

# Iceland – Gyr Falcons & The Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour Report

20 - 24 March 2013

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Amazing Northern Lights at Lake Mývatn



Gyr Falcon



Ptarmigan

Report compiled by Malcolm Stott  
Images courtesy of Nigel Carter



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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

**Wednesday 20th March**

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

The UK flights were uneventful and to schedule.

We met in the arrivals hall at Keflavik followed by a short drive to the Northern Light Inn. Most settled into the cosy rooms, and while some relaxed in the hotel others enjoyed the geo-thermal waters of the unique Blue Lagoon. After a delicious supper Malcolm gave a tour briefing, outlining the day-to-day logistics for the next few days.

We retired upstairs to the observatory where Malcolm held a ‘camera clinic’ giving guidance on how to obtain the best images of the Northern Lights. However with little hope for any celestial events this evening, we retired to our rooms only to receive a phone call minutes later to announce some aurora activity was visible. Grabbling extra clothes and cameras we dashed outside (or if you were lucky, viewed from your bedroom window!). The cloud began to disperse by 9:45pm and tell-tale signs of incipient aurora activity had appeared in the night-sky. At first, pale green streaks appeared and stretched through the night-sky, without structure or movement. Despite the chilly-wind we waited patiently for them to evolve into something slightly more spectacular, but they didn’t and by midnight they had vanished. Some who stayed up well into the night, reported more auroral light at 03:30am, but again it never fully materialised into anything other than insignificant green wands or patches.

## Day 2

## Thursday 21st March

Transfer Northern Light Inn to Hotel Sel (Myvatn); Weather details; Overcast, sunny periods, winds 6m/s, temp -1°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 centuries-old 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 where we gained a superb panoramic view of the old city, with its multi-coloured roof, from the spire. Next we drove down towards the harbour past the sculpture ‘Sun Voyager’, to the spectacularly modern opera house, Harpa before heading by the marine lake and eventually arriving at the domestic air-terminal for the 40-minute flight north.

With clear-skies and lovely light, we had some magnificent views of the interior 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 where we had lunch.

Continuing 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 a freezing vapour, made a truly awesome sight and a landscape opportunity that put our camera skills to the ultimate test. It wasn’t difficult to imagine the scene could have come straight out of any winter fairy-tail! We continued over high mountain ridges and plateaus and through dormant 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 is 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 36km<sup>2</sup> lake provided a spectacular panorama of pseudo-craters, lava-fields and cave formations, sulphur-streaked mountains, and sweeping frozen wetlands. Before settling we had time to settle into our cosy rooms Malcolm insisted we took a walk outside. This was simply to gain an awareness and appreciation of any obstacles or features that may be hazardous in the excitement and darkness while rushing outside to experience the celestial night-sky. Once checked-in 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 a briefing on the potential for Northern Lights this evening. Although the forecast for light activity was moderate, the night-sky was obscured by snow-clouds, so while we waited patiently for any break in the weather, Malcolm presented an informative DVD on the Aurora Borealis - its science and legends. Despite keeping an eye on the weather throughout the night the snow-clouds failed to break!

## Day 3

## Friday 22nd March

Lake Mývatn; Weather details; Sunny, wind 6m/s temp -2°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 white female. We watched the falcon for some time before she spread her wings and disappeared into the vastness of the landscape, displaying her powerful flight along the way.

Next we visited the wooded peninsula, Hofði for an enjoyable walk along fresh snow-covered path to chance our luck on finding Ptarmigan. Although the new snow hid past evidence of their presence, it also revealed signs of fox activity and perhaps explained why they were absent? The light was superb for photography this morning and we took time to capture images of the lava pillars, an 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; we even made new friends with some of the occupants! Dimmuborgir was our next stop, still looking for more Gyr Falcons and Ptarmigan. From the car-park we took a short walk down through scattered birch and willow scrub to take images of the weird and wonderful lava formations. At the village store in Reykjahlíð some purchased most of its liquorice supplies before going on to the Post Office and taking a monopoly on the stamps! Malcolm bought snacks for the evening should we be out late watching the celestial lights.

We had a slow drive around the residential properties in our search of Ptarmigan and found none before continuing to visit the impressive fissure and bathing caves at Grjótagjá where we stopped for lunch. The unsettled landscape at Námafjall followed, the scenery was surreal and desolate yet colourful too with yellow, pink and brown pastel hues appearing between the snow-fields. 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, or perhaps from getting the bus too dirty!

The 'Nature Baths' was our final venue of the day and while some took the opportunity to soak in the blue, silicon-rich waters others continued with the search for Ptarmigan and returned to the village. Failing to find the elusive bird we decided to chance our luck with finding another Gyr Falcon, which in the event proved easier; this was a different falcon to that previously, it's plumage being much greyer. In high spirits we returned to the village and on this occasion our luck held and managed to find a covey of 15 Ptarmigan and they were very approachable. While Malcolm quickly returned to Jarðböðin to collect the bathers, so they too could enjoy the Ptarmigan, two more Gyr Falcon were seen!

The daily-log and a northern lights briefing followed another delicious supper. Malcolm was in fairly optimistic mood, he thought a break in the cloud-cover was a realistic possibility between midnight and 02:00am. With that in mind we retired to bed and wait further announcements. Sadly the opportunity never materialised!

## Day 4

## Saturday 23rd March

Húsavík; Weather details; Sunny, wind 4m/s, temp - 2°C

After a brief pause by the River Laxá to photograph Barrow's Goldeneye we continued on our drive to Husávik. The scenery was quite spectacular this morning, a pristine landscape covered by fresh overnight snow and glistening in the sublime arctic light. Arriving at the important fishing town on the north coast we headed straight down to the harbour. Malcolm dropped us off at the far end of the inner harbour so we could have a walk back into town doing a little bird-watching along the way. Malcolm collected us at the bakery where we enjoyed fresh coffee and home-baked cakes and we visited the outer-wall of the harbour where a few Long-tail Duck, in summer plumage, were present. We even managed a brief view of Harlequins before they disappeared behind the seawall.

By an effluence pipe discharging factory waste from the fish processing plant, we found many duck, mostly Mallard, a few Eiders and lots of Fulmars that had gathered to feed, but other than that, the whole area was strangely quiet. We managed to find both Iceland and Glaucous Gulls in various stages of plumage and a small flock of Purple Sandpipers. An amble back to the outer seawall followed lunch to see if the Harlequins had reappeared; sadly they had not!

We left Husávik, bathed in glorious sunshine by early afternoon when we had an interesting return journey to Lake Mývatn via the mountain route. The drive was well-worth the effort, the scenery albeit in monochrome was magnificent. We first called at Reykjahlíð for a comfort stop before completing our journey along the lake's northern shores and stopping by the Laxá Bridge to look for Harlequins, but found none. It was 4 o'clock by now and the light was sublime so we continued along the southern shore, as far as the 'Cowshed Cafe', in search of more Gyr Falcons, but on this occasion found none. We returned to the hotel in plenty of time for a last walk in this wonderful environment before it was time for the inevitable packing before supper.

We gathered in the bar before dinner and when Malcolm appeared he shared his optimistic mood. We were delighted with news that the weather forecast suggested a strong possibility of Northern Lights this evening. After supper we retired upstairs for the daily-log and a briefing, still feeling optimistic despite a downgrade in the aurora forecast. Malcolm suggested we retire and finish our packing and to wait for a phone call.

At 10:35pm the phones rang all around the hotel announcing the lights had started. Some only just managed to get outside before the sky erupted in celestial luminescence! The sky was awash with very active auroral activity. Huge curtains of swirling colours, rays and wands of green and magenta, crimson and blue quickly developed. They were very animated rippling and dance through the moon-lit night. Wow, one could only gaze and gasp at the celestial phenomenon. Although the lights were at their most active during the first 2 hours, it was the initial burst of energy that resulted in the most spectacular display and an unexpected corona appeared; a sheer joy of heavenly delight! This was an amazing experience and surely exceeded all preconceived expectations we may have held!

## Day 5

Sunday 24th March

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

Auroral lights were reportedly still very detectable at 05:30am this morning! After an early breakfast and with luggage loaded we left Lake Mývatn still slumbering! As we retraced our route back to Akureryi this morning the light was exquisite and the countryside sparkled as though diamond dust had been scattered over-night. It was a truly magical journey through a very wintery and spectacular landscape.

We arrived in Akureryi with plenty of time for a little bird-watching by Eyjafjörður while Malcolm disappeared into town to refuel the bus. Once our luggage had been checked-in we could relax over a cup of coffee. The flight south was incredible, the clear-skies afforded extensive views of a frozen interior; high snow-covered mountains intersected by highland valleys, breeding haunts of Pink-footed Geese, as far west as the western fjords including marvellous views of the shield volcano that dominates Snæfellsness Peninsula and made famous by Jules Verne.

The bus was waiting our arrival when we touched down in the Reykjavik. After a short drive we were soon enjoying the cosmopolitan ambience in the sunbathed capital. Time simply ran out all too quickly and we were soon climbing back onboard the bus for the journey to Keflavik. At the International Airport check-in was relatively quiet, so without delay we said our farewells before going through security into the departure lounge and some serious retail therapy while waiting for the UK flight.

*NB - 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. Goda ferð (Good Trip)*

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## Species List

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	March				
			20	21	22	23	24
1	Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>			2		
2	Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>		✓		✓	✓
3	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus Cygnus</i>		80	2	12	80
4	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser Penelope</i>					1
5	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓			✓
6	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas Penelope</i>				1	2
7	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		✓	20		✓
9	Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>			2		
10	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓	✓		4	✓
11	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>				8	
12	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyernalis</i>				10	
13	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islansica</i>		12	✓	✓	
14	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>					2
15	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>					1
16	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		6			
17	Gyr Falcon	<i>Falco rusticus</i>			4	1	
18	Rock Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus lagopus</i>			15	6	3
19	Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		40			
20	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritime</i>				15	
21	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>				2	
22	Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactylia</i>				✓	
23	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>				✓	
24	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>				4	30
25	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>				6	12
26	Feral Pigeon/Rock Dove	<i>Columbia livia</i>		✓			✓
27	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			1		
28	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>					6
29	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	1	✓	3	12	✓
30	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓			✓
31	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>		200	2500	1000	250