

# Iceland – Gyr Falcons & the Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour report

4 - 8 March 2011

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Gyr Falcon



Harlequin Ducks



Northern Lights Show



Report & Images compiled by Malcolm Stott



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	Julia Dalton
	Peter Jenkins
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	Guy Crossman
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	Derek Coleman
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## Day 1

Friday 4th March

### Weather details: sunshine and temperature 2°C

Clients caught flights from both London and Manchester and were met at Keflavik for a smooth transfer to Reykjavik Domestic Airport for our flight even further north. The journey along the barren Reykjanes Peninsula gave us our first insight into Iceland's violent past; the old lava fields now softened by a vast blanket of grey Rhacomitrum moss. Along the coast the Atlantic swell pounded this relatively new land – well, dinosaurs were extinct before Iceland was formed! Picturesque fishing hamlets, once isolated, now merge to form part of 'greater' Reykjavik. We soon reached the vibrant capital with its houses and rainbow coloured roofs fast disappearing in, perhaps the largest forest in Iceland. This northern capital, its skyline dominant by the impressive Kirk, looked magnificent in the soft evening sunlight.

After a 30 minute delay our internal flight to Akureyri was airborne and we managed to gain some sense of the vast wilderness of the island's interior in the embers of the fading light before our descent into Akureyri. Once our baggage had been collected and loaded onto the bus we had a short drive to our city centre hotel. Having checked into our rooms Malcolm gave a brief introduction of what we might expect in the few days ahead before we enjoyed the culinary delights of our first Icelandic meal.

## Day 2

Saturday 5th March

### Weather details; temperature -6°C, clear sunny start, cloudy from late morning

Over breakfast we watched the sunrise over the steep mountains which were silhouetted against the cerise tinted sky – a marvellous start to our first day in the north! There was time for a post-breakfast stroll to the harbour before we loaded the bus and headed off further north to Lake Myvatn. During the journey our first stop was on the causeway spanning the fjord where we had a nice flock of Long-tail Ducks and some good views of Eiders and Red-breasted Mergansers. Ascending the steep hill we paused briefly in a lay-by to photograph Akureyri 'Jewel of the North' quietly nestling under the snow-covered mountains. During the drive the scenery was spectacular and Godafoss, in its winter coat adorned with icicles was breathtakingly beautiful... Nearing our destination we paused for a coffee in Laugar before arriving at the famous River Laxa where we had really good views of Barrow's Goldeneye.

The Harlequin ducks by the river bridge were a good excuse to stop for lunch and immerse ourselves watching the antics of these turbulent creatures! We had not travelled far before seeing our first Gyr Falcon of the day; an almost pure white female posing on a post by the road and giving everyone an opportunity of enjoying this magnificent and much prized bird! Turning off the main road we drove down a dirt track and found Snow Bunting and a very confiding Ptarmigan that patiently posed on a patch of snow and not intimidated, even when we had to manoeuvre to allow a tractor to pass.

In the village of Reykjahlid we took full advantage of the supermarkets facilities and even bought some treats. The geo-thermally heated springs, which feed the lake on its south-westerly edge, maintain an ice-free zone of open water attracting a congregation of wildfowl. We stopped at one and saw Tufted Ducks, more Barrow's Goldeneye, Red-breasted Mergansers and 3 Goosander, the later often difficult to find, and Malcolm pointed out another Gyr Falcon! We eventually arrived at our hotel by 1600hrs. We had some time for to indulge in a little R&R while the more adventurous decided on a stroll around the pseudo-craters. After another excellent dinner we held the customary bird-log and since the sky was overcast we retired to our rooms to ruminate on the days' events. We couldn't have wished for a better start to this short-break!

## Day 3

Sunday 6th March

Weather details; temperature -5°C with sunny periods and strong cold southerly wind

Breakfast was enjoyed gazing across the lake as the golden hues of another brilliant sunrise saturated the landscape and for some early participants, watching the life or death drama of a Ptarmigan. The said bird flew twisting and turning as it was pursued by a very hungry (not to say determined) Gyr Falcon. Albeit a sad outcome for the falcon, the Ptarmigan escaped much to the merriment of all on-lookers!

This morning we left the hotel in glorious sunshine to enjoy the stunning scenery on our quest to find the most celebrated of all Iceland's birds, the Gyr Falcon. We didn't have to wait long, just 5km down the road we rewarded with excellent views of another female hunting low beside the road. After a while she flew and perched on a prominent rock, but sadly for us it only offered views in silhouetted against the strong, low sunlight.

Next we visited the weird and wonderful lava formations at Dimmuborgir. Although the paths were very icy, we did manage a short walk before enjoying the warmth of the sun's rays from inside the coffee shop and buying the odd souvenir. Not satisfied with two Gyr Falcons we continued onto Grijotagja to visit the rift and look for more of these imperial birds before experiencing the sulphurous smells, hissing steam fumaroles and boiling mud pots at the strange, otherworldly, landscape at Namafjall. We attempted to visit Viti, the explosion crater, but just past the new geo-thermal energy plant the road was impassable due to snow and ice. Returning to the lake we then retraced our journey back to the hotel, scanning every post, pole and rock for evidence of more falcons. With no sign of any raptors we decided to go back for another look at the Harlequins before returning to the hotel in plenty of time for supper and since the sky was clear, to ready ourselves should the Northern Lights appear this evening.

After supper the weather held and we were quietly optimistic as we disappeared to our rooms to put on some warm clothing before walking the short distance across the road for our evening vigil. We didn't have to wait long before auroral light was clearly evident in the night sky. The 'green' light of the Aurora Borealis evolved and changed constantly. The illuminations intensified, first forming an arc across the inky-blue sky then a second arc appeared beneath the original, before simultaneous and large-scale transformation started happening along the auroral axis.

First we experienced many parallel rays of light, mainly green with reds and pinks towards the ends, then folds, bends and swirls appeared in a curtain before the whole structure appeared animated, moving fast! On this occasion the display lasted a mesmerising 90 minutes. By 2300hrs we retired in nocturnal bliss, feeling very privileged, if a little cold, to have experienced such a fascinating natural phenomena!

## Day 4

Monday 7th March

Weather details; temperatures - 7°C a lovely crisp sunny day with occasional snow flurries

Breakfast watching a glorious sunrise is becoming the norm. We left the hotel this morning and travelled across sand and stone deserts, the training ground for the Apollo crew prior to their epic moon-landing, before stopping to photograph the geo-thermally heated glasshouses on route to Husavik. On the outskirts of this picturesque northern fishing town we turned off the main road and headed down a track to where some Arctic Gulls were feeding by an outfall pipe. This provided an ideal opportunity to get to grips with identifying the subtle difference between Glaucous and Iceland Gulls. The light was perfect allowing some stunning photography before we visited the harbour and another outflow pipe by the fish factory where a marauding flock of gulls and many ducks squabbled over a meal. We had further stops before coffee and a visit to the Culture House Museum before taking lunch by the outer harbour wall where we scanned the sea for King Eiders. We were lucky, finding a first-winter male and an adult female before it was time to return to the environs of Myvatn.

For some, despite the icy-cold wind, a chance to climb the height and walk the rim of the huge explosion crater Hverfjall which dominates the Myvatn landscape and, perhaps the largest of its kind on the planet. The rest of us enjoyed a short walk along the wooded peninsula Hofdi and found even more Ptarmigan and a small flock of Redpoll. As we returned to the hotel late afternoon the sky was clear, albeit threatening snow-flurries, so we were very optimistic for another display of the Northern Lights this evening.

Malcolm held a pre-dinner 'photography surgery' on camera technique enabling us to optimise any opportunity of capturing the Northern Lights should we be lucky enough to see them again this evening. By the time we were outside after dinner there were already signs of celestial activity. We were blessed with another stunning showing of the Aurora and quite different from that of the previous night. This evening it appeared much calmer, long isolated wisps of green veils and moving blankets of the most amazing colours with many parallel rays of red light reaching high into a very starry night-sky. Another wonderful experience which will last a life-time! By 2330hrs we had all retreated to our rooms to pack for an early start the following morning with the Northern Lights still very much evident.

## Day 5

Tuesday 8th March

Weather details; temperature -6°C heavy overnight snow

...I eventually retired to bed at 0200hrs and auroral light was still illuminating the night-sky. At breakfast Ed reported watching the Northern Lights at 0330hrs, which means a display lasting at least 7 hours, unbelievable!

Early breakfast prior to our departure and instead of the customary sunrise this morning a blanket of overnight snow gave us a truly 'winter wonderland' landscape! We left the hotel at 0745hrs for our journey to Akureyri and our flight south to Reykjavik.

The scenery on route was spectacular, everywhere covered in a pristine blanket of white, even the road! The flight was on time and we landed in the snow-bound city of Reykjavik, where people were going about their business as normal as we boarded our waiting bus for a city tour. Our first stop was the very impressive Perlan, where some took full-advantage of the book-fare to buy copies of the 'Birds of Iceland' by Hjalmar Barðarson at hugely discounted prices! Next we visited the Hallgrímskirkja, the church that dominates the Reykjavik sky-line before a ride through the city centre and finally onto Keflavik.

We briefly stopped at the hotel where some of us would overnight before catching a flight to Manchester the following morning before arriving at Keflavik International Airport. We were early and the check-in hall was almost deserted, a very unusual scene. Once in the departure lounge there was plenty of time for some serious retail therapy for the ladies before boarding our flight back to the UK. On arrival at Heathrow we collected our baggage, said our farewells and melted into the crowds for our onward journeys home.

Although our time in Iceland was all too brief, the memories of stunning close-up views of Gyr Falcons, Barrow's Goldeneye, Harlequins and the incredible mesmerising experience of the Northern Lights will last a life-time!

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## Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded)

	Common name	Scientific name	March				
			4	5	6	7	8
1	Great-northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>				1	
2	Fulmar	<i>Fulmaris glacialis</i>		50		60	
3	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		1		1	
4	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus Cygnus</i>	7	12	15	2	✓
5	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	50				✓
6	Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>	1				
7	Wigeon	<i>Anas Penelope</i>	10			3	
8	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		11			✓
10	Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>					2
11	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	6	350		✓	✓
12	King Eider	<i>Somateria spectabilis</i>				2	
13	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>		7	7	7	
14	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyernalis</i>		40		30	
15	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>		30	20	10	2
16	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		10	1	12	
17	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		6			
18	Gyr Falcon	<i>Falco rusticolus</i>		2	2		
19	Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus mutus</i>		1	6	9	
20	Redshank	<i>Tringa tetanus</i>		3			
21	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>		6		40	✓
22	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		1		2	
23	Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>				1	
24	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		200		50	
25	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>		4		12	1
26	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>				24	
27	Greater Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		2		1	
28	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>				2	
29	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columbia livia</i>	3				
30	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		1			
31	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	1				
32	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>					✓
33	Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>				12	1
34	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	5		✓
35	Raven	<i>Corvus corvus</i>	✓	✓		12	✓
36	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>		1	10	15	25