

BIRCH WOODS AND BIODIVERSITY



**ELAV TRIP TO ICELAND 2007
5 - 10 AUGUST**

Table of Contents

	Page Number
Introduction	3
Day 1	3
Day 2	4
Day 3	5
Day 4	7
Day 5	10

Special Thanks go to Sherry and Throstur for making the trip so interesting and varied and for all the stimulating discussions which made the evening fly passed. Thanks also to Viv Halcrow of ELAV Scotland for organizing the trip and allowing us to see such a special country. Last and certainly by no means least, a very special Thank you to Mike Ellis and Clare Belshaw, who very nobly gave up the chance of a trip to Iceland when there was only one plane seat left so that I could go!

Introduction

Through ELAV, a trip to Iceland was organised to look at what re-establishing birch woods does for general biodiversity. For some of the trips attendees, this was an opportunity to look at some of the problems in simply growing trees in a hostile environment- like Iceland or North Scotland and some of the novel techniques used to overcome problems. For others it was the chance to see how another country deals with clashes between human needs or wants versus nature's needs- this was particularly evident in the potential conflict between two bird species- golden plover and whimbrel and the re-establishment of birch woods. Iceland holds approximately 40 and 50% respectively of the world's golden plover and whimbrel population, there are concerns expressed by ornithologists on the impact of land-use changes by governmental targets for forestry cover.

Overall, the trip to Iceland provided a fresh look at some old, and difficult questions faced by people working within the nature conservation sector, such as introduction of an alien species and also allowed the participants to see how other countries overcome some of these issues.

Sunday 5th August –Day 1.

The start of the journey! Kirstin Carmouche, Mike Ellis and Claire Belshaw met at Inverness airport to begin the travel onto Iceland. Through plane delays, grumpy check-in staff, and overnight stay in Heathrow and pure bad luck only Kirstin (minus bag) made it to Iceland on Monday 6th of August.



The exhausted troops relax in 5* Luxury!

Monday 6th of August- Day 2

Jenny, who had arrived separately spent the day looking around the valleys of Egilsstaðir and enjoying the Icelandic sunshine! Kirstin arrived in Egilsstaðir later in the day than planned and went to Sherry and Throstur house for a meal and to discuss the altered plans for the next few days.



Home Sweet Home



Relaxing in the Icelandic sun!

Tuesday 7th of August- Day 3

Visited forestry HQ in Egilsstaðir and looked into how the afforestation grant scheme is run in Iceland. The level of detail put into developing the afforestation schemes was very impressive; each piece of ground was visited by a Forester and the plans discussed with the landowner to ensure that their wishes were considered in the plan. Provided an interesting comparison to the UK equivalent Scottish Forestry Grant Scheme (SFGS), as it appears that people really enjoy having trees on their farms. Furthermore, having a planted forest on your farm may also increase the value of the property, which demonstrates how important trees are in national psyche of Icelandic people, which, ultimately almost guarantees the success of the reforestation programme.



An Afforestation Project

Following the visit to the Forestry HQ, we then walked through Community Woodland on the outskirts of Egilsstaðir. This provided the opportunity to see woodland which was managed solely for recreational purposes, with no management of the field layer and little difference in the age structure of trees.



Egilsstaðir

Visit to the Hallormsstaður National Park (the largest in East Iceland), where we met a researcher called Lauris who undertakes progeny experiments to improve the genetic material of Icelandic birch. This is achieved by selecting the best trees- in the case of Icelandic birch trees with single stems which grow straight- and crossing them together. The use of an alien species lupin to prevent soil erosion- this is a good example of where an alien species can be used relatively safely and goes against the some of the current thinking of nature conservation professionals in other countries who would be against the idea.



Looking at regeneration

This was followed by lunch at one the recreation areas on the shores of a glacial lake and just off a main road. In this area, planted larch had been selectively thinned to create a feeling of being in a natural wood. The thinning also provided screening from other users, giving a real sense of privacy and remoteness even though it was only a short distance from a major road. The facility catered very effectively for the needs of it's users, not only was it suitable for all types of access and wheelchair and prams/ buggies could be used, it also showed a great understanding of what people look for when undertaking recreational activities.

After lunch, we visited the Arboretum. Here we found some of the earliest examples of forestry growing trails, where various species of tree we grown to establish how successful they would be in Iceland. The arboretum also housed a nursery where the progeny experiments take place. One, quite unique feature about the arboretum, was that it is used as focal point for local community activities, with concerts and fun days, which again shows how important forestry is in Icelandic culture. It's so important in fact, that they have a purpose built bar ready for the next event!



What can I get you?

Wednesday 8th of August-Day 4

Travelled through the 'Highlands', towards Akuyiri and the western side of Iceland to look at two further National Forests. The Highlands in the centre of Iceland is heavily grazed and does not currently have any afforestation projects on it; this area is often described as a desert and has landforms on it for which Iceland is famous. It suffers heavily for wind erosion caused by an unstable topsoil layer, as there is very little vegetation cover, hence its description as a desert.



Soil Erosion

On they way to the National Forests we had just enough time to look at some of Iceland's famous landmarks...



Can anyone else smell eggs?



'The desert'

We were also fortunate enough to pass Lake Mývatn, where we were treated to a bird bonanza of bird species that are considered rarities in Britain, including a great northern diver!



Lake Mývatn



Harlequin ducks

Late in the afternoon we arrived at Iceland's hardest to get to National Forest- Vaglaskógur National Forest. It was well worth the difficulty in reaching it. The forest gave you a real sense of what Icelandic birch wood forests would have looked like before they were cut down, with a very natural forest structure. There was a real sense of isolation and peace due to its remoteness. This was also tinged with a bit of sadness as it really emphasised the point of the impact that humans have on the natural environment, as in Iceland's case- cutting down the birch woods and having an unnaturally high level of grazing.



Thursday 9th August- Day 5

The last day- trip to the East fjords to see one final forest which is also part of Iceland's walking network, which is very comprehensive and covers the whole of the country. Visiting the East fjords also meant we were able to travel on highway number 1- a ring road that eventually makes its way back to Reykjavik. That left just enough time to enjoy a traditional Icelandic desert of pancakes cream and jam before heading off to catch the plane to Reykjavik and back to Britain.