

Southern and western Iceland, June 22 – July 3, 2022.

VLADIMIR DINETS

We went to Iceland with two small kids, so we were mostly limited to short drives and short hikes. We avoided overhyped, senseless tourist traps like Blue Lagoon (a glorified power plant cooling pond) and Silfra (a water-filled crack in lava with no fish or anything of interest), and we wish we had skipped all the Golden Circle, too. We explored the southern coast from Westmannaeyjar to Hofn, made a few side trips onto the Tibet-like inner plateau (accessible by a bunch of dirt roads, not nearly as bad as rental companies and travel guides would make you believe), and spent some time on Snæfellsnes and Reykjanes Peninsulas. There were a few diving locations I really wanted to explore, but the logistics with the kids would be a nightmare, and the sites are all in northern Iceland. I was also desperate to get to the bird cliffs of Latrabjarg, but just couldn't squeeze them in. I was half-expecting to see no mammals at all but ended up with a trip list of 11 species.

I saw two **Arctic foxes**, both at night. They were tame and fun to observe. The locations were (spelled out as in Google Maps): Seljavellir (more precisely, Seljavallalaug bílastæði, 63.56117, -19.61838), and Baularvallavatn (64.91478, -22.87062). There were also lots of fox tracks around the pink-footed goose supercolony in Djorsarver Nature Reserve (64.51147, -18.61632). The only **American mink** seen was in Pingvellir National Park (at 64.24610, -21.05371), also at night.

There were a few **harbor seals** swimming in Lake Jokulsarlon near the outlet (64.04719, -16.18183), and a **gray seal** visible below puffin observation hut in Vestmannaeyjar (63.40351, -20.28668).

I didn't spend much effort looking for rodents, and saw only one **wood mouse**, in Vatnajökull National Park (in Baejarstadhaskogur Forest, 64.05362, -17.06434). This species is believed to be a 10th century introduction to Iceland, but local mice are larger and brighter, and have never been studied genetically. I also saw a **house mouse** from the abovementioned puffin observation hut in Vestmannaeyjar while waiting for storm-petrels at night. On these islands wood mouse is absent, so, unlike in the rest of Iceland, house mouse occurs in natural habitats as well as in human settlements. There are also feral rabbits on Vestmannaeyjar Islands but I didn't see any; in mainland Iceland their populations are unstable, depend on occasional introductions, and are largely limited to Reykjavik area.

We saw a pod of three **orcas** remarkably close to shore near Vikin Beach in Vestmannaeyjar (at about 63.40395, -20.27099) and two **harbor porpoises** in Snæfellsjökull National Park (at Írskrbrunnur, 64.90150, -23.94678). To look for **white-beaked dolphins** (which I've only seen from afar previously), I took a whalewatching tour from Reykjavik. Unfortunately, the boat spent too much time chasing numerous **humpback** and **minke whales**, so by the time we saw a few dolphins we were out of time and I got only distant views again.

I saw 73 of the island's 75 regularly breeding bird species, including all 12 endemic and near-endemic subspecies. Information provided upon request. Among other interesting things, we found five out of six species of Icelandic orchids, some charming spiders and opilionids, and lots of beautiful mosses, lichens and ferns.

Mammals list

1. Arctic fox	<i>Vulpes lagopus fuliginosus</i>	<u>Seljavellir</u> , Baularvallavatn
2. American mink	<i>Mustela vison</i>	Pingvellir National Park
3. Harbor seal	<i>Phoca vitulina vitulina</i>	Jokulsarlon
4. Gray seal	<i>P. grypus</i>	Vestmannaeyjar
5. Wood mouse	<i>Apodemus sylvaticus sylvaticus/grandiculus</i>	Baejarstadaskogur
6. House mouse	<i>Mus musculus musculus</i>	Vestmannaeyjar
7. Humpback whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae novaeangliae</i>	off Reykjavik
8. Minke whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata acutorostrata</i>	off Reykjavik
9. White-beaked dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus albirostris</i>	off Reykjavik
10. Orca	<i>Orcinus orca</i>	Vestmannaeyjar
11. Harbor porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena phocoena</i>	Snæfellsjökull National Park