



## Flora and fauna

*Nature in Iceland reflects the country's location as an island in the upper reaches of the North Atlantic bordering the Arctic Circle. Most regions in the country have a typical oceanic climate, but warm Gulf Stream currents effectively combat the harsh effects of the Arctic cold, although it is never far away.*



**Vegetation** - Icelandic vegetation is typical of northerly countries, as well as mountainous areas in southern Europe. Of the 500 species of flowering plants growing wild in Iceland, the majority have their origins in Europe.

Agricultural University of Iceland ([AUI](#))

**Forests** - For thousands of years downy birch thrived in Iceland's lowlands and it is estimated that, before settlement, birch forests dominated the dry lowlands to an elevation of 400m (above sea level), amounting to approximately 24% of the country. After settlement around 1000 AD, the vegetation changed significantly as inhabitants of this new environment cleared forests for fuel and agriculture. At present, forests only cover about 1% of the country. The effects of deforestation are varied, the most serious being soil erosion, where in some areas the soil is blown directly out to sea.

The Icelandic Forestry Service ([Skógrækt ríkisins](#))  
The Soil Conservation Agency ([Landgræðsla ríkisins](#))

**Birds** - Between 300-400 species of birds have been found in Iceland, but only about 75 species breed regularly in the country. Iceland is particularly rich in seabirds, waders and wildfowl. Possibly the most famous and most photographed bird is the Puffin. By late summer there are over 10 million Puffins in Iceland. Although most birds in Iceland are of European origin, the island's mid-Atlantic position also makes it home to three North American species: The Great Northern Diver, Harlequin Duck and Barrow's Goldeneye. Many of the country's birds are protected by law, including the rare White-tailed Eagle, Gyr Falcon and Grey Phalarope.

The Icelandic Society for the Protection of Birds (ISPB) ([Fuglavernd Íslands](#))

**Land mammals** - The Arctic fox is the only native land mammal in Iceland. The long-tailed field mouse arrived with the original settlers, and rats have always found their way to Iceland onboard ships. Reindeer were imported in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and released in several places, but today they are only found in the east of the country. Imported mink were farmed during the first part of the 20th century, but many escaped and now breed in the wild.

Drawings by [Jón Baldur Hlíðberg](#)

**Sea mammals** - Grey seals and Harbour seals live around the coast of Iceland and about 15 species of whales and dolphins are found around the island. The most common species are the Minke whale, White beaked dolphin and common porpoise. These species are often spotted off the coast, sometimes just a short distance from land. The Blue whale, the largest whale in the world, is frequently spotted off the western coast.

**Fish** - There are over 300 species of fish in the sea around Iceland and about 10% of these have an economic significance to the country. Cod, herring and capelin are the three most important fish with a total catch of almost 2 million tonnes each year.

**Other creatures** - There are relatively few insect species in Iceland. Ants, termites and various types of butterflies have no representatives in Iceland. There are also no wild frogs or reptiles in Iceland.