

An Icelandic Stopover By David W McKay



Carved Viking warrior, Reykjavik

Always on the lookout for a new collecting experience when booking a transatlantic trip on Icelandair, and discovering that I could stopover in Iceland for up to seven days without incurring any additional airline costs, I decided that this was a collecting opportunity that could not be missed. It was only after the flight, including stopover, had been booked that I discovered how hard it was to find out anything about Icelandic molluscs. Simon Taylor eventually loaned me a copy of a pamphlet on Icelandic prosobranchs and with the help of Koen Fraussen I got in contact with an Israeli shell collector who was living in Iceland. I tried a number of Icelandic Biological Organisations but the only response I got was from the Fishery Research Laboratory. With the help of the information I gained from these sources and a video of things to do in Iceland by the time I arrived in Keflavik I had a fair idea of what I was going to do.

Despite arriving in Iceland on 24th April we emerged from the Airport Terminal into a landscape covered in 3" of new snow, resulting in it taking 2hrs for us to drive the 40 km from the Airport to our apartment in Reykjavik. My first stop after getting settled in was to have a walk down to the harbour where I found a pontoon that had recently (the molluscs on it were still alive) been lifted out of the harbour and successfully collected my first Icelandic shells- only some *Mytilus edulis*, *Littorina obtusata* and *Lacuna vincta* but it was a start.

The following day the snow had all but disappeared and with low tide in the late morning I went collecting at a small island called Grotta which is joined to the mainland by a causeway that is exposed at low tide. My first impression was that I was on one of the boulder shores common on the west coast of Scotland as everything was covered in a thick mat of *Ascophyllum* that merged into *Fucus serratus* and then *Laminaria digitata*.

Mollusc wise my first impression was of what wasn't there, old friends such as *Patella vulgata*, *Gibbula cineraria* and *Littorina littorea* appeared to be entirely absent. Despite diligent searching I found no *Patella vulgata* or *Gibbula cineraria* in any of my collecting. I did find a handful of small specimens that I called *Littorina littorea* but I must admit to being very doubtful about the identification. I was soon scrabbling over the very slippery shore turning over stones where possible and being rewarded with both *Tectura virginea* and *testudinalis*, *Tonicella rubra* and *Ischnochitona albus* as well as old friends such as *Nucella lapillus*, *Littorina saxatilis* and both *Littorina obtusata* and *mariae*. By the time I was sated with collecting I had amassed 25 species including those from weed washings. I had had a good day.

In the afternoon we did a little exploring and drove out to Akranes, and, at the head of Kollafjordur, spotted a wide area of sand flat. Having found somewhere to park I ventured down to the beach to see if it was worth a visit the following day as

one of the species I wished to obtain is *Macoma calcarea*, which occurs as a subfossil in Scottish waters. I found some single valves and decided that this beach was worth a visit the following day. The following day I arrived at the beach about 2 hrs before low water and followed the tide out. Near the top of the beach I found *Cerastoderma edule* and *Mya arenaria* and, as I followed the tide out, I collected increasing numbers of dead articulated *Macoma calcarea* plus occasional single valves of *Arctica islandica*. Despite sieving numerous lots of sand on the shore, however, the beach seemed lacking in any live molluscs. As the time of low water approached I had more luck as I started to collect pairs of dead *Arctica islandica* of various sizes from 15mm up. The smaller specimens were an attractive light brown colour while the older specimens were the familiar black. My sieving began to reap rewards as well with a few live *Macoma calcarea*, a single *Thyasira* and several small specimens of a bivalve I did not recognise. As I progressed NW along the beach it turned muddier as I approached a mussel bed that occupied the NW



Beach on the island of Grotta



Beach at the head of Kollafjordur



Serripes groenlandicus

corner. In this muddier area I picked up more dead *Arctica*, some bivalved *Astarte* and larger specimens of the unrecognised bivalve in the sievings. After abortive efforts to identify it from the books I had with me I emailed Graham Oliver a description and he identified it as the Greenland cockle *Serripes groenlandicus*. Having concluded that I had exhausted the possibilities of the sand flat, I travelled a mile further round the shore of Kollafjordur to a piece of more sheltered rocky shore where the first mollusc I saw on the shore was a *Velutina plicatilis*. Despite the spectacular start I found little else of huge interest except a single valve of the Icelandic cockle *Clinocardium ciliatum*.

Having found out that one of the wildlife tour vessels that operated out of Stykkisholmur on the Snaefellsnes Peninsula did at least one dredge haul so that guests could sample Icelandic scallops straight from the sea, I booked a place on

the Saturday excursion. The tour visited lots of the small islands in off Stykkisholmur where passengers could see nesting sea birds including a pair of white tailed eagles and the spectacular basaltic columns. For me the trip was a bit of a disappointment as we caught very little apart from the *Chlamys islandica*. I did however get single specimens of *Musculus laevigatus*, *Margarites striatus* and *Gibbula tumida*. Once the boat returned to port, it being conveniently low water, I visited the only bit of accessible shore that I could identify on *Google Earth*. It



Beach at Stykkisholmur

looked extremely unprepossessing as it was crossed by an open sewer

which was steaming in the cold air. I skirted round the edge of the shore and eventually arrived at a piece of rocky shore where, once I had got over trying to collect every *Margarites helicinus* I saw, I found *Puncturella noachina* and *Trophon clathratus* living on the shore.

All in all I found Iceland to be an excellent shelling destination with lots of interesting species to find. Like everywhere one visits for the first time it is best to do some preliminary research. Like much of Scotland it is not for those who considered a hard days shelling as a walk along the beach collecting stranded shells and some shell sand. I certainly shall take advantage of the stopover opportunity the next time I fly Icelandair and if it is in the summertime I shall attempt sampling further north in the hope of finding some more arctic species. My one disappointment was being unable to get much offshore material. There is a fleet of inshore vessels which fish gill nets but when I was

there they were targeting Lumpfish, perhaps later in the year they target cod and haddock.



Opening the dredge on the tour boat

Photos by the author