

Iceland – Gyr Falcons & the Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour report

17 - 21 March 2012



Aurora Borealis

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Introduction

The northern lights are elementary particle physics, superstition, mythology and folklore come to life. Throughout the ages they have filled people with wonder and fear; they have challenged and inspired scientists and artists. But while scientific knowledge of the 21st century may offer us a cold and precise explanation of this magnificent phenomenon, we should never cease to relish the fascinating tales of old and enjoy the natural beauty and magic of the northern lights.

To be lucky enough to see the aurora is an unforgettable experience, since no pen can draw it, no colours can paint it and no words can adequately describe it in all its magnificence. Auroras are caused by a vast super-heated, super-sonic collection of smashed atoms, known as the solar wind that enters the earth's upper atmosphere where they collide with oxygen and nitrogen atoms. These collisions usually take place between 60 – 300 kilometres above ground, causing the oxygen and nitrogen atoms to become electrically excited and to emit light (fluorescent lights and televisions operate in much the same way). The result is a dazzling dance of green, blue, white and red light in the sky, but seeing the aurora borealis on any given night is never guaranteed.

Day 1

Saturday 17th March

Weather details: clear with sunshine, night temperature down to -8°C

The group assembled late morning at Heathrow for the 3-hour flight to Iceland. We descended through grey, murky clouds to land in a winter wonderland landscape at Keflavik International airport at 4:10pm. Customs cleared and baggage retrieved we were soon aboard our transfer coach to Reykjavik Domestic airport for the internal flight north to Akureyri.

With time to spare Malcolm persuaded the coach driver to take a small diversion through the picturesque fishing port of Halfnafjordur, now part of Greater Reykjavik, and make a visit to Bessastaðir, the Presidential residence, before we eventually arrived at the city airport. With only a minor delay we were soon on board the aircraft for the short 40min flight to Akureyri, 'Jewel of the North'. We landed on schedule and were soon driving the short distance to our town centre hotel. It was 8.30pm by the time we had checked into the comfortable hotel and wasting little time we quickly found our way to the restaurant, where Malcolm gave a brief introduction of what we might expect in the few days ahead.

The evening meal was traditional Icelandic cuisine of smoked lamb, salt-fish and apple tart, scrumptious! It was approaching 11:00pm by the time we had finished, so Malcolm suggested a quick walk down to the harbour to get some fresh air and chance our luck with the northern lights tonight, and we were not disappointed. Within just a few minutes wands of vivid green celestial light danced across the night-sky, much to our delight. We watched the light show for some 30 minutes before returning to the hotel and a nice warm bed, tired and contented, yet still full of expectations of the days ahead.

Day 2

Sunday 18th March

Weather details; glorious sunshine all day, night temperature down to -10°C

After a good night's sleep we were full of optimism this morning, helped by the strong sunlight streaming through our bedroom windows. Breakfast was almost a banquet followed by a leisurely stroll through the sun-kissed streets to walk off a few of the calories. Bird-watching down by the harbour produced large flocks of white-winged gulls, both Glaucous and Iceland Gulls were present.

The weather was glorious and by 11:00am we set off on our onward journey to Lake Mývatn. Leaving the bright city behind we drove across the causeway that spanned the fjord and ascended the mountain road. We paused in a lay-by to photograph the city nestled beneath the snow-covered mountains and bathed in warm sunlight, before continuing our journey through a frozen landscape of breathtaking beauty. We made several stops in an attempt to capture its magnificence on memory cards before eventually arriving at the spectacular Goðafoss. The waterfall was beautiful, encrusted with icicles and the misty spray, with the sun shining through, gave the impression of a golden halo interwoven with rainbow threads; a truly wonderful experience.

Once we had crossed the snowy mountain plateau and descended into the Laugar Valley we had our first encounter with the magnificent Gyr Falcon. This female falcon was undeterred by our interest in her as she sat on a grassy tussock enjoying the warmth of the sun only a few metres from the road. The views of this much sort after falcon were exceptional and we felt very privilege and lucky!

Located in the heart of north-east Iceland about 100km/65 miles south of the Arctic Circle, Lake Mývatn and its surroundings are one of Europe's greatest natural treasures. Shaped by repeated volcanic eruptions and seismic activity down through the ages, the landscape around the 36km² lake is a spectacular panorama of surreal lava, crater and cave formations, sulphur-streaked mountains, and sweeping wetlands. The journey took about 2-hours before we finally arrived by the prestigious River Laxá where we paused to admire the handsome Barrow's Goldeneye that were dotted along its turbulent waters.

After a brief comfort stop at the hotel we continued on a familiarisation tour of the lake to make the most of the glorious sunny weather. We stopped by the wooded peninsula at Hofði and strolled through the birch woods in search of Ptarmigan. We saw plenty of evidence as to their presence and many tracks of Arctic Fox before inadvertently flushing 3 birds and not everyone managed to see them! We returned to the hotel at 4:45pm in plenty of time to rest and relax before supper. Dinner was superb and started with a Lake Mývatn speciality; Arctic Char. As we dined high-cloud started to obscure the night-sky and with little prospect of seeing the aurora tonight we decided to retire early.

Day 3

Monday 19th March

Weather details; overcast, light-rain, strong cold southerly wind and temperatures -2°C

This morning we made a decision to head off to the coast and visit Húsavík, as much to find better weather as to find Harlequin and Long-tail Duck. Soon after leaving the hotel, just beyond the River Laxá bridge, we encountered the first Gyr Falcon of the day when it flew across the road.

Leaving the shores of the lake we drove through some high country, following a thin ribbon of black cinder that sliced through the vast snow fields framed by distant mountain peaks. On the outskirts of the town we turned off the main road and headed down a track towards the sea where many Iceland and Glaucous Gulls had gathered to feed by an outlet pipe. Although a few Long-tailed Ducks and Eiders were present on the sea, we couldn't find any Harlequins. Our next stop was by the effluent outfall from the fish processing plant that provided some wonderfully close views of Fulmars, Iceland Gulls and Eiders, but still no Harlequins. Next we drove around the picturesque harbour eventually ending on the outer sea-wall where Malcolm found a female King Eider, but there were still no evidence of Harlequins!

After a pleasant walk round town we had lunch by the inner harbour before visiting the Culture House Museum. The museum was a charming and delightful experience of a bygone era in Icelandic history. We left this once important fishing community at 3:00pm on our return journey, but instead of taking the mountain road we travelled along the coast, in a vain hope of seeing the elusive Harlequins, before heading inland up the Laugar Valley. Although the wind had increased in strength, the day remained bright and sunny and the scenery looked stunningly beautiful.

On reaching the River Laxá we cautiously approached a nearby group of Barrows Goldeneye only to find another Gyr Falcon perched on a post and showing just as much interest in them! The light conditions were perfect and we recognised our good fortune to be able to sit and watch such a magnificent bird at very close quarters for a second day in succession!

The weather forecast for this evening looked more encouraging, so after another excellent supper we prepared to wait until the cloud had dispersed before venturing out to look for the northern lights. By 9:15pm the cloud had lifted and the northern lights duly began their dance with the stars! Wow, this was truly spectacular and mesmerizing; green, red and violet streaks hanging curtain-like and moving as if on a breeze! No words can adequately describe this phenomenon, we considered ourselves very fortunate to experience the aurora for a second night! We retired tired, but happy and very contented!

Day 4

Tuesday 20th March

Weather details; temperatures Crisp and sunny day with temperatures -2⁰C

Today was spent enjoying the lake and its environment and we started by visiting the River Laxá in search of the elusive Harlequins, again without much success! Obviously, for whatever reason, their arrival to the breeding grounds was very late this spring.

A rather handsome male Goosander flew close to the road as we passed on our way to the Hverfjall crater. Turning off the main road we proceeded down a cinder track, but we were soon halted by a very deep snow-drift. With little room to manoeuvre the bus we had no choice but to abandon the planned walk around the crater rim this morning. Instead we revisited Hofði in search of more Ptarmigan. The walk was invigorating and we did managed to find Redpoll and heard a Wren singing, but alas no Ptarmigan on this occasion!

After a brief stop at the supermarket and Tourist Information Centre, we headed back out into the countryside to visit a high temperature zone. The Namaskardi area consists, without doubt, one of the most surreal scenarios on the island and is part of the Namafjall fissure, active proof of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge below, the opposing and contrasting forces of which tend to separate the two tectonic plates that form Iceland at a rate of a few millimetres per year. This area was certainly most unusual, the terrain being dotted with numerous holes of gurgling, bubbling grey mud and hissing, steaming fumaroles, typical manifestations of secondary volcanism. These infernal cauldrons, supplied by surface water that filters into the ground are heated by the molten rock beneath through deep fissures in the earth's crust, take one's imagination back in time, to the very creation of the universe; paradoxically Iceland is a land which has been formed in very recent, geologically speaking, times. The claggy-mud stuck to our boots, necessitating some vigorous rubbing in snow to rid the worst of it before Malcolm would even consider allowing us back inside the bus!

We had lunch by the tiny airstrip above the village of Rekjahilð, from this vantage point we scanned the landscape for Ptarmigan, but only found a car almost buried in snow. By this point we were getting desperate to find Harlequins, so we headed back to the River Laxá. On the drive we saw another, our fourth, Gyr Falcon perched reasonable close to the road on some lava; this bird, another female, appeared much darker than those previously observed. Although we couldn't find any Harlequins, the Barrows Goldeneye that were beginning to gather in some numbers on the ice-free areas of the lake and their courtship display made such a wonderful sight. On returning to the hotel the 'Cowshed Cafe' was a must stop en-route to taste the local chocolate cake and here we made some new friends! The increase in air temperature during the day saw the landscape beginning to emerge from beneath its blanket of snow, adding a splash of colour to an otherwise winter wonderland.

We eventually arrived back at the hotel about 5:00pm, in plenty of time for a short rest before dinner and another late night vigilance waiting for the aurora to appear. Despite high cloud-cover developing during the early evening, we remained very optimistic that we would see more northern lights tonight, even if it meant waiting until midnight before the skies would clear. Then suddenly cries of 'the lights are showing' reverberated throughout the hotel at about 9:30pm, so we quickly dressed in our warm clothing, grabbed our cameras and dashed out into the cold night air. Yes, there was a faint arc discernable in the inky-black sky, but no stars were visible, could this be a figment of some ones imagination? Although we waited patiently until 11:00pm, no further sign of the lights occurred so most of us retired in preparation of an early start the following morning.

Day 5

Wednesday 21st March

Weather details; bright with temperature 8°C

The alarm sounded at 5:45am this morning, was it really time to get up? Cases packed and deposited in the entrance lobby for Malcolm to load the bus we had an early breakfast. We departed the hotel, leaving the lake and the mysterious Harlequins until our next visit, and travelled through a new landscape awakening from its winter slumber en-route to Akureyri.

The flight south was rather turbulent initially, but nevertheless we arrived in Reykjavik in one piece and on schedule. With only 2-hours to spare there was little time for sightseeing or retail therapy before we were back on the transfer coach and heading to Keflavik International airport. Check-in was quiet, so we bade our farewells to Malcolm and continued through to the departure lounge.

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

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Gyr Falcon



Goldeneye

Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted; h = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	March				
			17	18	19	20	21
1	Great-northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>					
2	Fulmar	<i>Fulmaris glacialis</i>			30		✓
3	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		1			
4	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus Cygnus</i>	25	7	20	3	✓
5	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	50	12			✓
6	Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>					
7	Wigeon	<i>Anas Penelope</i>					
8	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	1				✓
10	Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>					
11	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓
12	King Eider	<i>Somateria spectabilis</i>			1		
13	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>					
14	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyernalis</i>			12		
15	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>		10	20	250	✓
16	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	2	6			2
17	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>				1	
18	Gyr Falcon	<i>Falco rusticolus</i>		1	2	2	
19	Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus mutus</i>		3			
20	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>					3
21	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>					
22	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>			3		✓
23	Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>			30		
24	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓
25	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>	✓	60	6		2
26	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>		12	24		4
27	Greater Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>			1		
28	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>					1
29	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columbia livia</i>					
30	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>				H	
31	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>					
32	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>					✓
33	Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>				2	
34	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		6			✓
35	Raven	<i>Corvus corvus</i>	3	4	12	2	30
36	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>		500	30	300	10