

Iceland – Gyr Falcons & the Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour report

21 - 25 March 2012



Northern Lights, dancing with the stars!

Report compiled by Malcolm Stott
Images courtesy Phil Piper



Naturetrek Cheriton Mill Cheriton Alresford Hampshire SO24 0NG England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour leaders: Malcolm Stott

Participants:

Trudy Seagon
Janet Seagon
Donna Goodchild
Phil Piper
Sheila March
Sheila Palmer
Stephen Woodham
Charles Jones
Michael Ball
Wendy Ball
Alan Davis
Susan Gubbay
Annette Beardsley
Sheila Elliott

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, supersonic 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

Wednesday 21st March

Weather details: sunshine and temperature 2°C

After a long delay parked on the tarmac at Heathrow we eventually descend into the bright sunshine at Keflavik International airport where Malcolm was waiting to greet us. Once on board the transfer coach we travelled along the barren Reykjanes Peninsula; its rugged landscape of ancient lava fields, softened by centuries old grey moss, and an impressive coastline, where the Atlantic's white rollers crash onto black lava sands.

Once we arrived at Reykjavik's Domestic airport we didn't have long to wait before the flight north to Akureyri. Luggage collected and loaded on board the bus for the 10 minute drive to our city centre hotel where we had plenty of time to settle into our cosy rooms before dinner and our first introduction to the Icelandic cuisine. The meal was traditional, delicious smoked lamb starter, followed by salt-fish and a cinnamon dessert. Malcolm gave a briefing after which we all disappeared to our rooms to organise ourselves in readiness for a night excursion 'chasing the lights'.

We travelled about 30km out of town to escape serious light pollution and found inky-black skies in the Drafalastadir Valley. We didn't have to wait too long before the sky glowed with green auroral light. Although the northern lights were certainly evident, the activity level was low giving the appearance of a ghostly shadow; weak and brief. Excited with our first experience of the celestial phenomenon we returned to Akureyri arriving in the warmth of the hotel room by 01:45am for a well-earned night's sleep.

Day 2

Thursday 22nd March

Weather details: Overcast with occasional light snow, clearing late evening temp -1°C

After breakfast there was time for a leisurely stroll around this northern 'Jewel' before loading the bus and departing from the hotel at 11:00am bound for Lake Mývatn. On crossing the causeway across the Eyjafjordur we paused briefly to look at a flock of white-wing gulls. Both Glaucous and Iceland Gulls were present which gave a good comparison to see the subtle differences in head profiles and sizes. Ascending the mountain road, repeating our journey of the previous evening, we had a great panoramic view of Akureyri below.

We travelled on to Goðafoss, through some amazing scenery, high snow-covered mountains and remnants of birch forest, once extensive throughout Iceland, and rivers frozen in time. By the time we had reached the waterfall light snow-flurries added to the atmosphere and Goðafoss looked beautiful in her winter dress adorned with some very impressive icicles. Continuing our journey over high snow-covered plateaus we eventually had our first view of the Lake Mývatn and its outfall, the River Laxá.

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. We stopped for our picnic lunch by the bridge where we enjoyed the company of the handsome Barrow's Goldeneye, but we found no presence of Harlequins, that is until a male duck suddenly appeared out of a distant cataract to be joined by a female – a truly marvellous feeling to see your first Harlequin in its blue livery with chestnut flanks and white streaks!

A brief comfort stop at the hotel followed before we continued on an anti-clockwise drive around the lake arriving back at the hotel in plenty of time to unpack, relax or enjoy a brief walk. Malcolm gave a pre-dinner explanation of the physics behind the northern lights phenomena and checked to make doubly sure we were all happy with taking images of the northern lights. After dinner we chatted and waited for the cloud-cover to disperse before going to our room to dress into warm clothing and head outside to witness the aurora.

Although the northern lights were discernable their ghostly appearance was initially very weak, but by 11:30pm the sky was completely clear and the aurora was extensive throughout the star-studded night-sky, with two or three really vivid displays – wow, this is what we came to see! By 1:00am the skies had calmed and so we retired to bed contented and to dream about more northern lights.

Day 3

Friday 23rd March

Weather details; Overcast am, sunny periods pm, clear skies evening, temperate -2°C

Following a leisurely breakfast we departed the hotel at 10:30am this morning for an excursion to Húsvík. Leaving the frozen shores of the lake we travelled across a barren, desolate landscape hidden beneath a carpet of snow. Allegedly the area was used by NASA and the Apollo crew to simulate a moon landing. On the outskirts of town we turned off the main road and descend a cinder track to the coast. We stopped by an effluent outfall pipe where a few Glaucous and Iceland Gulls were gathered before visiting the waste outfall from the fish processing factory. There were many Fulmars, various gulls and ducks, including a female King Eider (or should that be Queen Eider?) feeding very close to the seawall and providing an opportunity for photography.

Next we had a tour around the harbour looking for Harlequins and Black Guillemots and saw neither, but did manage some wonderful views of Long-tailed Ducks. After our picnic lunch some decided to spend the afternoon birdwatching/photography by the picturesque harbour while Malcolm took the rest to visit the Culture House Museum. We reassembled at 3:30pm and travelled back to Lake Mývatn via the Laugar Valley, stopping briefly by the mouth of the River Laxá to search for the elusive Harlequins, but failed to find any. We did, however, manage to see 2 Goosanders on the river which were new species for the tour.

Back at Mývatn we stopped briefly to take photographs of the lake and its outflow river, followed by a slow drive alongside the river and a diversion to the bridge looking for Harlequin that had so far managed to elude us, before returning to the hotel.

After supper we returned to our rooms, dressed in warm clothing before venturing outside. Although the aurora was clearly discernable in the northern sky from 10:00pm onwards it was low energy emissions, virtually invisible to the naked eye, but on camera showed as reds and yellow flares. By 01:00am most people had retired to the warmth of their room, when the northern lights suddenly erupted with high energy, the result lasted about 10 minutes and, for those who witnessed it, was a spectacular display. Sheets of vivid colours arced through the starry-sky, pulsating and swirling to fall in colourful curtains. This is exactly what we had hoped for and now having experienced it, we retired with a feeling of nocturnal bliss, very privileged to have seen such a fascinating natural phenomena!

Day 4

Saturday 24th March

Weather details; beautiful sunny day with temperatures reaching +8°C

The golden hues of a sunny day greeted us at breakfast this morning and after a walk to the pseudo craters we boarded the bus to enjoy our last day in this beautiful environment. Our priority species today were Gyr Falcon, Ptarmigan and Harlequin, with emphasis on the former species. First we revisited the River Laxá in search of Gyr Falcon and Harlequin Duck without much success.

Continuing our journey round the lake's shore we scanned every fence post, electric pole and prominent rock looking for the elusive Gyr Falcon with little joy. So we changed our tactics and quarry and headed for the idyllic birch wood peninsula of Hofði to try our luck with Ptarmigan. This proved more successful and having located a small covey of birds we were able to approach within reasonable distance while the birds, still in full winter plumage, sat camouflaged against the snow.

The weather was warm and sunny, the scenery amazing with erect lava columns rising from the azure blue waters and distant views of a wintery landscape. During the walk we also added Redpoll and Wren to the bird list before having lunch at Dimmuborgie. Malcolm specifically chose this site for two reasons, the first because it happened to lookout over 2 Gyr Falcon territories and as a potential location for watching the northern lights this evening. We had our picnic lunch while scanning the weird and wonderful landscape of lava structures attempting to locate any birds that may have been perched enjoying the warmth of the sun's rays, but sadly we again drew a blank! Given that we were in the most densely populated region, anywhere in the world, of Gyr Falcon, we were incredibly unlucky not to have seen a bird!

The high temperature area was unlike any other landscape we had visited. The Namaskard 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.

Before we were allowed out onto this unique landscape, Malcolm insisted on fitting plastic bags to our boots, not because the mud was acidic or that the claggy-earth might soil our clothes, more to do with keeping the bus clean! While the bathers amongst us relaxed in the therapeutic waters of the 'Blue Lagoon', we continued in our quest to find Gyr Falcon. We circumnavigated the lake checking and re-checking all the perches/plucking posts known to Malcolm, but for some unexplainable reason they still managed to elude us! A newly arrived group of Whooper Swans grazing on the defrosting meadows provided a welcome photographic opportunity before it was time to return and collect the bathers from the effluence of the power-plant, aka the 'Blue Lagoon'! We arrived back at the hotel at 5:30pm in time to pack before an early supper and our last evening to witness the northern lights at Dimmuborgie.

The site at Dimmuborgie was ideal, providing extensive view across the lake and maximising the vista of the night sky. Although the night-sky was initially overcast, it had cleared by 11:00pm and the stars, Venus in particular, shone brightly. We stood and watched with some excitement as the aurora started to develop. It was calm at first with the suffused light slowly spreading across the night-sky, then it became much more intense and wands of green rays stretched into the darkness before fading only to appear again elsewhere in the sky. Perhaps not the dramatic burst of high energy some of us witnessed on the previous night nevertheless it was a spectacular display of northern lights. Once the skies had calmed again, at around 01:00am, we returned to the hotel for some to sleep while others were captivated by this natural phenomenon.

Day 5

Sunday 25th March

Weather details; Overcast with temperatures of +8°C

The wake-up alarm sounded all too soon this morning. 06:30am cases all packed and left in reception for Malcolm to load while talk over breakfast was still focused on the northern lights. Once on the road our journey to Akureyri was uneventful and we were in plenty of time for our flight south to Reykjavik. A slight hiccup caused a delay at the airport waiting for the transfer coach, but when it did arrive we still had time to visit the new church that dominates the city skyline. At Keflavik International airport we bade farewell to Malcolm, who had it all to do again, before disappearing into the departures lounge for our onward flight to the UK.

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

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Whooper swans

Species Lists

Birds (h = heard only)

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