

# Iceland - Gyr Falcons & Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour Report

17 - 21 March 2010

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Northern Lights



Gyr Falcon



Whooper Swan



Naturetrek clients 2010 and the elusive Arctic Fox!

Report and images compiled by Malcolm Stott

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## Day 1

Wednesday 17th March

### UK to Akureyri

After an uneventful flight and a 45min transfer from Keflavik to the domestic airport in Reykjavik we then boarded the 6:40pm flight to Akureyri. Malcolm was waiting at the northern airport to welcome our arrival. Baggage collected and a short drive to our city centre hotel. It was 8:00pm by now, so just enough time to deposit our luggage in the rooms and head to the restaurant for supper and a short briefing. After dinner most of us retired early in preparation for the days' ahead, while some couldn't resist the temptation of a short walk before bed.

## Day 2

Thursday 18th March

### Akureyri to Mývatn

After a spot of bird-watching by the harbour or, for some, a casual spot of window shopping, we boarded the bus mid-morning for the drive north to Narfastaðir. As we ascended the mountain road it presented some spectacular panoramic views of this northern capital and its' environment. Before too long we were driving through open countryside and the scenery on route was breathtaking; over-night snow gave the landscape a crisp and pristine appearance. We stopped at Goðafoss to view the celebrated waterfall in which Þorgeir, the Lawmaker, cast his Pagan idols after decreeing Christianity as Iceland's new religion in 1000AD.

By mid-day we had arrived at our farmhouse accommodation, Narfastaðir. We unloaded the luggage and even had time for coffee and lunch before unhitching the trailer and heading off to explore the renowned Mývatn. Our first stop was by the River Laxa, to look for Harlequin Duck, produced our first pair of Barrow's Goldeneye, but no Harlequin Ducks. Further along the road we stop by the river bridge and this time we were lucky, a pair of these speciality ducks of Icelandic turbulent rivers during the breeding season had recently arrived back from their wintering haunts along the coast.

Luck was still with us when a large female Gyrfalcon flew low across the road and perched on a hillock providing an opportunity to view the falcon in more detail – marvellous! Whilst most of the lake was frozen, the numerous under-water geo-thermal springs maintained some areas ice-free where rafts of wildfowl congregated, including Barrow's Goldeneye. We also found 4 Slavonian Grebes at later stop. Snow Buntings were plentiful with a flock of up to 60 feeding on the roadside verge. Whooper Swans are one of the earliest migrants to arrive back to these northern breeding grounds and we had soon located our first flock of 130 birds resting on the still snow-covered pastures by the lake. After a brief visit to Dimmuborgir we continued our travels around the lake in an anti-clockwise direction. Before returning to the farmhouse we took a slight detour in search of Ptarmigan, but failed in our attempt to see any of these much sort after birds in their white-winter plumage.

The traditional birdlog followed a delicious fish supper as we eagerly waited for the skies to darken and the 'Northern Lights' to make a grand Celestial appearance. When they did appear it wasn't, perhaps, the grand entrance we had expected and for those who had retired earlier, it became a contorted struggle to dress quickly in to warm clothes and out in to the cold night air to view this phenomenon! Although the snow-laden skies suffused the Aurora Borealis, the lights were clear visible albeit briefly, and of the much rarer pulsating-type.

## Day 3

Friday 19th March

### Húsavík to Mývatn

Today we travelled through a snowy landscape of frozen lakes before reaching the coast and northern fishing harbour with its many colourful boats. First, we had a brief stop by the outlet to the River Laxa, to look for any Harlequin Ducks that may have been present and eventually arrived at the picturesque fishing town of Húsavík. On the outskirts of town we descended a cinder track down to the waters-edge where Iceland and Glaucous Gulls were present feeding by an outfall pipe. We stopped for a while learning the finer identification features between the two 'white-winged' species. Many Eiders Ducks were present in the bay and also a lesser number of Long-tailed Ducks; the males in splendid breeding plumage, with their elongated central tail feathers, and clearly enjoying the attentions of the females. Fulmars were numerous in the harbour and we even managed find a Black Guillemot, which gave excellent views and was still in winter plumage. The weather by now had deteriorated and visibility was poor, so we went into town for coffee and tried a museum but it was closed for refurbishments. We decided to return to Lake Mývatn in the hope of better weather. The return journey took us over the mountain road where we stopped at a geo-thermal farm before it became very snowy and difficult to tell where the landscape ended and the road began - for the first time silence fell on the bus!

Back at the lake we stopped at Höfði, a peaceful wooded peninsula and a rare habitat in Iceland. In the absence of grazing this unique area reflects, perhaps, the presence of native woodland that once dominated the country. During a short walk we managed to find a delightful group of Ptarmigan and trying to describe the precise location of the white birds in a completely white landscape proved quite a challenge! Later we stumbled across another group, accidentally causing the birds to flush from our feet in an explosion of sight and sound! Elated to have had such good views of Ptarmigan we left the tranquillity of Höfði to visit the unsettled landscape of bubbling mud-pots, hissing fumaroles and sulphurous rocks at Hverarönd that could have been from an extraterrestrial world!

Our final journey took us around the south-eastern shores of the lake and produced another Gyrfalcon perched on a roadside overhead power-line; a very fitting end to what had been a very rewarding day!

The birdlog followed supper as we waited and watched for the lights to appear, but sadly the skies were overcast, so we eventually had to admit defeat and retire to the warmth of our beds!

## Day 4

Saturday 20th March

### Laxa Valley & Lake Mývatn

Overnight snow had left an immaculate landscape for our drive to the Laxa Valley this morning in search of the elusive Arctic Fox. This begged the question, how easy would it be to find a secretive white animal in a vast snowy countryside? Not very would be the answer! After a couple of hours drive up and down the remote valley we decided discretion was, perhaps, the better part of valour and headed back to the Lake. Once more the mountain road was covered in snow and ice, so it was a very cautious journey back to Lake Mývatn. After a comfort stop and coffee some group members had the urge to climb the Tefra crater Hverfall, while the rest of us returned to Höfði to try and relocate the Ptarmigan we saw the previous day. After an hour of searching all we managed to locate was a single bird before it was time to return and collect the more energetic half of the group.

We had lunch in the shadow of Hverfall and returned to the village for a comfort stop before resuming bird-watching around the lake and stopping to photograph a group of Icelandic Horses. The winter wonderland took on a fairy-tale quality by mid-afternoon when the clouds finally broke and the sun's embers glowed across the snowy landscape. Although the scenery was breathtaking, we had precious little time left to appreciate all its winter glory before it was time to head back to the farmhouse and start packing!

## Day 5

Sunday 21st March

### Narfastaðir - Keflavik

This morning we arrived at breakfast to the breaking news of a volcanic eruption in the south of Iceland! As a result of the Eyjafjallajökull eruption all airports were closed due to potentially hazardous ash clouds to jet aircraft. With little news as to when normal flights might be resumed we had only one choice, to drive the 556km south to Keflavik, a journey of 6-hours! So, we said our farewells to Unnstein, who had been marvellous during our deliberations this morning, and by 9:30am we departed Narfastaðir. We stopped briefly at Akureyri airport on route, just in case they had any update information on flights, only to be given the news that all flights were grounded until further notice! We had another stop for fuel and we finally left Akureyri to begin the long ascent up the Oxnadalsheiði Valley and over the high snowy mountain-pass. Just north of Blönduós, and making goodtime, Malcolm received news that the London flight had been delayed until 7:00pm; now we had time to relax and take a much more leisurely drive.

We took a break for lunch at Staðarskáli and begin to enjoy the opportunity to see more of Iceland than perhaps we had originally expected and the scenery was spectacular! We eventually arrived in Reykjavik, a vibrant capital, and headed for the modern Perlan restaurant for coffee and some panoramic views across the city. Dropping Mike and Jo off at their Keflavik hotel we continued straight to the airport for our flight to London Heathrow, which by now had been rescheduled for 7:50pm, and an end to a very memorable holiday!

## Species Lists

Birds (H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	March				
			17	18	19	20	21
1	Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>		4			
2	Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓
3	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		3		1	
4	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus Cygnus</i>		130	6	24	12
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>		40	36		
12	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>		100	60	80	
13	Common Goldeneye	<i>B. clangula</i>				1	
14	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		3	1	7	
15	Goosander	<i>M. merganser</i>		3		8	
16	Gyr Falcon	<i>Falco rusticolus</i>		1	1	1	
17	Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus mutus</i>		1	12	1	3
18	Purple Sandpiper	<i>C. maritime</i>		40	1		
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>			1		
25	Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grille</i>			1		
26	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓			✓
27	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
28	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>		60	600	250	
29	Common Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>			H	H	

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