

Iceland – Gyr Falcons & The Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour Report

10 - 14 March 2013



Northern Light Images from Mývatn



Gyr Falcon

Report & images compiled by Malcolm Stott



Naturetrek Cheriton Mill Cheriton Alresford Hampshire SO24 0NG England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

| | |
|---------------|-------------------|
| Tour Leader: | Malcolm Stott |
| Participants: | Peter Briers |
| | Gina Briers |
| | Michael Marginson |
| | Carole Marginson |
| | Jane Morrish |
| | Martin Grace |
| | Dorothy Grace |
| | Margaret Stephens |
| | Rosie Lees |
| | Hilary Raeburn |
| | Liz Gonta |
| | Steph Warburton |
| | Kerrie Warburton |

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

Sunday 10th March

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

The UK flight was uneventful, touching down at Keflavik airport where Malcolm was waiting to meet and greet the group.

Following a short drive to the Northern Light Inn we soon settled into our cosy rooms, while some relaxed in the blissfully warm therapeutic-waters of the unique Blue Lagoon. We assembled in the bar (where else) and we had a tour briefing outlining basic day-to-day events. Following supper we were entertained by an informative DVD presentation on the Aurora Borealis – its science and legends. With low cloud persisting throughout the evening our chances of witnessing this natural phenomenon fast diminished, so we opted for an early night to recover from a day of travelling.

Day 2

Monday 11th March

Transfer Northern Light Inn to Hotel Sel (Mývatn); Weather details; Overcast, sunny periods, winds 2m/s, temp 3⁰C

Our coach duly arrived at 10:00am for the transfer to Reykjavik and we were soon travelling through a bewildering landscape of ancient lava-fields concealed by centuries of grey mosses, *Racomitrium lanuginosum*. We arrived in the northern capital, with its cosmopolitan ambience, in plenty of time for our onward flight to Akureyri, we even had time to visit the impressive church, Hallgrímskirkja. Unfortunately the church was closed due to refurbishing the 5,275 pipes of its famous organ. We did however manage some spectacular views of the city from its spire before driving past the spectacular Harpa, the new glass opera house by the harbour and the marine lake eventually arriving at the domestic airport for the 40-minute flight north. With clear skies and lovely light, we had some wonderful views during the short flight before touching down in the northern capital of Akureyri. While we retrieved our luggage, Malcolm briefly disappeared to collect the bus. With luggage loaded into the trailer we headed out across the causeway and into the countryside. Our first stop was at the view point, overlooking Eyjafjörður and the city beyond, for lunch.

Continuing on our journey we travelled through some breathtaking scenery of snow-covered mountains and ice-strewn rivers before arriving at the spectacular Goðafoss. The waterfall, especially in winter encrusted in icicles and veiled in freezing vapour, made a truly awesome sight and a landscape opportunity that put our camera skills to the ultimate test. We continued on a journey over high mountain ridges and plateaus into deep fertile valleys, a landscape perhaps best described as a 'winter wonderland'. Descending the high ground we soon arrived by the River Laxá at Lake Mývatn where we enjoyed our first Barrow's Goldeneye before ending our journey 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 Europe's greatest natural treasures for breeding wildfowl. 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. Before we had time to settle into our cosy rooms we took a walk outside. This was to gain an awareness and appreciation of any obstacles and features that could be hazardous in the excitement and darkness while rushing outside to experience the celestial night-sky. Before dinner Malcolm held a 'camera clinic' offering guidance on camera setting best to obtain good images of the northern lights. After supper we retired upstairs for the daily-log and a briefing on the next day's itinerary followed by a DVD presentation of the acclaimed BBC documentary 'Earth Story', in particular chapter 4 which is most relevant to Iceland. This fascinating account on the theory of tectonic plates was best described in a 'Journey to the Centre of the Earth'. Meanwhile outside low-cloud persisted, so with little chance of the northern lights tonight we retired to our rooms full of anticipation for our brief time in this unique environment.

Day 3

Tuesday 12th 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 finding Ptarmigan. Although we saw a covey of 9 birds, they immediately took flight. It was a pleasant walk through birch woods and we managed to see plenty of Redpolls, even a Wren and capture images of the lava pillars, an iconic emblem of Mývatn. On our return three Ptarmigan were seen, but when Malcolm positioned himself to be able to encourage the birds our way, they appeared to have vanished into thin air!

We continued our drive in search of the Gyr Falcon, but had seen none by the time we had reached the 'Cowshed Cafe'. The lure of fresh coffee and home-baked blueberry cake was a temptation we found hard to resist. Dimmuborgir was our next stop, still looking for the falcon and better views of Ptarmigan. From the car-park we took a short walk down through scattered birch and willow scrub to view the weird and wonderful lava formations before returning to the bus for lunch. The village store was next to purchase nibbles in the event of an evening watching the northern lights, before continuing onto visit the impressive fissure and bathing caves at Grjótagjá.

The unsettled landscape at Námafjall followed, the scenery was surreal and desolated yet colourful with yellow, pink and brown pastel hues, where steam escaped from hissing fumaroles in giant white plumes and the earth's crust bubbled and gurgled in a series of sulphuric-mud holes and its distinct 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; placing plastic bin-liners on our feet, taped to our legs to prevent the claggy-mud from sticking to our boots, (and from getting the bus too dirty!). The 'Nature Baths' was our final venue of the day where only the brave stripped off for a soak in the blue, silicon-rich waters, while the more sensible were content to sit in the warmth of the cafe with a hot drink! The daily species-log and a briefing followed a delicious supper of traditional Icelandic lamb, and with little chance of clear skies again this evening we retired content for an early night.

Day 4

Wednesday 13th March

Húsavík; Weather details; Overcast am, brighter pm wind 1m/s, temp -5°C

Before starting on our planned trip along the coast to Húsavík this morning, we first travelled a short distance east along the lake shore in search of Gyr Falcons. We didn't have to travel very far before we found a beautiful female perched on a prominent lava formation and much to our surprise a male was also present. The larger female flew a short distant out of sight, while the male obligingly perched close to the road. We slowly cruised by him several times so everyone had fantastic views of this much sort after falcon and even the photographers managed to get some marvellous images. Next we stopped by the bridge over the River Laxá just in case any Harlequins had made an early return to their breeding haunts and since we found none we assumed they would still be on the coast.

Our drive this morning took us down the Laugar Valley before arriving at the important fishing community on the north coast. The landscape during the drive was amazing, blanketed in a fresh layer of snow and firmly in the grip of an arctic winter. Arriving in Husávik we headed straight for the harbour and to where an effluence pipe discharged factory waste from the fish processing plant. Although many ducks, mostly Mallard, a few Eiders and lots of Fulmars had gathered to feed, the whole area was quiet. In the harbour itself several rafts of Long-tail Ducks were a joy to watch and rafts of Eiders were also present in small numbers, but white-wings gulls were mostly absent for whatever reason! From the inner harbour we walked back into town and enjoyed coffee and cake at the bakery before returning to the outer harbour wall when Malcolm received a call alerting us to the presence of a Gyr Falcon nearby. We arrived at the site and found a large female perched on a boulder-wall. This was perhaps a young falcon and she duly obliged us with some fantastic views. Managing to drag ourselves away, we returned to the outer-wall for lunch and unbelievably another falcon, this time a male suddenly appeared and perched on the boulders not more than 30 feet away! Again we had some stunning views and everyone managed to photograph the falcon as it confidently sat completely unconcerned by our presence – this was our fourth falcon of the day and still only lunchtime!

After lunch the cloud lifted, the light was amazing and the fresh-air had a real arctic feel; which shouldn't have been that surprising since we were only 50 miles south of the Arctic Circle! We retraced our route back to Lake Mývatn, again we stopped by the Laxá bridge, just in case we had missed any Harlequin earlier and found none. We then completed a circumnavigation of the lake, arriving back at the hotel where the non-bathers disembarked while the few returned to the 'Nature Baths'.

After supper we had our final gathering upstairs and since the night-sky wasn't looking too optimistic for an aurora display this evening, the weather forecast appeared more promising later suggesting the sky might clear by 3am! So we decided to retire early and pack, keeping our fingers crossed, and get-up mid-way through the night in any eventuality of seeing the northern lights! We had no sooner closed our bedroom doors when Malcolm came knocking to alert us to put warm clothes on and get outside quickly. While hitching the trailer he noticed the night-sky was miraculously clearing! Once outside we stood by the pseudo-craters in the chilling darkness and gazed into the arctic-night. The sky appeared like a piece of dark-blue velvet on which a myriad of bright constellations appeared like sequins with a pale bow arcing between the horizons. Full of excitement and anticipation we patiently waited for the auroral arc to develop and the celestial lights commence! We didn't have long to wait before the northern lights started, first the colour intensified and the arc increased its depth. It was calm without structure, an eerie glow that eventually developed into a series of multiple rays and sheets of green light, only the camera could pick out infra-red and ultra-violet colours. It was not, perhaps the most spectacular or animated display as we might have imagined, but it was the Aurora Borealis and an amazing 'unearthly' experience to witness. By 12:30pm mist and low cloud began to obscure the sky once more and the night-air was freezing, so we returned to our rooms contented and very happy that we had had the opportunity to see the phenomenon that has intrigued mankind for centuries.

Day 5

Thursday 14th March

Akureyri – Keflavik Airport; Weather details; Cloudy, wind 1m/s temp -4°C

It was still dark when we left the hotel at 07:00am this morning. A hard frost made the road sparkle, as if they used diamonds in the grit, in the early morning light and we encountered freezing fog while crossing the valleys before we reached Akureyri.

Our flight was on time and before long we were landing at Reykjavik where a coach was awaiting our arrival to take us on the short journey into the city. Having bid farewell to Martin and Dorothy, who had another night in Iceland, we all dispersed to enjoy the cosmopolitan ambience of capital whether window shopping or simply sitting by the lake enjoying close views of the waterfowl.

Our time passed very quickly before we resumed the final leg of our journey along the Reykjanes Peninsula to Keflavik Internal Airport. Check-in was completed with ease and Malcolm bid us farewell before we made our way upstairs, through security to the departure lounge and more retail therapy before our UK flight departed.

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. Goða ferð (Good trip, thank you)

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Species List

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted)

| | Common name | Scientific name | March | | | | |
|----|------------------------|------------------------------|-------|-----|----|-----|-----|
| | | | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 |
| 1 | Fulmar | <i>Fulmarus glacialis</i> | | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| 2 | Shag | <i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i> | | 6 | | | |
| 3 | Whooper Swan | <i>Cygnus Cygnus</i> | | 120 | 6 | 5 | 100 |
| 4 | Pink-footed Goose | <i>Anser penelope</i> | | | | | 1 |
| 5 | Greylag Goose | <i>Anser anser</i> | | ✓ | | | ✓ |
| 6 | Eurasian Wigeon | <i>Anas Penelope</i> | | | | 2 | 4 |
| 7 | Mallard | <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i> | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 8 | Gadwall | <i>Anser platyrhynchos</i> | | | | | 2 |
| 9 | Tufted Duck | <i>Aythya fuligula</i> | | 1 | 12 | 12 | 15 |
| 10 | Eider | <i>Somateria mollissima</i> | | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |
| 11 | Long-tailed Duck | <i>Clangula hyernalis</i> | | | | 40 | |
| 12 | Barrow's Goldeneye | <i>Bucephala islansica</i> | | 3 | ✓ | 20 | |
| 13 | Goosander | <i>Mergus merganser</i> | | | 6 | 6 | |
| 14 | Gyr Falcon | <i>Falco rusticus</i> | | | 1 | 4 | |
| 15 | Rock Ptarmigan | <i>Lagopus lagopus</i> | | | 13 | 1 | |
| 16 | Purple Sandpiper | <i>Calidris maritima</i> | | | | 80 | 20 |
| 17 | Black-headed Gull | <i>Larus ridibundus</i> | | | | | 8 |
| 18 | Common Gull | <i>Larus canus</i> | | 1 | | | |
| 19 | Kittiwake | <i>Rissa tridactylia</i> | | 3 | | | |
| 20 | Herring Gull | <i>Larus argentatus</i> | | | | 3 | |
| 21 | Glaucous Gull | <i>Larus hyperboreus</i> | | | | 5 | |
| 22 | Iceland Gull | <i>Larus glaucoides</i> | | 6 | | | |
| 23 | Feral Pigeon/Rock Dove | <i>Columbia livia</i> | | | | | ✓ |
| 24 | Redwing | <i>Turdus iliacus</i> | | 1 | | | 2 |
| 25 | Common Raven | <i>Corvus corax</i> | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 26 | Common Starling | <i>Sturnus vulgaris</i> | | ✓ | | | ✓ |
| 27 | Redpoll | <i>Carduelis flammea</i> | | | 20 | | |
| 28 | Snow Bunting | <i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i> | | 1 | 5 | 200 | |