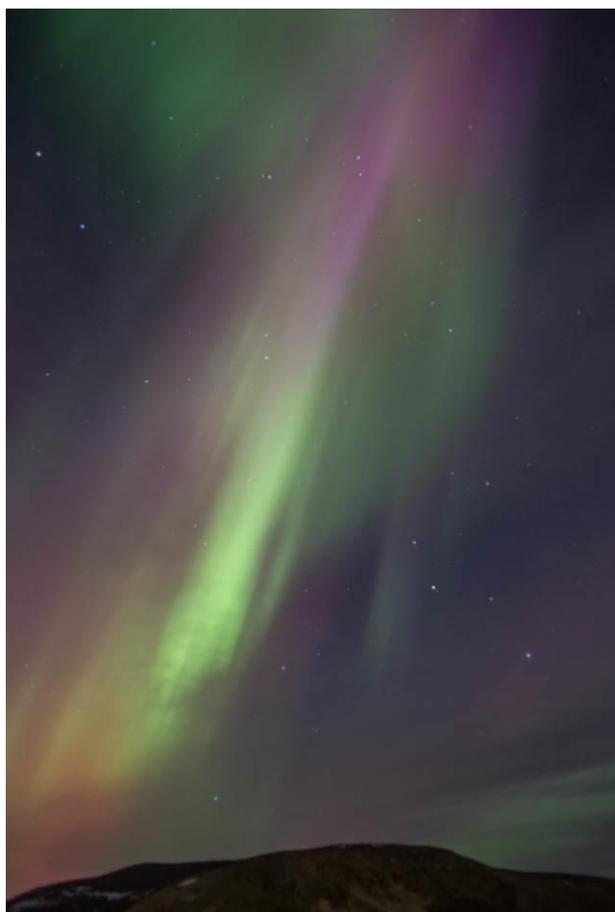


Iceland – Gyr Falcons & The Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour report

27 February – 3 March 2014



Northern Lights – Sue Brock-Hollinshead



Northern Lights – Ann Chase

Report compiled by Malcolm Stott
Images courtesy of tour participants



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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 the 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. Icelanders do not have a confidence in the future nourished by an immemorial past, as continental populations might. However dimly, they know they are perpetually on some sort of probation in this fragile and brutal environment. This may perhaps explain their unconventional way of looking at certain natural phenomena. For example, when a luminous curtain sets the sky aglow, men, women and children pretend to think of it as a magical event, a spray of light sent skywards by the elves that inhabit every nook and cranny of the island. Or perhaps the Icelanders are not entirely pretending. And why need they? Why not imagine that, if elves exist, these marvellous beings would toy with the currents of matter that bathe our planet. For in the fact these luminescent apparitions really do reflect forces that transcend us, that surpass our senses, and that act on the scale of a solar system. These strange glimmerings appear when the sun has sunk low enough beneath the horizon for the vault of heaven to unveil its loveliest of stars. At first, there is nothing, nothing but the night blue of the sky and the diamond flashings of the constellations. Quietly, a faint new nodule of light is born and draws our gaze, often over the north-west horizon. Little by little, this nodule sends out pale tentacles and grows brighter, taking on greenish tints barely perceptible to the naked eye, but which photography reveals magnificently. And then, suddenly, the spectacle begins. Waves of intense light invade the sky, undulating like a great curtain teased by the wind. The edging of this phosphorescent veil is criss-crossed by streaks and serpentine ribbons, which quiver like the surface of a lake skimmed by the breeze. The green hues intensify, sometimes pierced by rays of red and violet. The aurora borealis reaches its height, and whether it lasts a few minutes or the entire night depends on the strength of the solar storm that engendered it, but seeing the aurora on any given night is never guaranteed.

Day 1

Thursday 27th February

Heathrow – Northern Light Inn: Weather details: bright & sunny. Temperature 0°C

Once a computer glitch on the plane had been rectified the flight eventually departed Heathrow, an hour later than scheduled! Meanwhile, at Keflavik International Airport, Malcolm was patiently waiting to greet us in the arrivals hall. Once on board the bus it was a relatively short drive to the aptly named Northern Light Inn and a typically warm Iceland welcome.

After settling into our cosy rooms we reassembled in the bar (where else?) at 7pm for a tour briefing and Malcolm was keen for us to configure our cameras just in case the northern lights made an appearance later. With camera settings modified we then went through to the dining room where we thought we would be served a traditional Icelandic meal of seafood soup, followed by Arctic Char and apple cake with homemade ice-cream. What we didn't expect was Malcolm's entrance announcing the northern lights had already started just as soup arrived to the table! This engendered a mad exit for a quick look outside and, WOW! Dashing back inside most ignored the dining room and headed straight to their room to collect warm clothing and camera equipment!

In the chill night air the 'lights' were beginning to manifest into the most spectacular display one could ever wish to experience. It didn't take long before the sky was luminescent in amazing colour and intensity; huge red curtains stretched from horizon to horizon! We stood transfixed, gazing skywards for the next hour or so and supper somehow didn't seem all that significant! Although there was a sense of an indescribable energy brewing in the sky above, Malcolm suggested returning to the dining room to finish supper, (or should that be start supper?), with an expectation that the Aurora hadn't finished just yet!

The main course was delightful, but demolished in double quick time and, with little appetite for dessert, we were back outside again and the lights had, as Malcolm predicted, found new vigour. The sky was full of beautiful shimmering curtains that danced through constellations sparkling like diamonds and where great shafts of light descended from the outer reaches of our atmosphere. This was stupendous; it was simply incredible and difficult to believe we had been in Iceland for less than 4 hours!

Our senses and emotions were running high at the sheer beauty of what was unfolding in front of our eyes and we could not in our wildest dreams have wished for anything better; it was an unbelievable experience! Time seemed to slow, almost stop, as we craned our necks and stared above us to savour the moment. It was an emotional moment that seemed to touch our very souls. In a moment of silence, unable to speak or even blink, we even paused from taking photographs. Wow, this was something very special, an experience very few people ever get to witness and it felt as if the performance was for our benefit only!

Once back in the warmth we slept contentedly in our beds in the knowledge it doesn't get much better than this!

Day 2

Friday 28th February

Transfer to Hotel Sel, Mývatn (157km): Weather details: snow clouds. Temperature +1°C

Breakfast seemed to arrive awfully early, following a very late evening (or was it early morning?) and, as we loaded the bus for a 6:45am departure to Reykjavik's Domestic Airport, the northern lights were still very much evident with wands of auroral light stretching through the sky!

We arrived in the sleepy capital, where most people slept blissfully unaware of the night-time spectacle. At the airport we had plenty of time to relax before our onward flight to Akureyri. Sunrise was almost as spectacular as the northern lights this morning and we had an aerial view. As the sun made its appearance low over the horizon it cast a pink hue over the snow fields and glaciers beneath illuminating the vast interior. After the short 40-minute flight the plane descended into a cold and snowy Akureyri. The bus was organised in no time and we were soon driving into the city for a brief visit.

By 11am the group reconvened by Hof and we began an amazing journey through a landscape barely discernible due to wind-blown snow. The ice-encrusted waterfall Goðafoss proved too much of an attraction to have missed, so, despite not being able to differentiate road from landscape, we dared venture down to the car parking area. The waterfall didn't disappoint; it was an amazing and spectacular sight with vibrant blue water set in a monochrome landscape!

Pressing onwards we arrived at the renowned River Laxá, located in the heart of north-east Iceland about 100km/65 miles south of the Arctic Circle and the main out flow of Lake Mývatn, one of Europe's greatest natural treasures. Shaped by repeated volcanic eruptions and seismic activity down through the ages, the landscape around the 36 square kilometre-large lake provided a spectacular panorama of surreal lava, crater and cave formations, sulphur-streaked mountains, and sweeping wetlands as we circumnavigated its shores searching for Gyr Falcons. We did eventually find a female hunkered down, sheltering from the worst of the weather behind a lava rock. Although the views were not great, with a telescope we could see the identification features of this much sought-after bird. We finally arrived at the hotel about 3:30pm and, before checking in, Malcolm insisted we walked around the environment to familiarise ourselves with any icy conditions underfoot and gain knowledge of any obstacles that could prove hazardous should we make a dash to see the northern lights after darkness fell.

By late afternoon, the daylight began to fade and as temperatures dropped into negative figures we visited the Nature Baths. Taking our clothes off, we stepped outside. It's usually a 30-second walk from the changing room to the water, but most opted for a 10-second sprint that would have left Usain Bolt standing! It was worth the goose-pimpled skin, the water was blue and hot and wonderful. Around us was a world of white, but here we moved through sulphur-smelling water that steamed in the cold air. Cocooned by the heat of the geothermal water it was an exhilarating experience.

After supper we gathered in the upstairs lounge for the customary daily log and briefing followed by a DVD presentation on the 'Legends, Myths and Science' of the Aurora Borealis. Exhausted, yet exhilarated from our brief stay in Iceland we all retired early to re-charge our batteries for the days that lay ahead.

Day 3

Saturday 1st March

Lake Mývatn (89km): Weather details: light snow flurries with sunny periods. Temperature -1°C

Having enjoyed a good night's sleep we thought we were prepared for anything this morning, but we hadn't been expecting to see husky dogs and mushers gathering at the hotel for a weekend of dog-sled racing! After a leisurely breakfast we left the hotel at 10am on our quest to find Gyr Falcons. It only took 15 minutes before we found the first, a female perched quite close the road. It sat patiently, allowing us to take photographs, but its limits were

pushed too far when we tried to get out of the bus! A second bird was seen minutes later, but unfortunately this individual was further away. And we only had to drive a kilometre or so before finding our third bird of the morning; it was incredible!

To celebrate our good fortunes we next headed for the ‘Cowshed Cafe’ where we met some of its occupants and feasted on their speciality, blueberry cake and we found two more falcons! Next we decided to return to the hotel in the hope of getting even closer views of Gyr Falcons and to see the husky dogs in action. Unfortunately our timing coincided with the mushers having lunch, so having waited some time we left them to enjoy their extended break while we visited the otherworldly landscape at Namaskarði. This high-temperature area is, without doubt, one of the most surreal places on the island. It is part of the Namafjall fissure, and active proof of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge below, the opposing and contrasting forces of which are separating the two tectonic plates that form Iceland at a rate of a few millimetres per year. This extraordinary landscape could easily be confused for an extra-terrestrial world. The scenery is desolate yet colourful. Yellow, pink and brown hues are formed where steam escapes from hissing fumaroles in giant white plumes, and the Earth’s crust bubbles and gurgles in a series of boiling grey mud-holes and a sulphurous odour lingers – typical manifestations of secondary volcanism. These ‘cauldrons’ are 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. They take one’s imagination back in time, to the very creation of the universe, though paradoxically, Iceland is a land which has been formed in very recent history; geologically speaking it is almost pre-natal!

On our journey to the weird and wonderful natural lava sculptures at Dimmuborgir we stopped to enjoy a small covey of Ptarmigan acrobatically balancing on the slenderest upper-most birch twigs feeding on its pubescent buds. Although the road to Dimmuborgir was cushioned in snow, with care we managed the drive to the car park from where we enjoyed a walk through this unique landform to visit the King (or was it Queen) Troll’s throne before returning back to the hotel.

With little hope of seeing the northern lights tonight, due to total cloud cover, we retired to the lounge after supper for the daily log and a briefing followed by a very informative DVD on the Ayefatallajokull eruption.

Day 4

Sunday 2nd March

Husavik (181km): Weather details: overcast with sunny periods. Temperature -1°C

This morning we travelled down the Lauger Valley, through a landscape mostly obscured by strong winds and wind-blown snow, to the coastal fishing town of Husávik where we hoped to find Harlequin Duck. On the outskirts of town we took a cinder track down to the sea where huge Atlantic rollers expended their energy on the boulder beach. Few birds were present at the first outlet pipe and not that many more were gathered by the effluence outflow pipe from the fish processing plant either, but it was a Sunday and the factory was closed.

Long-tailed Duck were plentiful amongst the rafts of Eiders and we managed to find several Black Guillemots. Deep snow necessitated a walk along the outer harbour wall where we managed to find a small raft of the handsome Harlequin Duck and watched a flock of Purple Sandpipers twist and turn in unison as they were disturbed from a high-tide roost. Although few gulls were present in the harbour, we did manage good views of both Glaucous and Iceland Gulls.

Some fool-hardy souls decided to continue with birdwatching and photography, while those with more sense decided to check out the local bakery followed by a leisurely two hours of birdwatching and/or visiting the Whale Museum before heading back to the bus. The long-staying female King Eider, which can on occasions prove very elusive, was found in the inner harbour and provided some excellent views. During late morning the cloud had lifted and the light was perfect for photography. A male Gyr Falcon put in a brief appearance, and caused some ducks to have an anxious few moments, before disappearing almost as quickly as it had appeared.

All too soon it was time to leave the picturesque harbour at Husávik, but before leaving town we stopped on the outskirts to photograph a group of distant horses standing on an elevated ridge and set against a beautiful backdrop of snowy mountains. The rest of our journey back to Mývatn was uneventful except for another Gyr Falcon perched close to the road that gave some spectacular views when it took flight as we stopped.

Arriving back at the lake we had enough time for one last circuit before heading back to the hotel. As the sun dipped beneath the horizon the light was sublime, tempting us to take a final walk to the pseudo-craters and enjoy its dimming embers. Once inside the hotel we had plenty of time to download images and pack in readiness for an early start the following morning.

After supper we retired upstairs to the lounge to complete the daily log and receive final briefing instructions. With little chance of seeing any northern lights tonight we retired early, contented that we'd had another great day in this magical land.

Day 5

Monday 3rd March

Akureyri – Keflavik Airport (93km): Weather details: slightly overcast with a little sunshine. Temperature +4°C.

Our early morning call came a little earlier than we might have expected! At 3:30am the hotel's phones were ringing to alert everyone that the northern lights were visible – never say never!!! Quickly we retrieved warm clothing that had already been packed only a few hours ago and recovered cameras and tripods from packed luggage before stepping out into a chilly night. The landscape was large and white and Jupiter shone like a brilliant dot in the sky as we crossed to stand by the pseudo-craters. There was no one and nothing to be seen except a picture-perfect landscape and we were stupefied by its sheer beauty. The northern lights were already stretching in a great arc through the night sky and rays of green light, tinged with magenta and crimson began appearing from behind the pseudo-craters, as though they themselves were erupting; this was to be another unbelievable night and quite different from our first encounter, but just as beautiful. At that precise moment the chilly perfection of the landscape beneath the soft green auroral light was wonderful and we didn't wish to leave, but after two hours of pure magic it was, sadly, time to go!

By 5:30am we were back in the warmth of our rooms busily repacking our luggage before heading downstairs for an early breakfast while Malcolm loaded the bus. We left the hotel at 6:30am and wands of green lights were still visible during our journey in darkness to Akureyri. The flight south was just as spectacular as our flight north had been, with the sun's rays sparking over the horizon and casting a pink tinge to the otherwise white interior.

Once in Reykjavik we had a brief familiarisation tour of the 'old town' before being given our freedom to roam the streets. Most visited the church first before eventually finding the marine lake at the centre of this cosmopolitan

capital. Coffee and cream cakes at Harpa, the new and very impressive Opera House, was deemed necessary on this auspicious bank holiday. At Keflavik we said our fond farewells, leaving Malcolm to gather his thoughts in time for the next group, while we made our way through check-in and security en route for a little indulgent retail therapy!

NB – You were definitely blessed with some amazing lights, the likes of which could be seen from southern UK! I sincerely trust you enjoyed your brief stay in Iceland and can now share a little of my enthusiasm for this amazing land. Together we shared something truly memorable and rarely encountered by many. I hope one day, in the not too distant future, you may return to experience more of what Iceland can offer: ‘Autumn – Waterfalls, Glaciers & Icebergs’ and more northern lights perhaps! Thank you for being such great company.

Bless, bless

Malcolm

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Black Guillemot – Ann Chase



Purple Sandpiper - Sue Brock-Hollinshead

Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	February/March				
			27	28	1	2	3
1	Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	1	2		✓	✓
2	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		1		2	
3	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus Cygnus</i>				80	100
4	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>					1
5	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>			2		✓
6	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas Penelope</i>					2
7	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		6	✓	✓	✓
8	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>					3
9	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>			4		6
10	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		✓			✓
11	King Eider	<i>Somateria spectabilis</i>				1	
12	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		✓		✓	✓
13	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyernalis</i>			1	125	
14	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islansica</i>		50	30	12	
15	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>			1	5	2
16	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>			25		
17	Gyr Falcon	<i>Falco rusticus</i>	1	1	5	2	1
18	Rock Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus lagopus</i>		5	9	3	
19	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		30		24	
20	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>					1
21	Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>				3	
22	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		2		✓	
23	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>				2	2
24	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>		1		4	5
25	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>					1
26	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grille</i>				8	
27	Feral Pigeon/Rock Dove	<i>Columbia livia</i>					✓
28	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes islandic</i>			1		
29	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>					2
30	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>					12
31	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	2	15	3	4	10
32	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>					✓
33	Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>		25			20
34	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>	10	120	100	500	12