

# Iceland – Gyr Falcons & The Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour Report

15 - 19 March 2013

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Aurora Borealis as seen from the Northern Light Inn



Gyr Falcon

Report & images compiled by Malcolm Stott

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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 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.

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

**Friday 15th March**

UK – Northern Light Inn; Weather details: Keflavik, bright & sunny, temp -2<sup>0</sup>C

The UK flight was uneventful, touching down at Keflavik airport just behind schedule where Malcolm was waiting to greet and meet the group. Following a short drive to the Northern Light Inn we soon settled into our cosy rooms before assembling in the bar for a tour briefing to outline the day-to-day logistics.

Following supper we retired upstairs to the observatory where Malcolm held a ‘camera clinic’ giving guidance on how to obtain the best images of northern lights. Then we waited to see if we could put theory into practice should any celestial lights be visible this evening. We were lucky by 9:45pm the cloud dispersed and the incipient tell-tales signs of the northern lights started. First, sheets of pale green light appeared isolated in the night sky, followed by the familiar green arc. Between 11:00pm & midnight a double arc had developed, it broadened before rays and wands of light filled the starry-sky. It became more animated with curtains fringed crimson on its lower edge, rays and shafts of light appeared. Wow, this was marvellous, unfortunately most had retired before the celestial event reached its crescendo with columns of colour, green, white, magenta and red became observable between 03:00am & 04:00am. All this on our first night!

## Day 2

Saturday 16th March

Transfer Northern Light Inn to Hotel Sel (Mývatn); Weather details; Overcast, sunny periods, winds 2m/s, temp 3<sup>0</sup>C

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 grey moss, *Racomitrium lanuginosum* before arriving in the northern capital. We had time to visit the imposing church that dominates the city skyline, Hallgrímskirkja. Its spire provided some spectacular panoramic views of the old town before we continued on a brief city tour, along the sea front passing the new and very impressive opera house, Harpa before driving along the marine lake (or should that be ‘Swan Lake?’) and eventually arriving at the airport for the 40 minute flight north to Akureyri.

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 and with luggage loaded into the trailer we headed out across the causeway and into the countryside. We had lunch overlooking Eyjafjörður with distant views of the town and the weather was very pleasant. We continued our journey 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 a freezing vapour, made a truly awesome sight. It did take much to imagine this could have been a landscape straight out of any winter fairy-tail. We continued our journey over high mountain ridges, plateaus and down through dormant valleys, a landscape perhaps best described as a ‘winter wonderland’!

We eventually descended from the high ground to arrive by the River Laxá where we stopped to enjoy our first views of 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 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 pseudo-craters, lava-fields and cave formations, sulphur-streaked mountains, and sweeping frozen wetlands. On Malcolm insistence we took a walk around the hotel environment, to gain an awareness and appreciation of any obstacles and features that could be hazardous in the excitement and darkness while gazing upwards at the celestial night-sky before checking-in. Once settled into our cosy rooms, there was plenty of time to unwind and relax before supper.

After dinner we retired upstairs to the meeting room for the daily-log and an update on the potential for northern lights this evening. The forecast for aurora activity was high, but the night-sky was obscured by snow-clouds, so while we patiently waited for the skies to clear Malcolm presented an informative DVD on the Aurora Borealis its science and legends. Despite keeping an eye open for any change in the weather, the snow-clouds continued all night!

## Day 3

Sunday 17th March

Lake Myvatn; Weather details; Overcast, snow-flurries, wind 6m/s temp -9°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 and it didn't take long before we found a beautiful grey female. We watched the birds for some time before she spread her wings and disappeared into the vastness of the landscape. Next we visited the wooded peninsula, Hofði where we had an enjoyable walk along snow covered path and chanced our luck with finding Ptarmigan. Most managed a glimpse of a bird flushed at the beginning of our walk and we saw no more! We took pictures of the lava-pillars, the iconic emblem of Mývatn before returning to the bus.

We continued on our drive until we reached the 'Cowshed Cafe', where the lure of fresh coffee and home-baked blueberry cake was a temptation we found hard to resist! Still looking for another falcon and better views of Ptarmigan we visited Dimmuborgir next. From the car-park we took a short walk down through scattered birch and willow scrub to take pictures of the weird and wonderful lava formations. Standing at the viewing area we watched excitedly as a large white falcon flew amongst the lava rocks and eventually landed albeit some distance away. Malcolm disappeared only to return minutes later with a telescope, now we had some good views of this magnificent falcon before returning to the bus for lunch.

We briefly called at the local supermarket in Reykjahlið for a comfort stop before visiting the impressive fissure and bathing caves at Grjótagjá. The unsettled landscape at Námafjall followed; the scenery was unworldly, surreal and desolate yet colourful carpeted with pink, yellow 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. The 'Nature Baths' was our final venue of the day and while some didn't take the opportunity to soak in the blue, silicon-rich waters others chose to continue searching for the elusive Ptarmigan!

The daily-log and a briefing followed a delicious supper of traditional Icelandic lamb and with news of the aurora forecast showing severe, we had to contain our excitement with snow-cloud still persistent. Full of optimism we eagerly awaited the predicted weather-window between 2am – 6am. Sadly, having kept vigil on the night-sky, any opportunity that the cloud would disperse never materialised and we missed-out seeing the display...

## Day 4

Monday 18th March

Húsavík; Weather details; Snow flurries, wind 4m/s, Temp -8°C

After a brief stop by the River Laxá this morning, to see if any Harlequins had returned to their breeding haunts and none had, we continued our drive down the Laugar Valley.

The scenery was spectacular the pristine landscape covered by fresh, overnight snow. We had some amazingly close views of two magnificent Gyr Falcons en-route to the prosperous fishing town on the north coast. Once in Husávik we headed straight for the harbour down to where an effluence pipe discharged factory waste from the fish processing plant. Although many duck, mostly Mallard, a few Eiders and lots of Fulmars had gathered to feed, the whole area was strangely quiet. In the harbour only a few Long-tail Ducks were present and Eiders were not that numerous, while white-wings gulls were mostly absent for whatever reason! From the inner harbour we walked back in to town and enjoyed coffee and cake at the bakery before visiting the outer harbour wall for lunch. This afternoon some visited the Culture House Museum, while the ‘uncultured!’ returned to the coast to search for King Eider reportedly in the area, which remained elusive.

We returned to the lake and within minutes of starting to complete our circumnavigation of its shores we found the third Gyr Falcon of the day. Most of the northern part of the lake was frozen and it didn’t take long before we arrived at Reykjahlíð. Still looking for good views of Ptarmigan we drove slowly around the small residential community and to the delight of every one we managed to find a covey of 12 birds feeding along the edge of the road! Flocks of Snow Buntings were a memorable feature of today, with several flocks of these delightful birds seen fluttering close by the road before returning to the hotel.

With plenty of time to relax and take the opportunity to enjoy a last walk around the pseudo-craters before returning to pack in readiness for an early start the next morning. After supper we gathered upstairs for the daily-log followed by a briefing when Malcolm was in a fairly optimistic mood despite the cloud-cover being unbroken. Checking weather forecasts and cloud prediction there appeared to be, perhaps a ‘window of opportunity’ developing. So based on his advice we all disappeared to our rooms to pack and wait. We didn’t have long to wait, within a few minutes Malcolm was busy alerting everyone that the aurora was already starting to be visible! We all gathered outside in front of the hotel and watched as the clouds dispersed and a faint green veil of celestial light was just about discernible. Initially the aurora didn’t perhaps develop as much as we would have liked, but by 2am and again at 4am some rays and wands of the northern lights were evident, but most of us were tucked up in bed with an early start pending.

## Day 5

Tuesday 19th March

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

It was still dark when we left the hotel at 06:30am this morning, and the over-night snow added a new dimension to our drive this morning; a monochrome landscape at times with no defining edges and difficult to know where the road ended and the countryside began! The countryside looked and felt like the arctic, and on arrival in Akureyri even the fjord was totally bound with sheets of ‘pancake’ ice! After sorting out a bit of damage to our bus, we duly arrived at the airport in plenty of time. The 40-minute flight was very pleasant and we were soon landing at Reykjavik where a coach was waiting our arrival. After the short drive into town we had two-and-a-half hours to enjoy the sun and ambience of the very cosmopolitan capital before our final journey to Keflavik. At the International Airport check-in was empty, so without delay we said our farewells before heading through security and the departure lounge for some serious retail therapy while waiting for the UK flight. 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.

## Species List

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	March				
			15	16	17	18	19
1	Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓
2	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus Cygnus</i>		120		2	90
3	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>					1
4	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas Penelope</i>					3
6	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		6	3	12	
8	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		✓		✓	✓
9	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyernalis</i>				24	
10	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islansica</i>		20	12	100	✓
11	Gadwall	<i>Anus sreppera</i>					2
12	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>			6	3	
13	Gyr Falcon	<i>Falco rusticus</i>			2	4	
14	Rock Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus lagopus</i>			2	12	
15	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>					12
16	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>				2	
17	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		2		2	
18	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>				✓	
19	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>				4	
20	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>		6		2	
21	Feral Pigeon/Rock Dove	<i>Columbia livia</i>		✓			✓
22	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		4	1	6	2
23	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	5	✓	✓
24	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓			✓
25	Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>		2	10		
26	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>		2	250	1000	

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