

• Hiking map •



VAGLA SKÓGUR NATIONAL FOREST



The National Forests

Lands managed by Land and Forest Iceland are called National Forests. They are open to everyone, year round, and are located in all parts of Iceland. Many are easy to reach and have a variety of facilities for outdoor recreation. Others require a 4 wheel drive vehicle or hiking up steep hillsides in order to enjoy them.

Common cow-wheat

The plant species common cow-wheat (*Melampyrum pratense*), has now been added to the Icelandic Flora as a wild-growing native flower. No one knows how it got here but Vaglskógur Forest is its only known habitat in the country. Formerly, it was recognised wrongly as the closely related small cow-wheat (*Melampyrum sylvaticum*). Normally in its habitats, the common cow-wheat lives in symbiosis with an ant species of the genus *Formica*. It's far from impossible that this ant is living in Vaglskógur Forest as well, although that remains to be confirmed. The spreading of the plant in the forest indicates the ant's existence. Common cow-wheat is parasitic to several tree species. It is widely spread around the southern part of Vaglskógur Forest, in places forming continuous cover on the forest floor.

Vaglskógur National Forest

The forest of Vaglr in Fnjóskadalur Valley, Vaglskógur Forest, is one of the most frequently visited forest areas in Iceland. The forest land is just about 4.5 square kilometres in size. Each year, thousands of tourists visit the forest, equally for camping as for enjoying outdoor recreation. The forest is great for outdoor activities year round and you will find a variety of walking trails, in all 12.2 kilometres in length. The forest holds several nice camping areas, suitable for tents or caravans alike during the summer.

USE AND ECOLOGY

Birds seek out the forest for food, nesting sites and shelter against predators. Of common bird species worth mentioning are the redwing (*Turdus iliacus*), wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*), snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*), redpoll (*Carduelis flammea*) and rock ptarmigan (*Lagopus mutus*). You can also see, or at least hear, Europe's smallest bird species, the goldcrest (*Regulus regulus*), which in recent years has been colonising Icelandic conifer woods. Many go to Vaglskógur Forest for botanising or mushroom or berry-picking. In Vaglskógur Forest, you will find various kinds of delicious mushrooms such as the birch bolete (*Leccinum scabrum*), larch bolete (*Suillus grevillea*) or Slippery Jack mushroom (*Suillus luteus*). Rock bramble berries (*Rubus saxatilis*) are thriving well on sheltered sunny sites, especially on flowery hills in sparsely grown birchwoods and shrubs.

In Vaglskógur Forest, you will find the only known habitat in the country of the common cow-wheat (*Melampyrum pratense*), as explained below to the left.

HISTORY

Vaglskógur Forest is one of the National Forests in Iceland with the oldest traditions of wood-harvesting. In early 20th Century, the Icelandic state bought the farm Vaglr in Fnjóskadalur Valley of which the forest draws its name. In 1909, the forest was put under protection by law and subsequently, the Icelandic Forest Service began its activities in Vaglr.

No other Icelandic birch forest has been exploited and managed longer than Vaglskógur Forest. Thinning and harvesting has been ongoing since the beginning of activities in 1909. Today, Vaglskógur Forest is one of the tallest growing birchwoods in Iceland and more straight growing trees of downy birch are difficult to find elsewhere in Iceland. Vaglskógur Forest has for centuries been a steady source for first class firewood and that is still the case. The Vaglr birch is characterised by its light-coloured stems. Here, the birch can easily reach well over 10 meters in height and about 150 years in age.

From the start in 1909, about 700,000 seedlings of 26 different tree species have been planted in Vaglskógur Forest and the nearby area of Hálsmeðlar, adjacent to the north. In Vaglskógur Forest you will find the tallest known specimen of downy birch growing naturally in Iceland, about 15 meters tall. The fenced-off land in the area has been expanded twice towards the north since the initial protection of Vaglskógur Forest, first in 1946 and again in 1989. In the former expanded area, birch has been colonising naturally quite fast along with plantations of lodgepole pine and Siberian larch. The youngest area has mostly been planted with Siberian larch which already is yielding thinning wood suitable for fence pole and wood chip production.

In fact, Vaglskógur Forest is part of one of the biggest continuous forest areas in Iceland, reaching from the farm Háls in the north, all the way to the abandoned farm of Sörlastaðir, 25 kilometres to the south in the valley. On the other side of Fnjóská River, birch woods and planted forests have also been expanding fast in recent decades as sheep grazing has been declining and greater emphasis put on afforestation.

Vaglskógur Forest has long been a welcome shelter for camping tourists. History tells of camping and outdoor recreation in the area for more than a century. For a while in the sixties, a small hotel was even run in the forest too, just south of the old Bow Bridge.

"Fnjósk" and "Vaglr"

The name of the valley Fnjóskadalur is derived from the Icelandic noun "fnjóskur" (or hnjóskur), meaning a dry and decaying tree trunk. This toponym gives an idea of how the valley looked when people first arrived there during the age of settlement in Iceland, 1100 years ago. As nature goes, the reasonable tall-growing birch trees died naturally of old age, some of them falling into the river and washing ashore here and there, hence the name, "Valley of decaying trunks".

A rather common name of farmlands in Iceland is "Vaglr", the noun meaning tree trunks serving as horizontal high-beams in buildings, supporting roofs for instance. Places called "Vaglr" are always high in the landscape, providing great view over the surroundings, just as you see the old farmhouse of Vaglr in the upper part of the forest.

Charcoal making and bloomery

Walking in Vaglskógur Forest, you might stumble on to peculiar round knee-deep holes in the ground, about two meters in diameter. These are remnants of an ancient ironmaking tradition here. For centuries, people used bloomery furnaces for smelting iron from iron-rich peatland soil. Much charcoal was needed for the process and the holes were used for the preparation of charcoal from birchwood, abundant in the forest.

The biggest use of charcoal was thus for iron smelting and working. During the first centuries of human settlement in Iceland, charcoal making and iron smelting was an extensive business. Archaeological research suggests that Fnjóskadalur Valley was one of the biggest iron producing areas in Iceland with at least 19 smelting sites found. Iron production in the valley is thought to have reached a total of 500 tonnes during the 200 to 300 year period of massive iron smelting here. Recent research also suggests that the Icelandic iron was high-quality for the time and an important export for the Icelandic economy. But even though other sources of iron in time outcompeted the Icelandic iron business in foreign markets, Icelandic people still needed iron for making all sorts of tools and equipment. Need for charcoal thus remained, also for heating and cooking, sharpening of scythes for hay harvesting, making of horse shoes and more.

This particular practise fuelled the decline of the extensive birch woodlands which are thought to have covered at least a quarter of Iceland before settlement. Grazing animals prevented the birch from regrowing and so Iceland became a treeless land. Charcoal making with the traditional method remained in a few areas where firewood was still available, until the beginning of the 20th century. One of these areas was Vaglskógur Forest.

Fnjóská river

The river Fnjóská is considered the longest direct runoff stream in Iceland, in total running about 117 km to the sea. Its source is in Bleikumýrardreg in the highland area of Sprengisandur, above Bleikumýrardalur Valley, one of the valleys which Fnjóskadalur Valley divides into towards the south.

ARBORETUM

An area above the Forest Service Station has been dedicated to a variety of tree species as a small arboretum. In the area you will find the oldest plantations in Vaglskógur Forest. As you enjoy your walk along the hiking trail running through the place you can read the species names and origins.

Vaglskógur

• Hiking map •



1 cm on the map equals 120 m

Hiking trails

FOREST PATH

Yellow trail – 3.4 km
The walking trail lies parallel to the road through the forest, starting at the southernmost camping area all the way to the old Bow Bridge from 1900. It's partly adjacent to the blue track passing the information and service area and later shortly following the red track by the Sitrjófur "Big Glade" camping area. An easy walk with minimal elevation difference giving a good glimpse of the forest vegetation and surroundings.

VIEWPOINT

Pink trail – 0.9 km
A hiking trail lying uphill from the large parking area following partly a riding path. Returns to the same parking area. Walk through a forest with great diversity. Elevation from lowest to highest point: 35 m.

SHEEPHOUSE CIRCLE

Blue trail – 3.8 km
Walk from the large parking area towards the south following the yellow track at the beginning, partly also a riding path. Towards the southernmost camping area the trail turns left, entering a Sitka spruce plantation dating from 1947. Near you will arrive to the ruins of an old outback sheep house where sheep were kept overnight during the summer. From there, the track continues upwards through the forest, all the way to the old farmhouse of Vaglr, dating from 1912, then descending back to the parking area and finally arriving back at the yellow track. Elevation from lowest to highest point: 110 m.

ARBORETUM CIRCLE

Red trail – 2.1 km
The trail goes along the yellow one from the Sitrjófur camping area, up through a diverse forest to the Forest Service Station all the way to the Arboretum on Furðull ("Fine Hill"). There, planting of introduced tree species began at the turn of the 20th Century. From the Arboretum, the path crosses former eroded grass patches now vegetated to a nice viewpoint overlooking the forest and valley. Then towards the north and down again through a typical Icelandic birch forest and conifer plantations. You will pass a big greenhouse where tree-keeping is carried out, returning to the camping area in Sitrjófur. The trail is quite steep in places. Elevation from lowest to highest point: 60 m.

HÁLSHJÓKUR PEAK

Green trail – 1.8 km
A hiking trail beginning at a parking lot by the old farmhouse of Vaglr continuing all the way to the mountain peak of Hálsbjörk, 627 m above sea level. Elevation is about 60 m from the starting point with considerably steep slopes on the way. On clear days you will enjoy the magnificent mountain view over Fnjóskadalur Valley and surrounding regions, overlooking the mountains of Fnjófsfjall to the west and eastward to the Myvatn Nature Reserve.

RIDING PATH

Through the entire forest, a riding path follows an old road from Hálsmeðlar in the north to the Þlaugabekki camping area. Distance: 4.1 km.

SITKA SPRUCE GROVE

Sitka spruce grove planted in 1947 by a local, Mr. Arnþór Guðmundsson of the nearby farm of Músk.

SHEEP HOUSE RUINS

Ruins of an old outback sheep house dating from the beginning of 20th Century. Beautiful stacked walls of stone.

RYTKA SPRUCE GROVE

Ruins of an old outback sheep house dating from the beginning of 20th Century. Beautiful stacked walls of stone.