

Iceland – Gyr Falcons & The Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour Report

6 - 10 March 2013



Northern Light images from Mývatn



Gyr Falcon

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Nature's Magical Light Show

The northern lights are many things to many people; elementary particle physics, superstition, mythology and folklore come to life. Throughout the ages they have filled people with wonderment 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.

The sun, moon and the stars belong to the everlasting and predictable in our universe. The Northern Lights is on the other hand illusive, changing and unpredictable. 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

Wednesday 6th March

UK – Northern Light Inn; Weather details: Keflavik, blizzard -6⁰C

After experiencing unseasonal high temperatures, winter returned to Iceland with a vengeance this morning; blizzards, high winds and freezing temperatures.

It was an anxious time waiting to see if UK flights would actually arrive! Late is always better than never, so I was particularly pleased to meet the UK flights on arrival at Keflavik. The short drive to the Northern Light Inn was interesting; difficult to tell just where the road ended and the countryside began! Once at the hotel it didn't take long to settle into the cosy rooms and find the bar! Malcolm gave an introduction to the tour and briefly set-out the day-today logistics. Supper followed, this evening we dined on traditional Icelandic Cod and it was delicious. After a tiring day of travel most were eager to retire early, especially since there was little chance of the northern lights making an appearance this evening.

Day 2

Thursday 7th March

Transfer Northern Light Inn to Hotel Sel (Mývatn): Weather details; Strong winds, light snow flurries temp -5°C

This morning we were greeted with the news that there were no internal flights and if there were, the road north from Akureyri to Mývatn was closed anyway, so another anxious morning with a bucket-full of 'ifs and maybes'! By breakfast time Malcolm was working on contingency plans B and C to cover all likely scenarios! With no further news from the airport, we continued with the transfer into Reykjavik, still not sure whether we would be flying north or sightseeing around the city! Eventually news arrived that the flight would go ahead, but would be delayed until 2:30pm, this was a welcome relief! We managed to fit in a short city tour and visited the impressive church, Hallgrímskirkja that dominates the city skyline and saw the spectacular Harpa, the new glass opera house by the harbour before an early arrival at the airport, just in case we had a problem with our schedule flight; a lucky coincidence, because the flight was only 30-minutes later than the original 12:15pm departure!

The 50-minute flight north was uneventful until we started our descent into Akureyri. While waiting to reclaim our baggage Malcolm went to organise the bus. Once the luggage had been loaded, we climbed aboard and started our journey north through a landscape best described as a 'winter wonderland'! Halfway on our drive to Mývatn we stopped at the beautiful Goðafoss, a truly awesome waterfall that looked spectacular, especially so encrusted in icicles! We trod carefully across the frozen ground in order to take photographs – magnificent! We continued on our journey to Mývatn. 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 36km² lake provided a spectacular panorama of surreal lava, crater and cave formations, sulphur-streaked mountains, and sweeping frozen wetlands.

We arrived at the hotel about 4:00pm and quickly settled into our rooms before having a hot drink. Following which Malcolm took everyone on a short walk outside to gain an awareness and appreciation of any obstacles and features that could be hazardous in the excitement and darkness should the celestial lights make an appearance in the night-sky. After a delicious supper we retired upstairs and Malcolm explained the science behind the northern lights and showed an informative DVD on the Aurora Borealis – its science and legends. Malcolm held a 'camera clinic' afterwards for those needing guidance on how best to take photographs of the northern lights. Unfortunately low cloud persisted this evening, so with little chance of putting into practice our newly learned skills we retired to bed.

Day 3

Friday 8th March

Lake Mývatn; Weather details; Overcast, sky cleared late pm, wind 7m/s temp -4°C

After a leisurely start this morning we left the hotel at 10:00am in our quest to find a Gyr Falcon. We followed the shores of the lake scanning every post, pole and prominent piece of lava, but had seen none by the time we reached Hofði. We stopped at the wooded peninsula and took an enjoyable walk along snow covered path to chance our luck with Ptarmigan. Although there was plenty of evidence as to their presence, we found none but managed to watch a small flock of Redpolls busily feeding on birch seeds in the snow. Perhaps the fresh fox-tracks gave a clue as to why we found no ptarmigan?

We continued looking for Gyr Falcon until we reached the ‘Cow Shed Cafe’ and the temptation of home-bake blueberry cake and hot coffee was just too irresistible! From the cafe window some more observant members noticed a large falcon fly-by, so once back on board Malcolm knew exactly where she would be! And sure enough, not too far away, we found a beautiful almost white female Gyr Falcon perch on a lump of lava reasonably close. We sat and enjoyed the presence of this, the largest falcon in the world, a truly rare opportunity. The falcon sat patiently waiting for everyone to take photographs before flying-off and only then could we really appreciate her enormous size.

In a very happy mood we next visited Dimmuborgir, an area of weird and wonderful lava formations where we had lunch while scanning the ground beneath looking for Ptarmigan, but failed to find any! Next we called at the village store to purchase snacks for the evenings aurora watching before continuing onto visit the unsettled landscape at Námafali; a high temperature zone of bubbling, gurgling mud-pots and hissing fumaroles with a distinctive sulphurous odour and an unworldly experience. Retracing our route back towards the lake we visited the fissure at Grjótagjá before stopping at the ‘Natural Baths’ where only the brave stripped off for a dip, the rest sat in the warmth of the cafe with a hot drink!

After supper and the daily-log, the sky looked promising, studded with myriads of bright star and recognisable constellations, so we disappeared to collect warm clothing and cameras in preparation for the northern lights. The celestial display showed promptly soon after we had gathered outside, but remained subdued at first. By 11pm the light show had really started and equally as important, the wind had stopped! The aurora was amazing, wands and rays of green with edges tinted crimson and very animated. Although most had retired back to the warmth of their rooms by 1am the display continued and Malcolm reported it still being visibly active at 5am!

Day 4

Saturday 9th March

Húsavik. Weather details; Bright & sunny, temp -1°C

This morning we decided to visit Húsavik, a prosperous fishing community on the north coast. We travelled along the road by the River Laxá, where a pair of very confiding Barrow’s Goldeneye tolerated us taking their photograph, before reaching the Laugar Valley. The landscape was amazing and firmly in the grip of an arctic winter. The scenery particularly soul inspiring this morning with pristine snow drifted everywhere and distant mountains all glistening in the morning light, a truly winter wonderland.

On arrival in Husávik we headed straight for the harbour and to where an effluence pipe discharged factory waste from the fish processing plant. Many duck, mostly Mallard and a few Eiders had gathered to feed. In the harbour itself several rafts of Long-tail Duck were present in small number and the odd Iceland and Glaucous Gulls were at rest on the sea. But the biggest surprise was that of a juvenile Little Gull found by Nev!

After a comfort and coffee stop, or in John's case a chip-stop, we returned to the outer harbour wall and over lunch searched for Harlequin Duck, but despite extensive scanning we failed to find any. However, the light was amazing and the view back toward town was very photogenic. The air was fresh and had a real arctic feel, which shouldn't have been that surprising since we were only 50 miles south of the circle!

Our return journey was very spectacular and we stopped by the Laxá Bridge to enjoy the scenery and take photographs before completing our journey around the lakes shores. At Reykjahlíð we searched the residential area in our quest to find the elusive Ptarmigan and having failed again we drove at snail-pace along the road, peering under the scrubby bird trees, where there was a lot of evidence of their past presence, but without any luck of seeing them. Even at Dimmuborgir, a well-known hot-bed for Ptarmigan, our searches drew another blank. We arrived back at the hotel in good time for a last stroll in this spectacular environment, simply to appreciate where we were, soak-up the evening sun and enjoy the moment before supper.

This evening the night-sky was cloudless and there was a definite arctic chill present. We eagerly boarded the bus for another opportunity to witness the northern lights phenomenon. Even as we left the hotel on the short journey to Dimmuborgir, we could see a faint green arc materialising amongst the bright constellations. On the drive up to the viewing area, Malcolm noticed not one, but three Ptarmigan in the bus headlights and flying into the darkness, but of course no one really believed him!

We had a little time to wait for the celestial light show to begin, so time was usefully spent testing camera settings and generally preparing for the event to happen. By 10:30pm the aurora began to develop more structure and colours became a more intense. Waves of vivid light moved in an arc through the night-skies, stretching to both distant horizons. Next a series of colourful rays and wands, of the most amazing lights, filled the sky – Wow! Being lucky enough to capture images of the northern lights on previous nights, tonight we decided to be more creative. A small group of birch trees at the edge of the car park provided an ideal foreground, especially when dimly lit by the side-lights of the bus!

We left Dimmuborgir about 11pm when the aurora had calmed and travelling back to the hotel we stopped by Hofði to see if we could add more to our portfolio of northern light images, but the lights remained faint so after a short while we continued back to the warmth of the hotel where some stayed out in the night-air fascinated by the lights, but the majority disappeared inside to pack in readiness for an early start later that morning.

Day 5

Sunday 10th March

Akureryi – Keflavik Airport; Weather details; Sunny, wind 3m/s temp -1°C

Dawn was breaking as we left the hotel early this morning, and the sun cast a magical light on the wintery landscape that was simply wonderful. With plenty of time to enjoy the leisurely drive back to Akureyri we could relax and soaked-up all the superb images of a winter wonderland en-route.

The flight south was uneventful and on arrival in Reykjavik a coach was waiting to take us the short distance into the city centre. After we bade farewell to Diana and Judith, who were staying on for an extra day to catch a flight to Manchester, we had 1.5 hours to enjoy the ambience of this cosmopolitan capital. Some joined Reykjavikians by the marine lake feeding the wildfowl and enjoying the warm sun, while others engaged in a little retail therapy before the transfer to Keflavik.

Check-in was completed without delay and we said farewell to Malcolm, leaving him to gather his thoughts in time to meet the next group, as we made our way upstairs and through security for a little more retail therapy!

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 (and find ptarmigan) on another Naturetrek tour!

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Species List

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted)

| | Common name | Scientific name | March | | | | |
|----|------------------------|----------------------------------|-------|----|----|-----|-----|
| | | | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| 1 | Fulmar | <i>Fulmarus glacialis</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 2 | Shag | <i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i> | | | | | |
| 3 | Whooper Swan | <i>Cygnus Cygnus</i> | | 7 | 2 | 12 | 120 |
| 4 | Pink-footed Goose | <i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i> | | | | | 1 |
| 5 | Greylag Goose | <i>Anser anser</i> | | ✓ | | | ✓ |
| 6 | Eurasian Wigeon | <i>Anas Penelope</i> | | | | | 2 |
| 7 | Mallard | <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 8 | Gadwall | <i>Anus streppera</i> | | | | | 2 |
| 9 | Tufted Duck | <i>Aythya fuligula</i> | | | | | 16 |
| 10 | Eider | <i>Somateria mollissima</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 11 | Long-tailed Duck | <i>Clangula hyernalis</i> | | | | 40 | |
| 12 | Barrow's Goldeneye | <i>Bucephala islansica</i> | | 40 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 13 | Goosander | <i>Mergus merganser</i> | | | | 2 | |
| 14 | Gyr Falcon | <i>Falco rusticus</i> | | | 1 | | |
| 15 | Rock Ptarmigan | <i>Lagopus lagopus</i> | | | | 3 | |
| 16 | Purple Sandpiper | <i>Calidris maritima</i> | | | | 45 | |
| 17 | Little Gull | <i>Larus minutus</i> | | | | 1 | |
| 18 | Black-headed Gull | <i>Larus ridibundus</i> | | | | 2 | |
| 19 | Herring Gull | <i>Larus argentatus</i> | | | | 2 | |
| 20 | Glaucous Gull | <i>Larus hyperboreus</i> | | | | 10 | 1 |
| 21 | Iceland Gull | <i>Larus glaucoides</i> | | | | 16 | 3 |
| 22 | Feral Pigeon/Rock Dove | <i>Columbia livia</i> | | | | | ✓ |
| 23 | Redwing | <i>Turdus iliacus</i> | | 2 | | | 1 |
| 24 | Common Raven | <i>Corvus corax</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 25 | Common Starling | <i>Sturnus vulgaris</i> | | ✓ | | | ✓ |
| 26 | Redpoll | <i>Carduelis flammea</i> | | | 24 | | |
| 27 | Snow Bunting | <i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i> | | | 40 | 200 | |