

# Iceland – Gyr Falcons & The Northern Lights

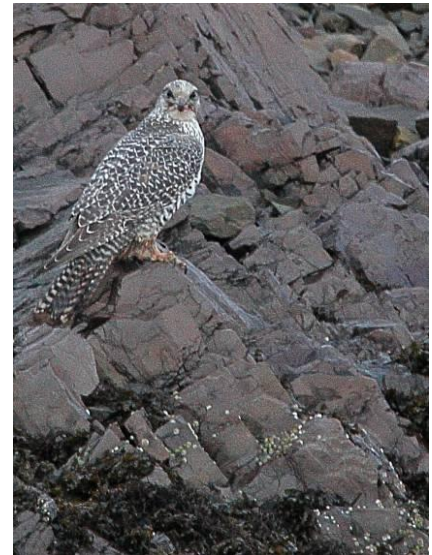
Naturetrek Tour Report

21 - 25 January 2013

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Lake Mývatn



Gyr Falcon

Report and images by Malcolm Stott



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Participants:	Trevor Rivett
	Kathleen Rivett
	Anita Sawyer
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	Marion Cho
	Gwyn Evans
	Diane Evans
	Simon Todd
	Philippa Todd
	Helen Swift
	Alessandra Gill
	Suan-Lu Chi
	Frances Marks

## Day 1

Monday 21st January

Heathrow – Northern Light Inn

Weather details: Heathrow snow flurries -20 degrees C

With winter's severe grip on the UK, we considered ourselves lucky to escape the chill and chaos. The flight was uneventful and we eventually descended into the arctic twilight and a much warmer Keflavik airport where Malcolm was waiting to greet us. Once on board the bus it was only a short drive to the Northern Light Inn where we had plenty of time to relax and unwind. For some, the lure of the Blue Lagoon and a chance to soak in its therapeutic waters was too great. After a delicious supper Malcolm gave a tour briefing followed by a presentation on the Aurora Borealis. The tantalising glimpse of stars in the night sky lulled us in to a false sense of expectation as we retired to the observatory in the hope that the celestial light show would put in an appearance this evening. Although low cloud persisted, the evening provided an opportunity to hone our camera skills should we get an opportunity to capture them...

## Day 2

Tuesday 22nd January

Transfer Northern Light Inn to Hotel Sel (Mývatn)

Weather details; Light cloud cover with sunny periods, late afternoon temp -1<sup>0</sup>C

Our transfer coach duly arrived to collect us at the appointed hour and we were soon travelling through a bewildering landscape of ancient lava-fields covered in grey Rhacomitrum moss. We soon arrived in the northern capital, with its cosmopolitan ambience, in plenty of time for our onward journey to Akureyri; we even had time to visit Reykjavik's impressive church (Hallgrímskirkja).

As we flew north, the ribbons of braided snow-fields quickly gave way to a vast frozen interior blanketed in snow and huge glaciers broken only by the occasional black, jagged mountain peak. We quickly began to appreciate why only the coastal belt of Iceland had been populated! After the 40 minute flight we arrived at the northern airport, Akureyri (Jewel of the North). While we retrieved our baggage, boots, tripods, cameras etc, Malcolm disappeared to locate the bus. Once the luggage had been loaded we began an amazing journey through a landscape frozen in the grip of an arctic winter. Ascending the mountain road we paused briefly to photograph Akureyri bathed in winter sunshine. The ice-encrusted waterfall of Goðafoss not only provided a spectacular sight, but a great opportunity to try-out our photographic skills.

The short winter days meant we had to press on to our hotel, located in the heart of north-east Iceland about 100km/65 miles south of the Arctic Circle on the shores of Lake Mývatn; 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 provides a spectacular panorama of surreal lava, crater and cave formations, sulphur-streaked mountains, and sweeping wetlands. We arrived at the hotel about 4:00pm and before checking-in we walked around the environment to gain an appreciation of the icy conditions under-foot and learn of any obstacles that could prove hazardous before darkness fell. We had time to relax and prepare for an evening under the stars in anticipation the northern lights would be putting in an appearance this evening before gathering for dinner. Unfortunately, low cloud persisted throughout the evening and we eventually retired without seeing the ethereal light show.

## Day 3

Wednesday 23rd January

### Lake Mývatn

Weather details; Very sunny with temp 2°C

We left the hotel at day break, the cerise sky bode well and sunshine eventually washed the landscape. We slowly circumnavigated the lake this morning in our search for a Gyr Falcon. We made a stop at Dimmuborgir to stretch our legs and look for Ptarmigan. Although icy under-foot, we did managed a short walk to photograph the weird lava formations and returning back to the bus we happened across not one, but two coveys of Ptarmigan. The covey below the car-park provided some excellent views as we watched them feeding on birch seeds frozen in the snow.

After a late morning coffee and a slice of delicious home-baked cake at the 'Cowshed' cafe, we continued on our quest around the lake trying to locate one of the several Gyr Falcons known to winter in this area. The presence of underwater geo-thermal springs maintain open water bodies much to the benefit of Barrow's Goldeneye that gathered in numbers along with a few Whooper Swans though little else. A flock of some 60 Snow Bunting was a sheer delight to encounter, albeit briefly on the drive. It wasn't until we had completed our circumnavigation of the lake that we found a large falcon perch on a roadside lump of lava. Although it initially took flight as we reversed, it did re-land, much to our joy, a short distant away and provided some good views through a telescope.

We travelled over the mountain road to visit the unsettled landscape of bubbling mud-pots, hissing fumaroles and sulphurous rocks at Hverarönd, which was an unworldly experience. Retracing our route back towards the lake we dropped off the bathers before going on to visit some natural pools in a nearby fissure.

The sunset this evening was superb, so much so we travelled back to the River Laxa to enjoy a magnificent experience before returning to the hotel while Malcolm returned to collect the bathers. The night sky this evening looked much 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. As if to whet our appetite Malcolm showed a DVD of the Aurora Borealis before dinner. Our expectation heightened when the northern sky cleared and our anticipation of a celestial light increased. Unfortunately the night was more mystic than magic, since the celestial magnifications never reached their full potential, despite a vigilance until 1:30am!

## Day 4

Thursday 24th January

### Húsavík

Weather details; Snow showers, temp 4°C

This morning we decided to visit Húsavík, a prosperous fishing community on the north coast. We travelled down the Laugar Valley, much of which was wrapped in a white blanket of snow. We arrived in Húsavík and took a dirt track (or should that be ice road?) down to the coast and an outfall pipe where several gulls were feeding, including both Glaucous and Iceland. A female King Eider caused minor excitement before we moved to the effluence outflow by the fish processing plant. Many duck, mostly Mallard, had gathered to feed. Long-tail duck were also present and the single Wigeon looked completely out of place. Further round the harbour we had good views of rafts of Long-tailed Ducks, more Glaucous and Iceland Gulls and many Eider Ducks with some males already in full breeding plumage. We continued to the outer seawall where clouds of gulls were resting on the boulders and had lunch in the company of a young common seal and two Black Guillemots amongst distant rafts of Long-tail ducks and Eiders.

We had time to visit the Culture House before returning to our hotel. Our plan, to drive the mountain road, had to be abandoned due to strong winds and snow flurries...a decision which later proved wise since more snow was falling on the south side of the mountains. We paused briefly to photograph horses in snow before arriving back at Myvatn. With an hour of daylight left we decided to visit the wooded peninsula at Hofði. The walk was enjoyable, crunching through deep snow, during which we managed to see six Ptarmigan albeit it briefly, as they uncharacteristically took flight, and found plenty of Arctic Fox tracks.

Back at the hotel we had time to relax before supper. Outside, strong winds and dense cloud cover didn't bode well for the northern lights this evening, so we all retired to our rooms early to pack in readiness for an early morning drive to Akureyri.

## Day 5

Friday 25th January

### Akureyri – Keflavik Airport

Weather details; Sunny, temp -2°C

We left the hotel in darkness at 7:15am this morning and travelled the 1½ hr journey through fresh snow before arriving at Akureyri for our flight south. During the 45 minute flight, the dawn light radiated an arctic glow over the landscape beneath, giving some truly spectacular views.

Once in Reykjavik Malcolm collected the bus and we drove the short distance into the capital, parking by the marine lake or should that be 'Swan Lake'. We had a couple of hours to explore and enjoy the cosmopolitan ambience of the city. Some delighted in simply photographing the wildfowl on the lake and adding Pink-footed Goose and a Redwing to our bird list, others visited 'Harpa' the new opera house, and even managed to add Shag to the bird list also.

All too soon it was time to board the bus and head back along the Reykjanes Peninsula. We dropped Jan and Anita off at the Northern Light Inn before arriving at the airport. I'm pleased to say check-in was quiet and not the chaotic rush one can often experience. Farewells said, Malcolm was left to gather his thoughts and spirit ready for the next group

*NB –In nature there is nothing predictable, except its unpredictability! The 'tricky lady' (northern lights) just didn't want to show herself during our brief stay on this occasion, and we can only hope she will be more acquiescent next time we go looking!*

*I hope you can now share a little of my enthusiasm for this amazing land and that one day you may return to experience more of the wonders Iceland can offer.*

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## Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	January				
			21	22	23	24	25
1	Shag						2
2	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus Cygnus</i>		4	16	2	160
3	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓			✓
4	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas Penelope</i>				1	
5	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>					12
7	Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>		1			
8	King Eider	<i>Somateria spectabilis</i>				1	
9	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>				80	
10	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyernalis</i>				60	
11	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islansica</i>		250+	30	15	
12	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>				2	
13	Gyr Falcon	<i>Falco rusticus</i>			1	1	
14	Willow Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus lagopus</i>			8	6	
15	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>				12	
16	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>				6	
17	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>				50	
18	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>				3	
19	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>				5	
20	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>				2	
21	Feral Pigeon/Rock Dove	<i>Columbia livia</i>					✓
22	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>					1
23	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	2	12	3	3	7
24	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓			✓
25	Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>					10
26	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>		1	60	4	14

## Mammals

1	Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>				1	
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