

## Hornstrandir Nature Reserve

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Hornstrandir nature reserve was established in 1975. It covers around 58.000 ha of the northernmost part of the Westfjord peninsula, a diverse landscape with fjords, mountains and abandoned settlements.

The area was inhabited from the 9<sup>th</sup> century, when the first settlers arrived in Iceland and was originally valued for easily accessible fishbanks with abundant amounts of fish. Later, excursions were also made to the area from other parts of the country to collect some of the driftwood that characterizes the shores of Hornstrandir and to hunt for the seabirds that nest there in large colonies.

During the centuries the population of the area fluctuated according to climatic conditions and it seems that the traditional subsistence farming and fishing on small boats was on the verge of supporting the settlements. The farms were small, 5-10 sheep and a cow. Unimproved grassland and wetland was used for haymaking, a necessity in the harsh winter conditions.

The area was abandoned between the 1930's and 1952 when the last inhabitants decided to move from the area. It has since been one of the tourist attractions of Iceland, equally visited by Icelandic and foreign tourists. There are no roads in the area and it is only accessible by boat or by traditional trekking routes.

The vegetation of the area has changed dramatically during the last 50 years, grassland has turned into flower meadows or in some cases a monoculture of *Angelica archangelica*. Heavy snowcover during the winter and an intensive, if short, growing season with 24 hrs sunlight create special conditions for rare species and the absence of grazing ruminants gives a new perspective on the capacity of many common species in these harsh conditions.

During the last 4 years Westfjords Natural History Institute has in cooperation with the University of Iceland and other institutions, been investigating many aspects of the area. Behavioral ecology of the arctic fox, birdlife and the diversity of plants and invertebrates have been among the fields investigated along with historical aspects of human settlements and the impacts of tourism today.