

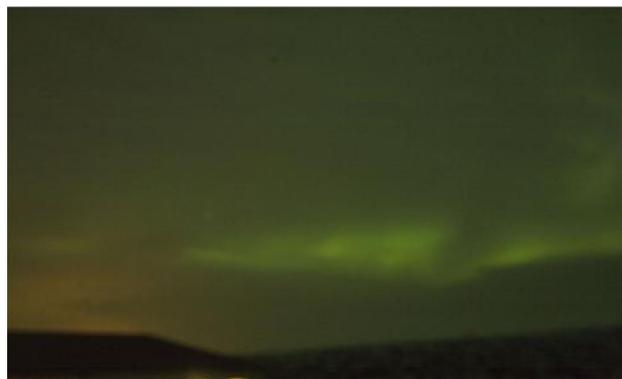
Iceland - Gyr Falcons & the Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour Report

12 -16 March 2010



Gyr Falcon



Aurora Borealis



Naturetrek Group - 2010



Barrow's Goldeneye

Report and images compiled by Malcolm Stott



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Day 1

Friday 12th March

UK to Akureyri

Stunning views of Iceland's southeast coast and the Vatnajökull ice-cap, Europe's largest glacier, confirmed our arrival to these Nordic Shores. Our flight touched-down at Keflavik International Airport on time and we were soon boarding a coach for the 45min transfer to Reykjavik. Our drive across the barren Reykjanes Peninsula, where ancient lava fields covered in grey *Rhacomitrium* moss, perhaps gave a false impression as to Iceland natural beauty and wonderment before we arrived in the northern capital. After a short wait at the city airport we were soon boarding a plane for the 40 minute flight, across an interior dominated by high snow-covered mountain peaks and glaciers, before landing at Akureyri, 'Jewel of the North'. Malcolm soon collected the bus and we travelled the short distance to our city centre hotel. It was 8:00pm by now, so we deposited our luggage in the rooms and headed straight down to the restaurant for supper; a delicious meal of cauliflower soup, fish/beef and a chocolate-cake for desert. After a long day travelling, most of us retired for an early night.

Day 2

Saturday 13th March

Akureyri to Mývatn

We decided to abandon our planned walk this morning, since it was snowing, in favour of some local bird-watching from the comfort of the bus. Stopping frequently around the fjord we managed to see Iceland and Glaucous Gulls, Red-breasted Mergansers and large rafts of Eider Ducks were also present. The early risers even managed to see Long-tailed Ducks near the harbour.

With snow flurries persisting we decided to leave the city and begin the journey north across the uplands. The main road ascended the mountain and the views across the fjord towards the city, cloaked in its white-winter shroud, were spectacular. We enjoyed some wonderful scenery on route before eventually arriving at the beautiful waterfall, Goðafoss.

Having crossing the last high moorland plateau we descended in to the Laugar valley and had time to stop for coffee. Not wishing to waste what little precious time we had in this pristine environment, we passed our farmhouse accommodation and headed straight for Lake Mývatn. We had lunch at Skótustöðir where we watched Icelandic Horses in a ‘Tolting’ competition on the frozen lake!

Although Lake Mývatn was predominantly frozen, the underwater geothermal springs maintained areas of open water along its south-eastern shores. We found many wildfowl, including Barrow’s Goldeneye and a more familiar Common Goldeneye, Salvonian Grebe and Goosanders congregating on these areas. A little further around the lake we had our first sighting of a Gyrfalcon; a male perched on a lava rock close by the road. Although it flew, we did manage to relocate the bird and enjoyed some fantastic views of this, perhaps, the most celebrated of Icelandic birds.

After a brief visit to Dimmuborgir and Rekjahlið, we returned to our farmhouse accommodation where a typically warm Icelandic reception greeted our arrival. Unnstein (our host) explained that the local Women’s Institute would be joining us for supper this evening! With all 85 of them assembled, we took a backseat and enjoyed an evening of Icelandic social etiquette, which proved a raucous evening of merriment, laughter and much singing. Although many of the tunes were familiar, the humorous punchlines to the story-telling completely eluded us! Having dined on a meal of smoked salmon and Icelandic lamb, been entertained by the local WI, we could only retire to dream of celestial delights tonight since the sky was overcast!

Day 3

Sunday 14th March

Húsavík & Mývatn

This morning we travelled down the Laugar Valley, through a spectacular landscape covered by snow and completely frozen, before reaching the coast. We stopped by the bridge, where the River Laxa ends its meandering course and enters the sea, and scanned the open-water in search of Harlequin Ducks. None were evident, although two distant ducks proved to be an ID challenge and caused some debate as to their identity. While our deliberation continued a female Gyrfalcon flew low over our heads giving us some incredible flight views – wow, the stuff of dreams! Having eventually agreed the two ducks were indeed female Wigeon, we continued on to the small picturesque fishing town of Húsavík.

As we descended a narrow cinder-track down to the bay we could see many Iceland Gulls (in various states of plumage) feeding by an outfall pipe. Rafts of Eider Duck were also gathered in the bay, along with good numbers of Long-tailed Ducks. The male Long-tailed Duck were already in breeding plumage, their elongated tail feathers were very obvious as they tried to impress the females. Unfortunately the two Harlequin Ducks seen close to the shore were disturbed by a local walker before everyone manage to have good views of these amazing birds that epitomise Iceland’s turbulent rivers.

Although it was rather chilly, we had lunch down by the harbour and manage to see a Black Guillemot, in its winter plumage, and a large flock of Purple Sandpipers. Before leaving Húsavík we toured the town peering into gardens looking for any passerines that may have been present, but despite our efforts we failed to find the one rarity that was lurking somewhere in town – a Robin! We travelled back to Lake Mývatn via the desolate mountain road, stopping to photograph a small geothermal glasshouse development and the barren, albeit beautiful wilderness landscape, before arriving by the lake’s shores in brilliant sunshine.

Making the most of the fine weather we decided to visit the sulphurous landscape and hissing fumaroles in the geothermal (bubbling mud-pots) area at Hvererönd. Later we ascended Krafla to experience the geothermal power plant and to visit the defunct volcanic crater, Viti. On our return to Narfastaðir we found our second Gyrfalcon of the day, perched near the road, another female but much darker than the one we saw by the bridge this morning.

Following another delightful supper we managed to squeeze-in a bird log while waiting for the 'lights' to be switched on! And right on cue, as the night sky began to darken we were able to witness the ethereal wands of the Aurora Borealis, its dim green arc resembling a veil across the velvet heavens. The display lasted some 40 minutes or so and it was an amazing experience. It definitely had the WOW factor! Back in the warmth of the lounge, Malcolm showed a DVD on the 'Wonders of the Solar System' in which Brian Cox explains the origins behind the 'Northern Lights' phenomena!

Day 4

Monday 15th March

Lake Mývatn & Laxa Valley

This morning we returned to Lake Mývatn and its environs hoping to find Ptarmigan and Snow Buntings. Our first stop was for a walk around the pseudo craters at Skútustöðir, the scenery was truly wonderful, followed by coffee at the nearby hotel. This proved to be an inspirational decision because we found Snow Buntings in full song behind the hotel!

Next we visited the wooded peninsula, Höfði on the shores of the lake. The vegetation structure here would have been representative of an earlier Iceland before grazing densities became an economic factor of farming. Less than 100 metres into the woodland we flushed 4 Ptarmigan. Finally, we had managed to see this surprisingly elusive bird in its snowy-white winter plumage, although the encounter was all too brief for us to truly appreciate this Arctic specialist.

The geological fault at Grijotagja together with its bathing chambers, provide an interest stop for lunch. With both of today's target species under-our-belt, we moved on to the Laxa Valley to try our luck at finding an Arctic Fox and perhaps more Harlequin Ducks. Just outside Rekjahlið Malcolm spotted a Gyrfalcon perched on a lava rock, so we leapt out of the bus (it was stationary at the time!) and spent some time watching the tiercel (female falcon) before she disappeared, last seen in pursuit of a Ptarmigan!

Driving up the Laxa Valley, our eyes searched the distant hills looking for foxes, but despite the valleys remoteness and being one of Iceland's premier salmon fishing rivers it would have proved a chance encounter, since foxes tend to lead a nomadic lifestyle in winter. We didn't manage to find any more Harlequin Ducks either, so we retraced our journey and returned to Narfastaðir full of anticipation of the night ahead.

After supper our anticipation of Northern Lights slowly dwindled with overcast sky. Nevertheless we had the bird log to do and kept a constant check for any signs of celestial manifestations, but the night sky remained obscured by cloud, so we eventually decided to retire to bed in preparation for departure the following morning.

Day 5

Tuesday 16th March

Akureyri to UK

We bid farewell to our hosts Unnstein and Rosa at Narfastaðir and headed back to Akureyri this morning, stopping briefly at Goðafoss before arriving at the northern capital in good time for our flight to Reykjavik and on to the UK.

After some local bird-watching (and mammal watching, since we had an Atlantic Grey Seal) near the airport, we said goodbye to Malcolm, who was staying on to meet a second group, and boarded the plane for our return flight home. This was a very memorable experience for many reasons and the chance to return in summer is a must for most of us!

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Species Lists

Birds

	Common name	Scientific name	March				
			12	13	14	15	16
1	Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>		2		2	
2	Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>					
3	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		1	1		1
4	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus Cygnus</i>	4	5	8	7	8
5	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>					
6	Wigeon	<i>Anas Penelope</i>			2		
7	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya marila</i>					
8	Mallard	<i>A. platyrhynchos</i>					
9	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>					
10	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>			2		
11	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>		2	120		45
12	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>		80	15	18	
13	Common Goldeneye	<i>B. clangula</i>		1	1		3
14	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		7			8
15	Goosander	<i>M. merganser</i>		4	2	5	
16	Gyr Falcon	<i>F. rusticolus</i>		1	2	1	
17	Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus mutus</i>				5	
18	Purple Sandpiper	<i>C. maritime</i>			120		
19	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>					
20	Common Gull	<i>L. canus</i>					
21	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>					
22	Glaucous Gull	<i>L. hyperboreus</i>					
23	Iceland Gull	<i>L. glaucoides</i>					
24	Greater Black-b Gull	<i>L. marinus</i>			4		2
25	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grille</i>		1			
26	Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio capensis</i>		1			
27	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>				2	
28	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>					
29	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>					
30	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>				17	
31	Common Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>				2	12
32	European Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>				2	

Mammals

34	Atlantic Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>					1
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