

Iceland - Gyrfalcons & the Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour Report

6 – 11 February 2015



Two magical nights of the northern lights at Lake Mývatn



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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 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 fact, these luminescent apparitions really do reflect forces that transcend us, that surpass our senses, and that act on a scale of the 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

Friday 6th February

Heathrow – Northern Light Inn

Weather details: Rain, sleet, snow & sunshine; wind 16m/s W, temp -4°C

Both UK flights into Keflavik Airport had an interesting landing in some challenging winds! Malcolm was in the arrivals hall, waiting to greet us and, once on board the bus, it was a relatively short drive to the Northern Light Inn, where a typically warm Iceland welcome our arrival.

After settling into our cosy rooms, we reassembled in the bar, where else, at 6.30pm for a tour briefing followed by a traditional supper of vegetable soup (Icelandic style), Monk fish and a cake dessert. Reassembling in the lounge later, Malcolm guided us through the techniques of configuring cameras, just in case the northern lights showed this evening. By 10pm it didn't look likely the aurora would put in an appearance tonight, since the cloud-cover was complete, so we retired, ever hopeful of receiving a wake-up call during the night; sadly it never happened!

Day 2

Saturday 7th February

Transfer to Hotel Sel (Mývatn, 94km)

Weather details; Bright periods dominated by strong winds, 20m/s S, temp 8°C

We had time for a leisurely morning, as we waited for our transfer coach to arrive to take us to the domestic airport in Reykjavik. Some made the most of this time, enjoying a stroll through the lava fields, while Malcolm held a camera clinic for others.

Once on board the coach, we travelled through a barren landscape of lava fields, softened by grey carpets of *Racomitrium* moss, on the 50-minute journey to the northern capital. At the airport, we joined the bustling crowds at check-in. The flight was uneventful, and we enjoyed tantalising views of glaciers and snowfields between breaks in the cloud, until the descent into Akureyri.

After a brief stop in the northern capital, we continued on our journey to Mývatn, only stopping the once to enjoy the spectacular ice-crusting waterfall Godafoss. Our arrival at Mývatn was greeted by winds that had definitely strengthened, so we headed straight for the hotel arriving just before 5pm. It didn't take long to settle into the warm, cosy rooms, where we couldn't help hearing the wind raging outside!

After a delicious supper, Malcolm summoned everyone outside: the aurora was visible! Our enthusiasm fired-up, if it was ever-needed, we disappeared to our rooms to collect extra warm clothes, before going outside to see if we could capture the real thing! We gathered in the darkness at the front of the hotel, before making our way across the road, where we waited patiently for the light show to begin. Although some aurora light was present, it was very weak and, with cloud cover gradually increasing, it denied us any opportunity to see the lights on this occasion, so we decided to go back, into the warmth of the hotel. A little disappointed, most of us decided to retire early in the hope the aurora might return stronger later.

Our earlier disappointment didn't last long; when Malcolm checked the sky outside at 11:45pm, he found wands of colourful lights illuminating a very starry sky, and soon the telephones started ringing to alert everyone that the northern lights were in full motion. Most dressed in haste, donning whatever warm clothing came to hand first, before venturing outside into the cold night-air and being blown across the icy road for a second time in as many hours. The light show was amazing, colourful bands and curtains of green with rays of magenta rippling through the night skies; we were so happy to witness one of nature's greatest manifestations. Very active auroras, such as we experienced, perhaps represent only 8% of the northern lights phenomena, so we were extremely lucky tonight. We retired about 1am in a state of eternal bliss and very content!

Day 3

Sunday 8th February

Lake Mývatn (158km)

Weather details; Cold and extremely windy, with gusts exceeding 30m/s SW and temp 4°C

After a leisurely breakfast, we headed off to explore the environs of Lake Mývatn, in our quest to find the world's largest and most prestigious falcon, the Gyr Falcon. The wind was unrelenting, and necessitated extreme caution driving on the icy road, but it didn't matter this morning: slow was good for searching for a falcon. We negotiated our way up to the car-park at Dimmuborgie, where we briefly admired the view, but we pleased to return to the warm bus and the main road.

We continued our search for the elusive falcon, but the attraction of meeting with the residents of the 'Cowshed café' and enjoying a cup of hot coffee and home baked cake proved too irresistible! Following mid-morning coffee, we checked an area around the village, looking for Ptarmigan. The lack of snow was, perhaps, the main reason why birds had not flocked into coveys, and were therefore difficult to find.

Moving on, we visited the other-worldly landscape at Namaskardi. This high temperature area is, without doubt, one of the most surreal scenarios on the island, and 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 unsettled landscape could easily have been confused for an extraterrestrial world. The scenery was desolate yet colourful; yellow, pink and brown hues where steam escaped from hissing fumaroles in giant white plumes, and the earth's crust bubbled and gurgled in a series of boiling grey mud-holes and a sulphurous odour lingered, 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 very recently: geologically speaking, it is almost pre-natal!

However, once out on the car-park it soon became apparent that the strong wind and icy conditions underfoot were potentially too hazardous, so we decided caution was the better part of valour, and departed for the 'Nature Baths'. Sadly, at the nature baths we were told the water was too cold and the wind too strong, so we had no alternative but to return to the hotel. The fact we didn't find a falcon came as no surprise: given the storm-force wind, any self-respecting bird would have been well and truly hunkered down for shelter!

After supper, the wind suddenly and surprisingly dropped, and there was a reasonable chance of clear skies, so we headed off into the night, hoping for another encounter with the magical northern lights. Unfortunately this was not to be and, after a couple of hours searching, we returned to the hotel to wait for a call should they appear during the night. It was midnight when the telephones started ringing to inform us the lights were clearly visible! Quickly climbing into warm clothing, we were soon outside gazing up towards the heavens and enjoying our second experience of the beautiful celestial light show. Tonight's display was completely different from that of the previous night. The skies were filled with blankets of soft, green light and wands with hints of magenta fringes, and fairly static compared with before. Nonetheless, it was a wonderful experience to watch as it slowly spread in whorls across the dark night sky. We could enjoy the moment even more, since the wind was not as strong as previously!

Day 4

Monday 9th February

Husavik (158km)

Weather details; Sunny, wind 17m/s SW, temp 0°C

We had a change of scenery this morning, as we travelled down the Lauger Valley, through a strange landscape: neither snow nor tundra, more a mosaic of each. We were heading for 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 dissipated their energy on the boulder beach below. Except for a flock of Black-headed Gull, few other birds were present by effluent outflow from the fish processing plant, so we moved onto another outlet pipe, where Mallards squabbled over titbits, and a string of eiders bobbed like corks on the sea beyond the breakers.

In the harbour more eiders were present, with a few Long-tailed Duck, and we scanned the rafts of Common Eider in the hope of finding the female King Eider that Malcolm knew had taken up residence here. Our persistence finally paid-off when we reached the outer seawall and found the Harlequins we had hoped to see, and what's more, they were in the presence of a 'Queen' Eider, much to our delight! The odd Glaucous Gull and a small flock of Purple Sandpipers were also note-worthy additions to the bird list.

A visit to Culture House was an opportunity not to be missed and a chance to thaw-out! We spent a fascinating hour and a half, absorbed in Iceland's history between the 1850's - 1950's; the museum was a treasure and an educational delight. After our spell of culture, we resumed birdwatching down by the harbour, where we managed to find a few Iceland Gulls, before it was time to return to Mývatn. On this occasion, we decided to chance the Highland road for our return journey, since the strong wind appeared to have eased. Once on the mountain road, the scenery had a desolate beauty, a quality of landscape rarely found south of the Arctic Circle. Arriving at the lake, Malcolm thought we should have one last attempt to see if we could find a Gyr Falcon before going to the 'Nature Baths' and, as luck would have it, we managed to see a beautiful falcon, albeit briefly in flight.

While some enjoyed a swim in the warm therapeutic waters at the Nature Baths, the more sensible(!) immersed themselves in coffee and cake, before we returned to the hotel.

After supper we retired to our rooms to pack, in preparation for an early start the following morning. We did, however, reappear in reception later to appraise the possibilities of the aurora happening. However, with complete cloud cover and a very low prediction of activity level, Malcolm thought the chance of any northern lights this evening were extremely remote, so it was a unanimous decision that we retired for the night.

Day 5

Tuesday 10th February

Akureyri – Keflavik Airport (93km)

Weather details; Strong winds & blizzard conditions, wind 23m/s SW, temp -5°C

Having retired with little expectation of a call to say the northern lights were showing, we were lulled into a false sense of security as we later found out at 4am, when rudely awakened to the noise of storm-force winds rattling the bedroom windows!

Despite difficult conditions, we arrived at the airport with time to spare before the flight, only to discover that all flights were temporarily cancelled. Eventually we were told that there would be no flights that day, but Air Iceland provided us with overnight accommodation and an evening meal. We were taken by complimentary taxi to the aptly named Aurora Hotel for a night of luxury, which everyone could appreciate and enjoy.

Day 6

Wednesday 11th February

Akureyri

Weather details; Overcast, wind 9m/s SW, temp -4°C

After an unexpected over-night stay in Akureyri and a good breakfast we were collected by taxi and returned to the airport for our onward flight south, albeit a day late! The flight was uneventful and 45 minutes later we touched down in to a very chilly Reykjavik. The transfer coach was waiting our arrival and before heading off to Keflavik airport we had three hours in which to enjoy a little of this vibrant city beneath the Arctic Circle.

We arrived at the International airport in good time and breezed through check-in, and soon bade farewell to Malcolm before heading up stairs to security and some retail therapy!

NB – I sincerely trust you enjoyed your brief stay in Iceland. The weather could have been kinder and the birds more obliging, but the scenery was quite amazing and we did have two extraordinary nights of the most amazing northern lights. I hope the experience has not dampened your enthusiasm for this wonderful country, and one day, in the not too distant future, you may return to experience more of what Iceland can offer: Autumn – Waterfalls Glaciers and Icebergs and more northern lights perhaps! Thank you for being such great company.

Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	February					
			6	7	8	9	10	11
1	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>				1		
2	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		1		2		
3	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		5	2	5		44
4	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>						1
5	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		20				60
6	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>		12				
7	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>						1
9	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>						18
10	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		8		✓		4
11	King Eider	<i>Somateria spectabilis</i>				1		
12	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyernalis</i>				24		
13	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>		49	25	20		
14	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		1		6		
15	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>			3			
16	Gyr Falcon	<i>Falco rusticolus</i>				1		
17	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>				✓		12
18	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>		1		10		
19	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>				8		
20	Greater Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		1		1		
21	Feral Pigeon/Rock Dove	<i>Columbia livia</i>						✓
22	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>						30
23	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		8				24
24	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	2	50	3	6	2	5
25	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>	30	1	80	20		10

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