

Iceland – Gyr Falcons & the Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour report

5 - 9 October 2013



Northern Lights



N.Lights and psuedo-craters



Landscape at Namnafeld



Mighty Dettifoss

Report & Images compiled by Malcolm Stott



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Introduction

As autumn draws to a close, it is the time to enjoy the serenity of the mountains. Colours begin to change, in both the landscape and the sky, with spectacular sunsets on a regular basis. As the evenings cool, the northern lights begin to appear dancing across the night skies. There are many charming myths and folk-lore legends surrounding the Northern Lights phenomenon, many claiming them to be Spirits of ancestors or messages from the heavens. The scientific explanation, as is so often the case, is far less mysterious and enchanting but enlightening and interesting nonetheless. The aurora borealis are named after the Latin phrase meaning ‘northern dawn’ and are caused by solar winds interacting with the Earth’s ionosphere. Most of the winds, consisting of charged solar particles sent Earthwards by solar flares or explosions simply pass the Earth by and disappear into space, but some do enter the atmosphere at its weaker polar-points colliding with atoms and molecules which absorb the particles energy. In order to return to their ‘normal’ state these atoms and molecules emit photons, or light particles, giving us the phenomenon of the Northern Lights.

The aurora is best seen in between October – March, far away from artificial light, beneath the aurora oval which usually circles the Earth between 60° – 70° of latitude which makes Iceland an ideal location to witness this wondrous phenomenon. The intensity of luminescence is inextricably linked to sun-spot activity that has a natural rhythm. Waiting for these capricious manifestations to appear can be a long and often cold wait with no guarantee the celestial lights will show on any given night due to solar inactivity or cloud-cover. Those with a deep aspiration to observe the aurora it is paramount to keep a watchful-eye on the night-sky between 10:00pm – 02:00 am, especially on cloudy-nights when a weather-window may suddenly improve otherwise poor visibility.

Day 1

Saturday 5th October

Heathrow – Keflavik (Northern Light Inn)

Weather details: Bright & sunny: Wind NW 3m/s & temp 4°C

The flight touched down at Keflavik International Airport on time and Malcolm was waiting with a bus for the 20-minute transfer to the comfortable Northern Light Inn. Once checked-in we disappeared to our cosy rooms where we had plenty of time to relax and unwind from the day’s travel before enjoying a delicious supper of Icelandic Catfish. We retired from the dining room and reconvened in the observatory where Malcolm held a ‘camera clinic’ giving some useful tips on how best to capture the northern lights. We didn’t have long to wait before the first incipient signs started to appear in the night sky. Unfortunately on this occasion the aurora never materialised into anything spectacular, so just before mid-night most had retired in the knowledge that should any celestial show commence later a telephone call would alerted us of the event.

Day 2

Sunday 6th October

Northern Light Inn – Mývatn Sel Hotel (118km)

Weather details; Clear skies & sunshine: Wind W1m/s & temp -3⁰C

We departed the Northern Light Inn this morning for the 50-minute drive to Reykjavik. Our journey took us along the barren Reykjanes peninsula, through ancient lava-fields softened by centuries old Rhacomitrum mosses, before reaching the vibrant city centre. We had just enough time for a brief visit to Hallgrímskirkja, the impressive church that dominates the Reykjavik skyline, before arriving at the domestic airport in plenty of time for the flight to Akureyri. During the 40-minute flight north the weather was bright and sunny allowing some impressive views of the vast glaciers beneath, occasionally dotted with sapphire-blue ice-pools, and remote interior before the plane started its descent into Akureyri, jewel of the north.

Once on board the bus we had only travelled just a short distance before seeing a Merlin perch above the road on a street-light before lunch on the outskirts of town by a lake. Once over the mountains we stopped at Goðafoss to enjoy this spectacular waterfall before arriving at Lake Mývatn, which is located in the heart of north-east Iceland about 100kl/65 miles south of the Arctic Circle. Lake Mývatn and its surroundings are one of Europe's greatest natural treasures. Shaped by repeated volcanic eruptions and seismic activity down through the ages, the landscape around the 36km² lake was a spectacular panorama of surreal lava, pseudo-craters and cave formations, sulphur-streaked mountains, and sweeping wetlands. The afternoon light was perfect, so instead of going straight to the hotel we decide to drive around the lake stopping frequently for bird-watching, where we saw many Barrow's Goldeneye, before calling at the 'Cowshed Cafe' to sample some delicious blueberry cake and coffee and chance our luck with finding a Gyr Falcon, which we did manage some brief glimpses of a falcon in flight! Soon after leaving the delightful cafe Malcolm managed to locate a second falcon and within as many minutes had found two more, including a very white individual perched on a roadside pole that allowed an incredibly close approach. Wow, we could not have wished for a better start than this!

In jubilant mood we arrived at the hotel and quickly settled into our rooms before heading down to the dining room for a traditional supper of Mývatn Trout and chocolate cake. During the evening it began to snow and with prospects of seeing the northern lights fast diminishing we held the daily-log in the lounge and watched a DVD explaining the science behind the Aurora Borealis phenomenon in beautiful images. With visibility still poor we retired to dream of what might be during the rest of our stay at this incredible place, while still keeping an eye on the sky through the bedroom window should the weather improve.

Day 3

Monday 7th October

Lake Mývatn – Dettifoss (182km)

Weather details; Cloudy & dry: Wind W1m/s & temp -2⁰C

Fresh overnight snow left a real winter wonderland feel on this morning's drive to Dettifoss. From the car park we took the short walk to above the canyon where we stood in amazement at the mighty waterfall, the most powerful in Europe. Although the path down to the edge of the waterfall was icy and often slippery to negotiate, with great care we managed it safely and to stand above the thunderous waters was awesome. Large boulders strewn along the top edge and even the sparse vegetation was encased in thick-ice and frozen in time.

Icicles hung from the guide-ropes and glistened in the sunlight, appearing like huge diamond drops on a giant necklace, it was an incredible sight. Safely back on higher ground above the canyon we took even more photographs before retracing our footsteps back to the car park.

We returned to the lake and had lunch at Hofði before enjoying a walk through the woodlands in all their autumnal glory. Flocks of Redwings were noisily stripping Rowans of their berries and Redpolls busily teased seeds from the fruiting birch. It was a truly wonderful walk and the scenery quite spectacular. Next we briefly visited Dimmuborgir for coffee before moving onto a nearby high temperature area. The Namaskardi area consists, without doubt, one of the most surreal scenarios on the island and is part of the Namafjall fissure, active proof of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge below, the opposing and contrasting forces of which tend to separate the two tectonic plates that form Iceland at a rate of a few millimetres per year. This area was certainly most unusual, the terrain being dotted with numerous holes of gurgling, bubbling grey mud and hissing, steaming fumaroles, typical manifestations of secondary volcanism. These infernal cauldrons, supplied by surface water that filters into the ground and is heated by the molten rock beneath through deep fissures in the earth's crust, take one's imagination back in time, to the very creation of the universe; paradoxically Iceland is a land which has been formed in very recent times, geologically speaking.

After supper the customary daily-log followed by an interesting DVD on the science behind the 'Continental Drift' theory and with low cloud outside, but a potential for a break in the weather forecast, we retired to our rooms to wait for a call announcing the celestial lights show had started. We didn't have long to wait before Malcolm was banging on doors urging us outside, 'the lights have started!' We all gathered on the car park in front of the pseudo-craters and watched as blankets of eerily green light started to illuminate the night-sky. Although the aurora was quiet and calm initially, the arc of light gradually intensified and extended across the sky beneath the star constellation of the Plough. Most of the group stayed out in the chilling air until midnight when the lights eventually faded, and numbing fingers beckoned for a hot cup of coffee, before falling into nocturnal bliss, happy to have experienced such a fascinating natural phenomenon! The light show didn't end there, a second burst of energy at 0400 hrs, more intense than earlier, filled the night sky with wands of green edged pink light that gently rippled through the sky like waves on an ocean. The display was brief only lasting 20 minutes before darkness was once more restored!

Day 4

Tuesday 8th October

Huðavík (137km)

Weather details; Bright am, snow pm: Wind S1m/s & temp -1°C

Today we headed down the Laugar Valley and followed the coast road to Huðavík, the light and the scenery was exquisite. As autumn succumbs to winter's grip, the season's changes were immediately apparent on our drive this morning as the russet grasses and fiery-red carpets of prostrate shrubs were frosted amidst showers of golden leaves and the lakes were already freezing-over. On the outskirts of town we turned off the main road and drove down a cinder track to the sea where several Glaucous and Iceland Gulls, along with numerous Black-headed Gulls, were feeding by an effluence outlet pipe. Our next stop was by another fish processing outlet pipe, again many gulls were gathered squabbling over every morsel of food. We visited the outer-harbour and found a small group of Long-tailed Ducks in their elegant winter plumage and two Black Guillemots, before finding a coffee house in town.

In the knowledge that 6 Hump-back Whales had been seen in the bay we decided to have lunch over-looking the placid waters and chance our luck with seeing any whales that may have been close-by. Although we saw no whales, the scenery was worthwhile, the soft winter's sun highlighting the distant snow-covered mountain – awesome!

On our return to Mývatn darkening clouds heavy with snow loomed closer and by the time we were driving across the mountain road it began snowing and we found a large flock of Snow Buntings, what else! After looking for Ptarmigan and failing we decided on returning to the hotel and en route saw our eighth Gyr Falcon, as white as they come in Iceland, sitting confidently on a roadside post posing for photographs!

This evening was to be our last meal at the hotel and the weather outside was not looking particularly good for seeing the northern lights tonight, so with the daily-log completed we all retired to pack and prepare for an early departure in the morning. Less than an hour later Malcolm was banging on doors announcing a break in the clouds and the lights were showing. Initially bands of vivid green light spanned the sky before becoming more subdued and spreading across the night sky almost filling the darkness with an eerie glow. Following a momentary burst of energy the lights calmed before fading into pale insignificance. At 12:30am more lights were visible, stronger and much more animated than earlier, and curtains of green fringed with magenta appeared in the night-sky. And again at 03:00 two parallel green arcs were very obvious high above the pseudo-craters and rays of light appeared to move between each before visibility was frustratingly lost once more.

Day 5

Wednesday 9th March

Mývatn – Keflavik - Heathrow

Weather details; Overcast, but dry: Wind NW2 & temp 2⁰C

Bus loaded, we departed the hotel at 7:00am to start the journey southwest to Akureyri. A beautiful cerise sky heralded the dawning of the day and we were lucky to see an unexpected Short-eared Owl buoyantly flying across the road in front before we left the Laugar Valley. We arrived at the airport in good time and the scenery during the flight south was breathtaking, even better than the previous flight which in itself was quite spectacular.

Once in Reykjavik we had almost 3-hours to enjoy the cosmopolitan ambience of this northern capital before we gathered outside the impressive new opera house, Harpa to be reunited with the bus. We travelled back along the Reykjanes peninsula to Keflavik airport. The flight was on schedule and we landed safely at Heathrow. In the baggage hall we collected our luggage, said our farewells and melted in to the crowds with, hopefully, pleasant memories of a wonderful experience shared together in an amazing country. I hope you can now share a little of my enthusiasm for this amazing land and may you return again one day soon to experience more of what Iceland has to offer.

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Gyr Falcon

Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	October				
			5	6	7	8	9
1	Salvonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>			2		
2	Fulmar	<i>Fulmaris glacialis</i>		2			
3	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		2		6	
4	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus Cygnus</i>	✓	✓	12	10	50
5	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓	2	✓	✓
6	Wigeon	<i>Anas Penelope</i>		15		2	
7	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		200		✓	✓
10	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyernalis</i>				6	
11	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
12	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>			20	✓	1
13	Gyr Falcon	<i>Falco rusticolus</i>		4	3	1	
14	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		1		1	
15	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>				✓	
16	Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>				1	
17	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>				✓	✓
18	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>				15	
19	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>				30	
20	Greater Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>				12	2
21	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>				2	
22	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columbia livia</i>		15			✓
23	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>			1		
24	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
25	Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>			30		
26	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓
27	Raven	<i>Corvus corvus</i>	6	✓	✓	✓	8
28	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>				250	