

# Iceland – Gyr Falcons & the Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour report

25 - 29 March 2012



Northern Lights & Hotel Sel



Harlequin Duck

Report compiled by Malcolm Stott  
Images courtesy of Weng & Eileen Lim



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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 21<sup>st</sup> 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

**Sunday 25th March**

Weather details: Bright and breezy temperature 9°C

The flight touched down at Keflavik International Airport on time and Malcolm was waiting our arrival. The 50min transfer into Reykjavik took us along the barren Reykjanes Peninsula, through ancient lava fields softened by centuries old Rhacomitrum moss, before reaching the vibrant city centre. We had 3-hours to enjoy this northern capital, visiting the harbour, admiring the new opera house or simply gazing through shop windows before walking to the church that dominates the Reykjavik skyline. Back on board the coach it was just a 5 minutes journey to the Domestic airport.

The flight north to Akureyri took 40 minutes where we had a smooth transfer to our city centre hotel and a delicious dinner awaiting our arrival. Malcolm gave a brief introduction and after supper we had a short walk to the harbour for some instruction on photographing the northern lights. Although light pollution from the city was very noticeable, it was helpful when we did see a little auroral light in separating the two. By 01:00am we had all retired to our rooms, some to gaze through their windows just in case the lights did put in an appearance, others to fall into a deep sleep after a busy day of travel...

## Day 2

Monday 26th March

Weather details; Overcast am, sunny with strong winds pm, temperature 6°C.

After a leisurely post-breakfast stroll around town and a visit to the harbour we loaded the bus and were on our way by 11:00am. This morning we travelled through a changing landscape where winter was reluctantly loosening its grip on the countryside. The blanket of snow now reduced to a patchwork revealed a mosaic of colourful hues; vivid greens of mosses, russet tones of dwarf shrubs and black lava encrusted with splashed of orange lichens were once more beginning to dominate a new spring landscape.

We stopped at Goðafoss to enjoy this spectacular waterfall before arriving at the River Laxá and seeing Barrow's Goldeneye. 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 36km<sup>2</sup> lake is a spectacular panorama of surreal lava, crater and cave formations, sulphur-streaked mountains, and sweeping wetlands. We had a picnic lunch by the river bridge where we saw our first Harlequin; we were delighted to find this most handsome duck. After a brief comfort stop at the hotel we continued on a journey circumnavigating the lake to familiarise ourselves with this prestigious environment. The low cloud had lifted by the afternoon and the scenery was awash with beautiful sunlight, it felt like spring had arrived to the frozen lake. We ended up back at the River Laxa and making the most of the exceptional light we had panoramic views overlooking this important conservation site.

At the hotel we unpacked and made preparations for our first experience of the northern lights. After a delicious dinner we left the hotel at 9:00pm and drove the short distance to Dimmuborgie, its elevated position gave extensive views across the landscape and a big sky to capture the aurora. We didn't have a long wait before it all started to happen at 10:15pm. Auroral light soon filled the inky-black sky with a green tinge and cyber-like rays of magenta, red and yellows danced amongst the stars. To witness an aurora is always very special and this experience will surely last a life-time!

## Day 3

Tuesday 27th March

Weather details; bright & sunny with very strong SE winds, temperature 6°C.

The breakfast room was disrupted this morning when a Gyr Falcon was observed from the window, giving a great show for all those present! Once on board the bus we returned to the River Laxá and from there we took a leisurely drive around the southern-shores of the lake in search of more Gyr Falcons. The erratic contours of Lake Mývatn extend over a vast lava plain and in some parts small islets of brightly-coloured, bizarre-shaped volcanic columns rise from the placid waters and have stimulated numerous legends. Perhaps the best area is seen from Hofði, where we took a pre-lunch stroll.

Walking through the birch woods we managed to find Ptarmigan, which were very obliging and allowed a very close approach as they pecked birch seeds off the snow. Later we saw more, but not as close. We had an enjoyable walk, the light was exquisite and the landscape compelling to the photographers eye. We also managed to add Redpoll and Wren to the bird-list this morning.

Lunch was by the fissure at Grjotagja before visiting the 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. 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 soiling our clothes more to do with keeping the bus clean!

Leaving the otherworldly landscape behind we continued on our quest to find Iceland's most iconic bird during a drive back towards the River Laxá, checking every post, pole and prominent rocks of lava with little success. Retracing our route back to the hotel we saw a large white falcon flying low, so we followed as best we could until the bird was thought to have perched some distance away. We arrived at the location where it was last seen, but despite extensive searching we could not re-find the falcon, it had disappeared into thin air!

Returning to the hotel Malcolm briefly took us on a familiarisation visit to the observation point where we would be watching the northern lights tonight. Following another delicious meal and the bird-log we headed to our rooms and collected warm clothing and our cameras before going into the cold night air. By the time we had walked across the road to the observation point the celestial lights were very obvious. Green cyber-like rays arced through the inky-black velvet sky where colourful curtains of magenta, red and yellow shimmered. Wow, this was really something very special and much more extensive than the previous night. The whole night-sky was alive with auroral colours, a truly magical moment and one to cherish for a lifetime! The light show continued until about 01:30am, by which time most had retired in nocturnal bliss, happy and very contented to have experienced such a fascinating natural phenomenon!

## Day 4

**Wednesday 28th March**

Weather details; overcast with strong SE winds, temperatures 4°C

Bleary eyed we slowly emerged one by one to the breakfast room this morning, still wearing an ecstatic smile and talking of the events earlier!

Today we headed down the Laugar Valley and followed the coast road to Hušavík. Just outside the town we turned off the main road and drove down a cinder track to the sea where several Glaucous and Iceland Gulls were feeding by an outlet pipe. Further out at sea we could see many small groups of Long-tail Ducks and Common Scoter amongst the flotillas of Eiders.

Our next stop was by the fish processing plant outlet pipe, again many Fulmars were gathered along with Eiders to feed. Unfortunately, the factory was not in operation today, so there were fewer birds present than normal when the plant is in full production. We toured the harbour and found a small group of Harlequin and a King (or should that be Queen) Eider before lunch.

For some a visit to the Culture House Museum, while others remained at the picturesque harbour to photograph the birds. On the latter group Roy had a Common Guillemot and a male Gyr Falcon. Once reunited we were just about to leave the town when, presumably the same Gyr Falcon as seen earlier flew across the road just ahead of the bus. We tried following the bird to find where it had landed, but with little success! We returned to the shores of the lake via the road over the high mountain plateau, where the Apollo crew allegedly trained for their moon landing and visited the Cowshed Cafe. Unfortunately chocolate cake was as rare as close views of a Gyr falcon, but Harvey succeeded in finding one; i.e. a chocolate cake!

This evening was to be our last meal at the hotel and the weather outside was not looking good for any sighting of the northern lights tonight, so after the bird-log we all retired to pack and prepare for departure in the morning.

## Day 5

Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> March

Weather details; bright, but a little overcast temperature 6°C

Bus loaded we departed the hotel at 9:45am heading west for Akureyri and our flight south to Reykjavik. The journey was uneventful, but pleasant and we eventually arrived at the airport in plenty of time to do a little bird-watching along the causeway and visit the lagoons where some waders were just starting to arrive. After some slight turbulence after take-off the flight south was smooth and we were soon on board our transfer coach travelling through the lava fields along the Reykjanes Peninsula. Keflavik International airport was fairly quiet as we checked-in for our flight. 3-hours later we all gathered by the baggage reclaim at Heathrow to collect our luggage, bade farewell and melted into the crowd for our onward journey home.

Although our time in Iceland was all too brief, memories 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 (h = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	March				
			25	26	27	28	29
1	Fulmar	<i>Fulmaris glacialis</i>	√	√		√	
2	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	1	1			
3	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus Cygnus</i>		2	28	40	√
4	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	√	√	√	√	√
5	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	√	√	√	√	√
6	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	√	√		√	√
7	King Eider	<i>Somateria spectabilis</i>				1	
8	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>		3		6	
9	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyernalis</i>	√	24		12	6
10	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>		√	√	√	√
11	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		2			4
12	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		2			
13	Gyr Falcon	<i>Falco rusticolus</i>			1	1	1
14	Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus mutus</i>				10	
15	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>	60	30			100
16	Redshank	<i>Tringa tetanus</i>					20
17	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>		√		√	4
18	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>				2	
19	Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>				√	
20	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		6		√	
21	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>				4	
22	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>		1		20	5
23	Greater Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>				1	
24	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aaglge</i>				1	
25	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>				H	
26	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	1				
27	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	√	√	√	√	√
28	Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>				10	
29	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	√	√		√	√
30	Raven	<i>Corvus corvus</i>	√	√	√	√	√
31	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>		2	1	1	1