

# Iceland – Gyr Falcons & The Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour Report

8 - 12 February 2013



Gyr Falcon



Ptarmigan



Northern Lights, Lake Myvatn



Report and images compiled by Malcolm Stott



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## Nature's Magical Light Show

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, 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

Friday 8th February

Heathrow – Northern Light Inn; Weather details: Overcast, showers with temp 3<sup>o</sup>C

Flights from the UK were uneventful and touched down in Keflavik airport where we met in the arrivals hall. After a short drive to the aptly named Northern Light Inn and before you could say 'Eyjafjallajökull' most were enjoying the warm, therapeutic waters of the unique Blue Lagoon; blissfully soaking away the tiredness of modern day travel while others chilled-out in the comfort of the hotel! Once back at the hotel we had just enough time to collect our thoughts before heading to the restaurant for a delightful supper. Over coffee Malcolm gave a tour briefing explaining what we might expect during our short time in Iceland and with little chance of the Northern Lights this evening we retired to our rooms full of expectation for the days ahead.

## Day 2

Saturday 9th February

Transfer Northern Light Inn – Hotel Sel, Mývatn; Weather details; Overcast with sunny periods in the north, temp 1°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 soften in grey mosses *Racomitrium lanuginosum*. 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 and the new opera house, Harpa before arriving at the Domestic Airport. As we flew north, the braided ribbons of snow-fields quickly gave way to a vast frozen interior blanketed in snow and where black, jagged mountain peak broke through huge glaciers. Now we began to understand and appreciate why only the coastal belt of Iceland had been populated!

After the 40-minute flight we arrived in Akureyri (Jewel of the North). While we fumbled through our baggage to retrieve boots, tripods, cameras etc, Malcolm disappeared to collect the bus. Once the luggage had been loaded we began an amazing journey through a landscape, surprisingly not frozen in the grip of an arctic winter. Ascending the mountain road we paused briefly above Eyjafjörður to photograph Akureyri in the distance.

The ice-encrusted waterfall of Goðafoss not only provided a spectacular sight, but a great photographic opportunity to put camera skills to the ultimate test. We continued our sojourns over mountain roads that descended into fertile valleys and soon arrived at Skútustaðir. Our hotel was 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. An environment shaped by repeated volcanic eruptions and seismic activity down through the ages, the landscape around the 36km<sup>2</sup> lake provided a spectacular panorama of lava-fields and pseudo-craters, cave formations and sulphur-streaked mountains and sweeping, frozen 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 to learn of any potential obstacles that could prove hazardous in the darkness and excitement should the aurora manifest. We had time to relax and enjoy a stroll before dinner. Following the daily-log Malcolm held a 'camera clinic' giving advice on how to achieve good images of the northern lights before venturing out into the cold night air to practice just in case the celestial lights appeared later – sadly, they didn't perform this evening!

## Day 3

Sunday 10th February

Mývatn; Weather details; Beautiful sunny day, winds of 5m/s temp 2°C

After leaving the hotel this morning we followed the lake shore, stopping at the small, tranquil wooded peninsula, Hofði for a brief walk. We followed the trails buried beneath deep snow-cover in our quest to find Ptarmigan. Although their presence was all too evident and in plentiful supply and we manage to see 16 birds in flight, for whatever reason they were very difficult to approach. Perhaps the answer could be to do with the fresh fox tracks imprinted in the snow? During our walk Redpoll were calling from the birch trees and we eventually found a flock of some 40 birds feeding on seeds deposited in the frozen ground and now available with the thaw.

It was past mid-day so after a brief visit to Dimmuborgir, we headed to the ‘Cowshed’ cafe and en-route we found a spectacularly beautiful, almost white Gyr Falcon perched on the lava. She sat patiently bathed in wonderful light, permitting some very privileged views before she eventually took flight. Only now could we really appreciate the true size of this the biggest falcon in the world! In jubilant mood we called at the cafe where we enjoyed fresh coffee and sampled its renowned home baked cakes. Next we briefly visited the village store in Reykjahlið to purchase snacks for the evening and to collect the latest design in Icelandic footwear accessories for our visit to Námafeld, the high temperature area. As we left the general store we found a group of Ptarmigan close to the road and though they initially took flight, the covey of 14 birds re-landed nearby allowing some fantastic views.

Ascending the hill en-route to the high temperature zone we stopped for lunch at the viewpoint and enjoyed panoramic views of the lake and its spectacular scenery. At Námafeld an unsettled landscape greeted us, the scenery was surreal and desolate yet colourful with yellow, pink and brown hues and where steam escaped from hissing fumaroles in giant white plumes and the earth’s crust bubbled and gurgled in a series of boiling mud-holes and the odour of a sulphurous gasses was very detectable. Before allowing us freedom to roam and explore this unworldly landscape, Malcolm insisted we wore the latest footwear accessories placing plastic bin-liners over our feet to prevent the claggy-mud from stick to our boots! We continued our sojourns around the lake in sublime light, the quality of which is only found in arctic regions. Eventually we arrived back to the hotel where the non-bathers disembarked and Malcolm took the bathers for a relaxing soak in the warm therapeutic, mineral-rich waters in the ‘Nature Baths’.

The weather forecast for this evening looked less cloudy and more encouraging, so after another excellent supper we collected warm clothes and cameras from our rooms and boarded the bus to re-visit Dimmuborgir as the best location to view and photograph the aurora. Just as we were leaving the hotel our attention was drawn skywards as the northern lights began to make an appearance. A double wand of celestial light arced through the night-sky where myriads of bright stars appeared sequin-like on dark-green velvet. We hastened to our observation point and waited for the aurora to develop and we were not disappointed. This evening the aurora appeared calm with long isolated wisps and green veils, moving blankets and the most amazing colours. Parallel rays of red light fell from a very starry night-sky. WOW, a wonderful experience that will last a life-time! No words can adequately describe this phenomenon, no pen can draw it and no picture can be painted, even our cameras fail capture the emotion to do it justice! We considered ourselves very fortunate to experience the magic of the northern lights when so many try and fail! We returned to the hotel about 11:30pm where most were content to retired to a warm bed happy, while others stayed outside the hotel for more!

## Day 4

**Monday 11th February**

Mývatn - Húsavík: Weather details; Overcast am, sunny pm, winds 3m/s, temp 1<sup>0</sup>C

This morning we had a change of scenery as we headed down the Laugar Valley and along the north coast to visit Húsavík, a picturesque harbour and important fishing community. After a stop to photograph some Icelandic horses we entered Húsavík and on the outskirts of town we turned off the main road and descended a cinder track towards the shore. The outfall pipe, usually bustling with a variety of duck and gulls, was quiet today except for the odd Iceland and Glaucous Gulls that flew by and a small numbers of Long-tailed Duck and Eider dotted on the sea.

We next stopped by the effluence pipe from the fish processing plant, again usually a hive of activity, but only Mallard, some Eiders and a single Wigeon were present. The harbour itself had good numbers of Long-tail Ducks, small rafts of Eider and 3 Black Guillemots. By midday the cloud broke and the sun's light was exquisite. After coffee in the local service station we drove to the outer seawall and again very few birds were present. A small eider, perhaps a female King Eider was a sleep, head and bill tucked well into her feathers refusing to wake and show her identification features!

Some of the group took advantage of a visit to the Culture House, the rest of us cruised the streets of residential properties looking for Snow Bunting. We eventually found a single male, but it was not that co-operative, flying off as soon as we stopped. Returning down the same cinder track as earlier Malcolm noticed a female Gyr Falcon perched on the steep grassy bank. Following a cautious approach to where she perched, we enjoyed some fantastic close views and the light was amazing. Having watched her for some time she flew off allowing some wonderful views of this powerful bird of prey in flight. We returned to Culture House to collect other members of the group and returned to Mývatn via the mountain road. The landscape was barren and desolate, only the thin black ribbon of tarmac cut through an otherwise pristine countryside. By the time we reached the lake the light was enchanting and forced a photo stop before returning to the hotel by way of the north shores. Arriving back at the hotel a flock of 6 Ptarmigan landed close to where we had parked providing another photo opportunity.

After another delicious supper we retired to our rooms to pack, but quickly reappeared when word got around that the northern lights were visible. It started quickly, developing from a green wand into a broad arc stretching from horizon to horizon. It was active and colourful with reds, yellows and pale greens shafts of light dropping curtain-like from the broad band in moving waves. Albeit a much better display than the previous night, it was of much shorter duration and had faded by 10:30pm. Returning to our warm rooms we resumed packing before retiring to bed in preparation for an early start the following morning, or so we thought! A call at 12:30am had us back outside in the cold night-air when celestial activity had re-started. A very fitting conclusion to a wonderful time spent at Mývatn!

## Day 5

Tuesday 12th February

Mývatn, Reykjavik & Keflavik Airport; Weather details; Sunshine, wind 3m/s, temp 5°C

We left Mývatn in the morning darkness as we made an early start for our journey to Akureyri. Dawn was breaking as we flew south, the pink hue making the glaciers beneath look like giant marsh-mallow. The bus was waiting our arrival at Reykjavik airport and we took the short ride into town, where we said our farewells to Peter and Julia, who were extending their holiday, before hitting the town for some serious retail therapy. The weather was glorious and ideal for participating in a touch of Reykjavikian relaxation by the lake, feeding the wildfowl and soaking-up the warmth of the sun!

Once back on the bus we travelled along the Reykjanes Peninsula, dropping Brian and Alison off at the Northern Light Inn, before arriving at Keflavik International airport. Once check-in we said our farewells before disappearing upstairs to the departure lounge and more retail therapy!

**Summary** – There is nothing predictable in nature other than its unpredictability! So, we considered ourselves blessed to have such marvellous views of the Gyr Falcons and experience the northern lights, not once but on two consecutive nights, when so many try and fail...and don't forget the glorious weather throughout the tour!

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

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## Species List

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	February				
			8	9	10	11	12
1	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmaris glacialis</i>		✓		15	✓
2	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>		✓			4
3	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>				2	1
4	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus Cygnus</i>		2	20		50
5	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		24			60
6	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
7	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		✓	✓		10
8	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>			✓	✓	✓
9	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyernalis</i>				60	
10	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islansica</i>		18	12	6	
11	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		2			
12	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		3		5	3
13	Gyr Falcon	<i>Falco Rusticus</i>			2	1	1
14	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritime</i>				30	
15	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>			✓	✓	1
16	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>			5	✓	✓
17	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>				✓	✓
18	Greater Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>				2	
19	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus graellsii</i>			2		
20	Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grille</i>				3	2
21	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>					1
22	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>					5
23	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	2	6	2	✓	6
24	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	10	20			✓
25	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>		6	4	12	