

WILD, WILD ICELAND



Ir. Chin Mee Poon

Ir. Chin Mee Poon is a retired civil engineer who derives a great deal of joy and satisfaction from travelling to different parts of the globe, capturing fascinating insights of the places and people he encounters and sharing his experiences with others through his photographs and writing.



A puffin holding a row of fish in its beak

With a population of 1% that of our country occupying a land almost $\frac{1}{3}$ the size of our country, Iceland does not have any urban centre that can be truly classified as a city in the normally accepted sense. Even its capital, Reykjavik, has only a population of 124,000 people and is one of the smallest "capital cities" in the world. Iceland has much more nature than culture to offer tourists.

During our 38-day exploration of Iceland, my wife and I, together with my younger brother and his wife, travelled round the island in a rented car in a clockwise direction, starting from Reykjavik near the southwest corner. We followed the ring road but turned off every so often to visit almost every nook and corner of the island accessible to a 2WD passenger car. Some of the roads, especially those in the interior, are not paved and are open only to 4WD vehicles. We were able to visit many tiny hamlets spectacularly situated at different points on the many fjords that characterise the coastlines of west, north and east Iceland. And of course we came across tens of thousands of birds and other wildlife. We also saw more sheep than people.

The Westfjords is a peninsula somewhat resembling a hand sticking out from the northwest corner of the island. The dozens of fjords along the coast of this large peninsula provide not only beautiful settings for many villages and hamlets but are also home to a large variety of birds. In the 10 days we were in this area, we came across large flocks of eider ducks, arctic terns, kittiwakes, northern fulmars, guillemots, razorbills, some whooper swans, greylag geese, black-headed gulls, black-backed gulls, harlequin ducks, oyster catchers, red-breasted mergansers, red-throated loons, black-tailed godwits, shags, a few rock ptarmigans, golden plovers, sandpipers, common snipes, whimbrels, arctic skuas, etc.

We had our first close encounter with the clownish but iconic puffins at the world-famous Látrabjark Bird Cliffs in the southwestern corner of Westfjords. We were extremely lucky to see a king eider among a group of ordinary eider ducks. We came across a small colony of harbour seals in one of the fjords too. It was also in this peninsula that we saw Dynjandi, the first of the many spectacular waterfalls in this country.

On the day before we left Westfjords for North Iceland, we were doubly lucky to come across a few harbour seals basking on rocks in a fjord, followed by two arctic foxes beside the road. A few days earlier we saw two orphaned arctic foxes in the Arctic Fox Centre near the small village of Suðavik. The arctic fox is the only native mammal in Iceland.

In North Iceland, we saw more harbour seals and some new species of birds, including a large colony of northern gannets, some red-necked phalarope, meadow pipit and Slavonian grebe. In Husavik, we went whale watching and saw several humpback whales and caught sight of a minke whale. I did not, however, forget that Iceland is one of the 3 countries that kill a large number of whales every year, and I find it extremely hard to reconcile this with the Icelanders' efforts to promote whale watching as a major tourist attraction.

In East Iceland, we had our most satisfying and memorable close encounter with a large number of cute puffins at Hafnarhólmi, many of them back from the sea with a row of small fish in their beaks to feed the newly hatched chicks in their burrows.

Remembering Iceland as a "Land of Fire and Ice", we climbed the craters of a few dead volcanoes and visited a cluster of pseudo-craters formed by steam explosions when hot lava flowed over frozen ground. We also got to view glacier tongues, glacier lakes and icebergs at very close range in South Iceland.

Iceland is truly a nature lover's paradise. ■