

Iceland – Gyr Falcons & The Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour report

12 – 16 February 2015



Night of a million stars and the aurora



Barrow's Goldeneye



Godafoss

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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

Thursday 12th February

UK – Northern Light Inn, Weather: Calm & bright, wind W 6m/s & temp -5°C

Following an uneventful flight, the aircraft touched down into a frozen landscape at Keflavik airport, where Malcolm was waiting to greet us in the arrivals hall. Once aboard the bus, it was a short 20-minute drive to the aptly named Northern Light Inn.

Quickly settling into the spacious, cosy rooms, we had time to relax before Malcolm held a tour briefing in the bar, (where else!). Supper was a traditional Icelandic meal, enjoyed by everyone, after which we retired to the comfortable lounge where Malcolm held a ‘camera clinic’. After an explanation of the best techniques of capturing good aurora images, we were keen to experiment, should we be lucky enough to see them. With total cloud-coverage, the experience would have to wait for another night.

Day 2

Friday 13th February

Transfer to Hotel Sel (Mývatn) (93km); Weather: Cold, but sunny, wind W 5m/s and temp -7°C

After all the travelling of yesterday, this morning was more leisurely, as we waited for the transfer coach to arrive. The resident flock of 80-odd Snow Bunting around the hotel presented an opportunity to practice our camera skills and, unseen by everyone except Malcolm, they had attracted the attention of a Gyr Falcon. Outside the breakfast room window, evidence, in the form of fresh footprints in the snow, suggested we had an overnight visit from an Arctic Fox!

The 50-minute journey along the barren Reykjanes peninsula into Reykjavik provided most of us with our first insight as to Iceland’s violent geological past, although the ancient lava fields were now softened with carpets of grey *Rhacomitrum* moss.

Once at Reykjavik’s domestic airport, we didn’t have long to wait before boarding the aircraft for our onward flight north. The high cloud permitted good aerial views of the city and the extensive countryside beyond. Our flight took us over massive snowfields and the Langjökull Glacier, before we started a rather turbulent descent into Akureyri.

Collecting our luggage, we were soon aboard the bus heading into the ‘Jewel of the North’, where we had a short time to explore this northern city before crossing the causeway of Eyjafjörður, and travelling through a strange landscape to Mývatn. Before arriving at the hotel, we stopped briefly to photograph the magnificent waterfall Goðafoss, heavily encrusted with icicles. We arrived at the friendly and comfortable Hotel Sel just after 4pm and, quickly depositing luggage in our rooms, we had time to stretch our legs by taking a walk through the pseudo craters before darkness fell.

The birdlog and a briefing session preceded supper, after which we all disappeared to our rooms to wait for a telephone call alerting us that the northern lights had started; unfortunately it never came on this occasion.

Day 3

Saturday 14th February

Husávik (157km). Weather; Overcast, wind 20m/s SW and temp -7°C

Weather conditions necessitated a change of plan for this morning. Rather than birdwatching around the lake, we decided to visit Husávik, trying to avoid the strong winds predicted for later in the day. Travelling down the Lauger Valley, the landscape was definitely in the grip of winter, and the vibrant wetlands were frozen and quiet. Continuing along the coast, we soon arrived in the coastal fishing town of Husávik, where we hoped to find Harlequin Duck, amongst other species.

On the outskirts of town, we took a cinder track down to the sea, and along to the harbour. We parked by an effluent outlet pipe from the fish processing plant, where flocks of Black-headed Gulls were squabbling over titbits and a flotilla of Mallards had gathered to join the feeding frenzy. A string of Common Eiders bobbed like corks beyond the breakwater, and we found a couple of Eurasian Wigeon. A few Glaucous and Iceland Gulls were also present, which provided Malcolm with an opportunity to explain the subtle differences in field characteristics, that separate these two similar gulls. With no trawlers landing any catches, and the fish processing plants closed for the weekend, fewer birds were present than normally expected. On the outer seawall, we managed good views of Long-tailed Ducks and had brief views of a pair of Harlequin Ducks before they disappeared behind the boulders. Returning to the inner harbour, Malcolm found a female King Eider present amongst a raft of eiders and it was close enough for us to appreciate the differences between the two species.

The timelessness of a typical Icelandic fishing village was reflected in Húsavík, with its quiet streets, picturesque houses and bustling harbour, as we visited Culture House. The museum is normally closed at weekends in winter; however, Sif kindly agreed to open it especially for our visit. The exhibitions depict life in Iceland's social history between 1850 and 1950; it was a fascinating insight into the period of change, between settlement and the changing lifestyle of Icelanders. It was a unique insight into the daily life and nature of this area and, more poignantly, Iceland was home to people who knew deprivation and hardship all too well, during its long history and settlement.

We returned back to the harbour for lunch in the hope of relocating the Harlequins, but they proved very elusive. Purple Sandpipers and a Black Guillemot were, however, much more obliging, giving some good views. All too soon, our time in the charming town was over, and we prepared to return to Mývatn. Instead of retracing our route, Malcolm decided to take a chance that the more scenic mountain road would be open. It was, and the landscape was awesome: it was no surprise that the Apollo 13 crew used this area as a training ground for their Moon landing. It was barren and desolate, yet beautiful, and a rare quality of scenery rarely seen south of the Arctic Circle.

Back at the lake, we made a reconnaissance visit to the Nature Baths, before slowly winding our way back to the hotel in search of Gyr Falcons and Ptarmigan, neither of which we found, but we did manage some nice views of a Merlin, perched close to the road.

Although aurora predictions indicated it was, perhaps, not in our favour for this evening, Malcolm had a final check outside just before midnight, and the skies had suddenly cleared. Amongst the millions of stars, there were tell-tale signs that the aurora was about to start. Much loud knocking on bedroom doors and telephones ringing soon had everyone outside in the windy, cold night air. We took whatever shelter we could from the strong, biting wind, even if it meant standing behind the rubbish container! The sky was a myriad of stars, while the green and magenta wands of aurora light ebbed and flowed in strength: it was truly magnificent to watch. It may not have been the spectacular dancing lights we had hoped for, but it was still an amazing encounter with this natural phenomenon. By 1am, the aurora glow had dimmed, so most retired to bed very content with the experience, only to be woken later during the night by another alert that the lights had gained strength and were clearly visible. On this occasion, few stirred again from the warmth of their bed during the night!

Day 4

Sunday 15th February

Lake Mývatn (294km). Weather: Dull, light showers, sunny pm, wind N 9m/s and temp 0°C

We left the hotel in a relaxed mood this morning, to spend time around the famous lake. Lake Mývatn is located in the heart of north-east Iceland, about 100km/65 miles south of the Arctic Circle, and is one of Europe's greatest natural treasures. Shaped by repeated volcanic eruptions and seismic activity, the landscape is spectacular; surreal lava, pseudo craters and cave formations, sulphur-streaked mountains, and sweeping, frozen wetlands. We navigated its irregular shores in search of Gyr Falcons, but the birds proved elusive and before, repeating a second circuit of the lake, we visited its only outlet, the River Laxá. We found a small raft of Barrow's Goldeneye, which were very obliging, enabling the photographers to capture some good images.

Continuing our quest for the falcon, we arrived at the Cowshed Café by midday. Although we found no falcons, the home-baked cake and hot coffee were delicious, and we made some new friends too! A brief visit to Dimmuborgie followed, where we enjoyed the panoramic view across the lake. By now the wind had increased in velocity, so we left to visit the more sheltered Hofði, local nature reserve, for a post-lunch walk. Here we had hoped to find Ptarmigan, but the snow-laden paths proved too icy and, being sensible, we decided discretion was the better part of valour and returned to the bus.

Following our third circuit of the lake, which also proved negative, not managing to find a falcon, we decided to visit the high temperature zone at Namaskardi. The area consists, without doubt, of one of the most surreal scenarios on the island. It 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, geologically speaking, times.

By late afternoon, the short day-light began to fade and, as temperatures dropped to minus degrees, we visited the Nature Baths. It was worth the goose-pimpled skin: the water was blue and hot and wonderful. Around us 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.

Back at the hotel, we enjoyed our last evening meal together and, with northern light predictions looking favourable, we boarded the bus and headed out into the darkness to chance our luck. We returned to the high mountain road above the lake, where the ethereal glow of the aurora was clearly discernible. Unfortunately the low cloud never really cleared, and the ghostly greens and pinks remained subdued so, with an early start and packing in mind, we decided to return to the hotel and wait for a call saying the lights were showing well. Despite the favourable predictions, the aurora never did manifest as we had hoped.

Day 5

Monday 16th February

Akureyri – Keflavik Airport (89km) Weather Heavy snow showers, wind S 4m/s and temp -3°C

After an early breakfast we left the hotel in the darkness, for our journey to Akureyri and our flight south. After a short delay, the flight was uneventful and we landed into a very snowy capital. Having dropped Ron and Gill off at their city hotel, and following a brief stop at Harpa, we continued through a landscape covered in snow to Keflavik airport. Our early arrival meant we missed the crowds and, having said our farewell to Malcolm, we headed upstairs to indulge in a spot of retail therapy.

NB – As a result of the strong storm-force winds, Gyr Falcons were well and truly hunkered down and proved elusive. The lack of snow meant Ptarmigan had not gathered into the usual coveys, and were difficult to locate. Despite all of this, we were really lucky in having two nights of northern light activity. I sincerely trust you enjoyed your brief stay in Iceland, and can now share a little of my enthusiasm for this amazing land. I hope, 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.

Malcolm

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Species Lists

Birds (✓ = Recorded but not counted: H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	February				
			12	13	14	15	16
1	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		1	1		
2	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>			2	24	
3	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>				1	
4	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>			3		
5	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		15	✓	✓	
6	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>			1		
7	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		✓	✓		
8	King Eider	<i>Somateria spectabiliis</i>			1		
9	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>			2		
10	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>			12		
11	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>		12	40	50	
12	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		1	6	1	
13	Common Merganser (Goosander)	<i>Mergus merganser</i>				1	
14	Gyr Falcon	<i>Falco rusticus</i>			1		
15	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		1	1		
16	Rock Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus muta</i>				H	
17	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>			✓		
18	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>			✓		
19	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>			4		
20	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		✓	✓		
21	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>		3	10		
22	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucooides</i>			15		
23	Greater Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		6	2		
24	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepheus grille</i>			2		
25	Feral Pigeon/Rock Dove	<i>Columbia livia</i>		4			
26	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	2	12	10	12	6
27	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		10	3		12
28	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>	80	120	1		