (common) seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>
3	Arctic fox	<i>Vulpes lagopus</i>

