

Iceland - Gyrfalcons & the Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour Report

12 -16 February 2013



Aurora Borealis at the Northern Light Inn



Gyr Falcon



Long-tailed Duck



Ptarmigan

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 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

Tuesday 12th February

Heathrow – Northern Light Inn; Weather details: Overcast, showers with temp 3^oC

The UK flights duly arrived at Keflavik and the first impression gained of Iceland was perhaps not that one might have expected; sunshine, no snow and 5^oC! Malcolm was at the airport to greet us and we were soon travelling the short distance to the aptly named Northern Light Inn. We had plenty of time to settle into our cosy rooms before making our way to the dining room and after a delicious meal we retired to the comfortable lounge. Malcolm gave a tour briefing and explained the phenomenon of the Aurora Borealis followed by a 'camera clinic' before heading upstairs to the observatory in anticipation of the celestial light show.

Once we had made adjustments to camera setting and tested these out on the glow from the geothermal power-station, we waited patiently and didn't have long to wait long before Malcolm drew our attention to the pale glow in the night sky; the northern light phenomena was about to begin! Dashing back to our rooms we wrapped-up well before heading outside in the cold night air.

Full of optimism we re-grouped outside in front of the hotel and watch in awe as the ethereal lights developed. The aurora borealis evolved gradually at first, before becoming more animated. The illuminations intensified, first forming an arc across the inky-blue sky then a second arc appeared beneath the original, before simultaneous and large-scale transformations started happening along the auroral axis. First we experienced many parallel rays of light, mainly green with a crimson fringe, then folds, bends and swirls appeared in a curtain before the whole structure became active animated and moving fast! Crimson fringes to the curtains were very obvious, bending and waving beneath the main display. We were mesmerised, enjoying our first experience of the northern lights that lasted for 90 minutes before it became much calmer. Most had retired in nocturnal bliss by 11:30pm, feeling very privileged if a little cold, to have experienced such a wonderful and exciting phenomena on our first night! The aurora, albeit suffused, did continue throughout the night and was still discernable at 0600hrs the following morning; the Northern Light Inn certainly lived up too, it not exceeding our expectation – a wonderful experience and memories that will last a life-time!

Day 2

Wednesday 13th February

Transfer Northern Light Inn – Hotel Sel, Mývatn; Weather details; Sunny periods am, overcast 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 concealed by centuries of 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 that dominates the city's skyline before arriving at the Domestic Airport. As we flew north, the braided ribbons of snow quickly gave way to a vast frozen interior blanketed in white and black jagged mountain peaks that occasionally broke vast glacial expanses. Now we could appreciate why only the coastal belt of Iceland had been populated!

After a 40 minute flight we arrived in the northern capital, Akureyri (Jewel of the North). While we sorted through our baggage to retrieve boots, tripods, cameras etc, Malcolm disappeared to collect the bus. Once the luggage had been loaded we made a brief visit into Akureyri before starting our journey northeast through a landscape hidden by heavy winter's snow. Ascending the mountain road we paused briefly above Eyjafjörður to photograph Akureyri before continuing onto Goðafoss, 'Waterfall of the Gods'. The ice-encrusted waterfall not only provided a spectacular sight, but a great photographic opportunity.

Continuing our sojourns northeast over high mountain roads and through dormant valleys we soon arrived at Skútustaðir and 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. An environment shaped by repeated volcanic eruptions and seismic activity down through the ages, the landscape around the 36km² lake provided a spectacular panorama of pseudo-craters lava fields and cave formations, sulphur-streaked mountains, and sweeping frozen wetlands.

We arrived at the hotel about 5:00pm 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 excitement and darkness should the northern lights suddenly appear. We had time to relax, and enjoy the exquisite evening light before preparing for an evening under the stars in anticipation the aurora would be putting in an appearance this evening. After dinner Malcolm held a 'camera clinic' giving guidance on how to achieve good images of the northern lights before venturing out in to the cold arctic air to practice in readiness for the celestial lights. Although conditions looked promising the 'Tricky Lady' did not make an appearance this evening, so we retired back inside to the warmth of our hotel rooms.

Day 3

Thursday 14th February

Mývatn; Weather details; Snow flurries, winds of 5m/s temp -1°C

The day (or should it be night?) started early when the telephones rang at 02:30am to announce 'a little northern lights were showing'. Some, still half-asleep managed all kinds of contortions to dress quickly, while others were content to watch the aurora develop in the warmth from their bedroom windows. It never really materialised into anything quite as spectacular as our first night and ended soon after 3:30am when we returned back inside to the warmth and bed!

After breakfast some chose a very different adventure with all the various activities on offer, such as 'Super Jeep' safaris, snowmobile and horse riding possibilities. For the rest of us we left the hotel and followed the shores of the lake, stopping for a short walk at the small, tranquil wooded peninsula, Hofði. We followed the woodland paths, covered by fresh overnight snow in our quest to find Ptarmigan. Although we saw a total of 14 birds, for whatever reason, they were very weary and difficult to approach. Perhaps the answer could be connected with the fresh fox tracks we saw in the snow?

The 'Cowshed' cafe proved an excellent choice of comfort stops; the blueberry cake was particularly yummy! Next we visited the weird, yet wonderful lava formations at Dimmuborgir where we had lunch parked on the car-park with spectacular panoramic views across the lake. A flock of Ptarmigan flew in and landed below where we were parked and we watched as some struggled to balance on the fine twigs in an attempt to feed on the pubescent birch buds; wow, this was marvellous!

Rejoining the main road we hadn't travelled far when Malcolm stopped and quickly reversed into a field entrance having noticed a Gyr Falcon perched on a roadside pole. The falcon was so close and we didn't want to get out and disturb her, so Malcolm quickly assembled the tripod and telescope inside the vehicle to give some excellent views through the open window. Unfortunately the female bird took-wing, but only to fly a short distant and land on a grassy bank by the lake shore; far enough away for us to stand outside and view the bird. To our amazement and great joy she was joined by a second female, this bird was a beautiful almost white falcon. They both sat patiently in a swirl of snow-flurries as we watched them for some 30 minutes.

Following a brief visit to the local store to purchase snacks for the evening and collect the latest design in footwear for our next stop at Námaföld. An unsettled landscape, the scenery was surreal and desolate yet colourful with yellow, pink and brown hues 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 a sulphurous odour made its presence known!

Before allowing us freedom to roam and explore this unworldly landscape, Malcolm insisted we wore the latest in Icelandic footwear accessories; plastic bin-liners over our feet and taped to our legs to prevent the claggy-mud from sticking to our boots, or perhaps from getting the bus dirty! On our return to the hotel we stopped at the 'Nature Baths' for some to indulge in a relaxing soak in the warm therapeutic, mineral-rich waters before supper, while the rest returned to the hotel. After supper, with overcast skies outside, we watched a DVD on the Aurora Borealis; science and legends. With little chance of the weather improving and the skies clearing, we all retired to our rooms after the daily log.

Day 4

Friday 15th February

Mývatn - Húsavík; Weather details; generally overcast with snow flurries, winds 4m/s, temp -1°C

We had a change of scenery this morning as we headed down the Laugar Valley and along the north coast to visit Húsavík, a picturesque harbour and important fishing community. On the outskirts of town we turned off the main road and descended a cinder track towards the shore. The outfall pipe is usually bustling with a variety of ducks and gulls, but today few were present; the odd Iceland and Glaucous Gulls flew by and small numbers of Long-tailed Duck and Eider were dotted on the sea. We next stopped by the effluent pipe from the fish processing plant, again usually a hive of activity, but only Mallard and a few Eiders were present for whatever reason unbeknown to us! The harbour itself was again strangely quiet except for good numbers of Long-tail ducks and small rafts of Eiders.

After coffee and a comfort stop we returned to the harbour for a stroll. To our amazement and great delight a Gyr Falcon suddenly appeared and landed on a boulder groin opposite to where Malcolm had parked. After a quick view through the telescope, we relocated the bus much closer behind some boats on the quayside where we were able to get out and steal some incredible views of this magnificent falcon. The bird sat patiently permitting us to observe her for 40 minutes before she eventually flew off, but only to fly a short distance back onto the kill from where she had been accidentally disturbed earlier. You could not wish for better views of this much sort-after bird of prey and it was very difficult to drag ourselves away from such an obliging Gyr Falcon!

On the outer sea wall we watched Long-tailed Ducks and found 3 Harlequins, along with Fulmars and the odd Iceland Gull while having lunch. Before leaving Húsavík we enjoyed a very informative hour in the 'Culture House' museum. Our return to Mývatn was via the mountain road, a barren and desolate area where the road cut a thin black ribbon of tarmac through an otherwise pristine landscape. Once back at the lake we completed our circumnavigation of its shores before returning to the hotel in plenty of time to enjoy our last 2-hours of daylight in this wonderful environment. After supper we briefly stepped outside to gaze at the night-sky and it was obscured by dense cloud, so with little chance of the northern lights showing tonight we retired to our rooms to pack and prepare for an early departure the following morning.

Day 5

Saturday 16th February

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

We left Mývatn and made an early start for the return journey to Akureyri. Dawn was breaking as we flew south, casting a pink hue on the glaciers beneath giving the impression of a magical wonderland.

A bus was waiting our arrival at Reykjavik airport and took us on the short journey into town. We parked opposite the new and impressive opera house, Harpa before going our separate ways to experience the northern capital. The weather was glorious and offered extensive views across the bay to the Snæfellsnes Peninsula where the shield volcano made famous by Jules Verne in his classic novel 'Journey to the Centre of the Earth' dominated the horizon.

Once back on the bus we travelled along the Reykjanes Peninsula, dropping Janet off at her hotel in Keflavik before arriving at the International airport. With check-in completed we said our farewells before heading for the departure lounge for a little retail therapy!

Summary – There is nothing predictable in nature other than its unpredictability! So, we were blessed to have such marvellous views of Gyr Falcons, not once but twice at very close quarters - the later on a kill and we experienced a most incredible display of the northern lights, an experience that will live-on in our memories for a life-time!

I sincerely hope you can 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				
			12	13	14	15	16
1	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmaris glacialis</i>		2		✓	
2	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>				1	
3	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	1	1		2	
4	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus Cygnus</i>		12		6	60
5	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓		✓	✓
6	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	6	✓	✓
7	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>					20
8	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		✓		✓	✓
9	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>				3	
10	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyernalis</i>				60	
11	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>		6	24	4	
13	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>			3	3	
14	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		4			
15	Gyr Falcon	<i>Falco Rusticus</i>			2	1	
16	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>				3	
17	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>					7
18	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		10		✓	
19	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>		3		✓	
20	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>				✓	
21	Greater Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>				1	
22	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus graellsii</i>					3
23	Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>					1
24	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>					2
25	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	1	✓	✓	✓	✓
26	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		2			✓
27	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>			24	265	