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Turf roofed houses (Stefan Shafft)

The Land, Flora & Fauna



When the Vikings first arrived in Iceland, 25 to 40% of the land was covered with forests and other types of vegetation. That changed rapidly as the residents began to use the timber to build and heat their homes and to repair their ships. Additional trees disappeared as they began to clear the land for cultivation. As a result, by the early 1900s the land had been severely stripped.

Today, the people are desperately striving to restore their forests. Commonly seen are the birch (*Betula pubescens*), which varies in size from a scrubby bush to a 10- to 12-foot tree, and the rowan (*Sorbus aucuparia*), which can reach 30 feet in height. It is found in birch woods and gardens.

The entire center of Iceland, commonly known as The Highlands, is uninhabited. Some of that region is devoted to national parks and the lower elevations are often used for the grazing of domes-

tic animals. Hiking, skiing, snowmobiling, biking, and Jeep tours are common.

There are some 200 volcanoes throughout Iceland.

Vegetation

Apart from the trees being reinstated to the forests, Iceland's plant life can be classified as basically European in nature. Buttercups, saxifrages, roses, and daisies are found almost everywhere. Also quite common across the country are the **Arctic fireweed** or **river beauty** (*Epilobium latifolium*), which has large purple flowers and commonly grows on gravelly riverbanks, in dry riverbeds, and in river gorges, particularly inland; the **broad-leaved willow** (*Saux callicarpaea*), a variable scrub; and the **angelica** (*Angelica archangelica*), growing to a height of three to four feet along herb-filled slopes, on moist rock ledges, along rivers and streams, and on bird cliffs.

Also found on herb-filled slopes, in the woods, and in the scrublands is the **wood crane's bill** (*Geranium sylvaticum*), with its beautiful blue flowers, while the pink-flowered **thrift** (*Armeria maritime*) is most common in gravelly and sandy areas.

From middle to late summer, visitors look for the blue-flowered **harebell** (*Campanula rotundifolia*).

In the wet areas, look for the **lyngbye's sedge** (*Carex lyngbyei*), a tall, beautiful plant with brownish upright male spikes and dark brown pendulous female spikes that grows in very dense bunches. The **marsh felwort** (*Lomatogonium rotatum*), which



Silene vulgaris (bladder campion), often seen in Iceland



Fireweed

foliolosa), the **mountain heath** (*Phylodoce coerulea*), and the **upright primrose** (*Primula stricta*).

In the South, watch for the **ragged robin** (*Lychnis flos-cuculi*), the **devil's-bit scabious** (*Succisa pratensis*), and **valerian** (*Valeriana officinalis*).

Some plants do quite well in the warm soils and water commonly found in Iceland's geothermal areas. Among them are **adder's tongue** (*Ophio-glossum azoricum*), **red shank** (*Polygonum per-sicaria*), **marsh penny-wort** (*Hydrocotyle vulgaris*), **water speed-well** (*Veronica anagallis-aquatica*), and **marsh cudweed** (*Gnaphalium uliginosum*).

Around the gravelly/stony areas and the lava fields, you probably will see some **woolly**

has blue flowers, tends to grow in bogs, and is most commonly found in the North, where the **Arctic poppy** (*Papaver radicum*) can be found in gravelly and stony soils, mainly in the hills and mountains.

Also in the northern part of Iceland, look for the **foliolose saxifrage** (*Saxifraga*



Moorland spotted orchid

fringe moss (*Rhacomitrium lanuginosum*), while in the moors and lowlands, you will find **heather** (*Calluna vulgaris*), which has pink flowers that burst forth in the late summer; **northern green orchids** (*Platanthera hyperborean*), which have sweet-scented, greenish-white flowers; and **moorland spotted orchids** (*Dactylorhiza maculata*), whose pink-lilac flowers are dotted in red and with dark spots on its leaves.

Wild Animals

Iceland has little animal life to boast about. Occasionally, a polar bear will come to shore, having drifted across the sea on a wayward iceberg, but such events are rare and short-lived.

The adorable little **Arctic fox** is present, but seldom seen. **Bats** occasionally are blown



Arctic fox (Per Harald Olsen)

into the country with the winds, but they are unable to breed here and soon die off. Serpents, snakes, and reptiles also are unable to breed in the rugged northern environment.

Other animals that survive in Iceland include the reindeer, the field mouse, and the American mink.

Only the sea life, the birds, and the extraordinary domestic animals that have survived their passage to Iceland have produced much interest among tourists, but Iceland is unquestionably outstanding in each of those categories.

The island's river banks and coastal areas are frequently laden with **seals**, while boatload upon boatload of tourists regularly venture onto the waters to catch sight of a **whale**. It is said that 90% of them will get their wish.

ICELAND'S ESTIMATED WHALE POPULATION

Blue whale	700-1,000
Fin whale.	10,000
Humpback whale	1,500-1,800
Minke whale.	50,000-60,000
Northern bottlenose whale	40,000
Sei whale	10,000
Sperm whale.	1,200-1,400

Among the whales to be seen around Iceland are:



Blue whale with calf (Andreas Tille)

Blue whale. The largest animal ever to live on Earth, these amazing animals run about 80 feet in length and weigh in the neighborhood of 150 tons, but feed on the smallest living organisms in the ocean, plankton and krill. Between 700 and 1,000 individual whales, roughly one-fourth

of the world's total population, are believed to migrate to Iceland in the spring, stay there to feed throughout the summer, and return to the South in the fall. The spouts, their most noticeable feature, shoot water approximately 25 feet into the air.

Fin whale. While the whales' right jaws are white or nearly so, their left jaws are dark grey or black.

Humpback whale. These playful creatures have flippers up to 16 feet long, which they occasionally use to slap the water before rolling over or leaping out of the water. They run about 50 feet in length and weigh around 30 tons, and nearly always raise their fluke before diving. In the summer, they breed in the Caribbean, but later frequent the fjords and bays of Iceland in search of food.

Minke whale. The smallest of the baleen whales, the Minke averages 26 feet in length and weighs about nine tons. They

spout three or four times before diving, and sometimes leap out of the water. Although capable of staying underwater for 20 minutes or so, they usually resurface in four or five minutes. A part of the most abundant whale species, an estimated 55,000 Minke whales are thought to frequent Iceland's waters.

Northern bottlenose whale. Some 40,000 of these whales occupy the waters around Iceland. In the winter, they keep to the deeper waters to the Southeast, but in the summer, they move closer to shore. Running about 26 feet in length and weighing around seven tons, these brown-colored whales can remain submerged for more than an hour, and their spout is low, making them less easy to spot.

Sei whale. About 52 feet in length and 25 tons in weight, this variety of whale shoots its spout some 10 feet into the air. They will breathe three or four times before diving, stay submerged for about five minutes, and then return to the surface. Usually seen in the West of Iceland, they prefer to stay in deep water about 45 miles offshore.

Sperm whale. The largest of the toothed whales, this giant runs about 50 feet in length and weighs up to 40 tons. Its enormous head can be as much as one-third of its total length and it can stay underwater for as long as two hours – the longest of any of the whales. Those that are seen around Iceland are bulls (males). The female whales and their mates stayed in their South Seas breeding grounds and do not migrate to Iceland.

Dolphins & Porpoises

Dolphins and porpoises also are considered members of the toothed whale family. In Icelandic waters, you are most likely to see the **harbour porpoise**, which averages 14 to 16 feet in length, is quite shy, and rarely leaps. It tends to avoid boats, preferring shallow waters, and is most often seen in fjords, bays, and estuaries.

Another possibility is the **long-finned pilot whale**, actually a dolphin, which weighs from two to five tons and measures between 15 and 23 feet in length. The whales dive to a depth of 100 feet or more, and stay submerged from five to 10 minutes at a time. They like to travel in large groups and most frequently are seen off the Southeast, South, and West coasts during the late summer and fall.

A third possibility would be the **white-sided dolphin**, a white-beaked animal with a dark back and flippers, and sides that are decorated with yellow and white stripes and spots. These animals do not stay submerged for long and can swim extremely fast. They travel in large groups and are often seen leaping out of the water, especially along Iceland's South, Southwest, West, and Northwest coasts.



Leaping killer whales (Robert Pittman)

Orcas stay together in groups called pods and most often are found in the rich herring grounds off the East Fjords, off the South coast, or off the West coast. During the summer, they stay closer to shore and may be found in inlets and bays, but in the winter, they prefer deeper waters.

The **orca** or killer whale also is a member of the dolphin family. Orcas have a tall dorsal fin and a distinctive black-and-white color. Fast swimmers, they can stay submerged for as long as 20 minutes, but usually surface in five-minute

Domestic Animals

When the Vikings left Scandinavia hundreds of years ago, they took their animals with them. Unfortunately, their ships were not large enough to carry as many of the horses, cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, fowl, and dogs as they might have preferred, but they were given little choice.

Over the centuries, various attempts to import new animals often proved disastrous because the existing livestock sometimes became infected with diseases, such as pneumonia, causing a great many of their animals to die. The Icelandic people soon learned that inbreeding was a far better solution. As a result, the

government is very strict about refusing outside animals entrance to their country.

Perhaps the most appreciated of Iceland's domestic animals is the diminutive **Icelandic horse**. These exceptional animals have a sleek, glossy coat during the warm months, but develop a thicker, warmer coat for colder weather. They are strong, intelligent, loyal, and have a pleasant personality, but their most distinctive quality is the fact that they have five gaits while other horses have but three or four.



Icelandic horse (Andreas Tille)



Icelandic sheep

The **Icelandic sheep** also is highly regarded. It is one of the oldest and purest breeds in the world and comes in a variety of colors and patterns. Its wool is strong and warm, and the fact that it is allowed to feed on the native Icelandic grass and herbs throughout the summer gives its meat a

unique and delightful flavor. Garments woven of their wool are exceptionally warm and make highly-prized gifts.

The **Icelandic cow** has been protected from outside influences since about 900 AD. It is rather small, comes in many colors, and provides a great deal of milk, from which a variety of dairy products are obtained.

Birds

Literally millions of birds are found throughout Iceland, particularly along the rugged coastal cliffs. Some 270 different species in all have been recorded.

The best time for bird-watching is the latter half of May and the first

three weeks in June, although some **redwings** and **redpolls** tend to visit in the winter. The **Iceland gyrfalcon** is often seen near the seashore in the winter, and **fieldfares**, **blackbirds**, and **ravens** also are common winter visitors. **Teals** enjoy the winter season when the ponds and streams are frozen over. **Snow buntings** and **merlins** tend to gather in the towns and villages during bad weather, and **widgeons** are very commonly seen around Reykjavik in the wintertime.

Turnstones, **oystercatchers**, and **redshanks** are common along the shoreline near Reykjavik in the winter, and such waders as the **snipes**, **curlews**, **bar-tailed godwits**, **knots**, and



Puffin (Matthias Meckel)



Ducks in flight

sanderlings are common visitors during that time of year as well. Winter waders, such as the **purple sandpiper**, are best seen along the shoreline in the Southwest and Southeast.

Among the nesting species, **puffins** are the most popular among the tourists, but they must compete for space along the

cliffs with the **fulmars, kittiwakes, guillemots,** and **Brunnich's guillemots.**

Other breeding species include **shovelers, tufted ducks, pochards, lesser black-backed gulls, herring gulls, common gulls, black-headed gulls, short-eared owls,**

and **starlings.** **Lesser black-backed seagulls** are true migrants and leave Iceland during October and November.

Seen almost everywhere in Iceland are the **mallard, golden plover, whimbrel, redsnak, black-headed gull, Arctic tern, meadow pipit,** and **wheatear.**



Puffins

The Weather



Many potential visitors reject the idea of going to Iceland because of its name. In point of fact, it would have been more accurate to have called Iceland Greenland and to have called Greenland Iceland. The reason: the Gulf Stream that sweeps northward along America's Atlantic coast and then swings eastward along the coast of the British Isles, later turns somewhat to the west and sweeps by Iceland, providing it with an exceptionally stable climate, not unlike that in the Aleutian Islands, on the Alaskan Peninsula, or in Tierra del Fuego.

Not surprisingly, the South coast of Iceland is generally warmer than the North coast, and the winter snowfall, while not very common, is more likely to occur in the North than in the South. Summers rarely exceed 75°, while winters average around 35°, never dropping as low nor climbing as high as the temperatures in New York City or in Ottawa, Canada.

The climate is moderate throughout the summer, although it can be somewhat unpredictable and subject to rapid change. Sum-

mers tend to be damp and cool, and it is not unusual to see snow as early as October or as late as April. But snow is not common in Iceland and it rarely stays on the ground for more than a couple of days.

The all-time high temperature in Reykjavik, set in 2004, was just 76.6°F, while the record low temperature, set in 1918, was -12.1° – not too bad by most standards.

For most travelers, the best time to visit Iceland is from May to November.



Did You Know? The people of Iceland quote the temperature in Celsius (Centigrade). To convert Celsius to Fahrenheit, multiply the Celsius figure by 1.8 and then add 32.

AVERAGE TEMPERATURES (°F)		
	Reykjavik	Akureyri
January	31.6	30.9
February	34.7	33.4
March	38.7	36.5
April	39.6	37.2
May	40.3	39.9
June	42.9	49.1
July	53.2	53.4
August	42.9	49.1
September	48.2	47.8
October	43.3	40.5
November	34.9	31.5
December	36.1	30.7

A greater distraction than the temperature is the amazing amount of daylight that prevails in Iceland. During the winter, for example, the residents normally receive just six hours of daylight per day, but during the summer there is virtually no darkness. In July, golfers frequently play as late as midnight, and children often stay outdoors well into the night.