

# Iceland – Gyr Falcons & The Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour report

23-27 February 2015



Goðafoss



Snow Bunting



Northern Lights



Lake Mývatn

Report & Images compiled by Malcolm Stott



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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 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. 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 northwest 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 crisscrossed 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

Monday 23rd February

Heathrow – Northern Light Inn; Weather: Bight & sunny, wind SE 9m/s, temp -3°C

The UK flight descended into a very wintery landscape at Keflavik airport where Malcolm was waiting to greet us in the Arrivals Hall. After a short transfer to the aptly named Northern Light Inn we had time to relax and enjoy the warm hospitality of the family run hotel before a pre-dinner briefing.

After supper we reassembled in the cosy lounge where Malcolm held a ‘camera clinic’, talking us through the optimal camera setting to best capture aurora images should we be fortunate enough to witness the celestial light show. Despite a good aurora prediction, continuous cloud-cover meant it would have to wait for another night!

## Day 2

Tuesday 24th February

Transfer to Hotel Sel (Mývatn) (118km); Weather: Snowy, wind NE 8m/s and temp -5°C

Following a leisurely morning with some of the group having a stroll down to the Blue Lagoon while others simply enjoyed the antics performed by a large flock of Snow Buntings and a Merlin they attracted. The coach to transfer us to the domestic airport in Reykjavik duly arrived on time and by late morning we were driving through ancient lava fields along Reykjanes peninsula on our way to the northern capital. The 40-minute flight to Akureyri was uneventful although we suffered strong turbulence as we started our descent.

Akureyri was in the tight grip of winter and after an hour exploring the ‘Jewel of the North’, we began the journey northeast to Lake Mývatn. At times it became difficult to differentiate where exactly the road ended and the countryside started during the journey! Fortunately, just before we started the steep climb over the mountain pass, a snow-plough conveniently pulled out in front of us, much to Malcolm’s relief. The road to Goðafoss was snow-bound with very poor visibility due to a blizzard but we continued on, eventually arriving at the River Laxá. It was here we saw our first Barrow’s Goldeneye, and shortly after a Gyr Falcon was found perched on a roadside post. Although it flew, it didn’t go far and the big grey female gave some very obliging views. Before arriving at the hotel we found a small covey of Ptarmigan feeding on pubescent buds in the birch canopy and giving some great views.

It was 5pm by the time we reached the hotel and after quickly unloading luggage we were soon checking into the warm, comfortable rooms. There was time to relax or take a short walk around the pseudo-craters before a pre-dinner daily log and briefing.

With only a slim possibility of the northern lights appearing later during the night we retired early to wait for a telephone call alerting us that the phenomena had started. It came much sooner than expected when Malcolm popped out at 11pm to check the sky and found a break in the cloud-cover and the tell-tale soft green hue of the aurora. Donning our warmest clothing we step out into the cold night air to witness the event. It may not have been the colourful dancing curtains of light we all so wanted to experience - it wasn’t strong and mostly hidden beyond clouds - but it was clearly the northern lights. After an hour of craning our necks, peering into the darkness and straining our eyes, we had just about convinced ourselves we had experience a little of the northern light magic before retiring back inside to the warmth of our rooms.

## Day 3

Wednesday 25th February

Lake Mývatn (120km); Weather: Overcast with snow showers, wind E 14m/s, temp -5°C

At 3.30am we were suddenly woken by the telephone ringing to announce the aurora was visible! Dressing quickly into warm clothing we assembled outside. On this occasion the wind had gained in strength and the night air was definitely much colder than earlier. Although the eerily glow of soft green light filled the sky, it was still defused; hidden by snow-clouds and with little prospect of it improving, we returned to the warmth of our beds.

While we enjoyed the delights of a beautiful cerise dawn over breakfast this morning, the weather forecast was not quite as bright and had a rather ominous outlook for the rest of the day: so we stayed close to the lake in a quest to find evidence of the world's most prestigious and largest falcon and explore some of the geological features of the area.

Lake Mývatn is 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 lake provided a spectacular panorama of surreal lava, crater and cave formations, sulphur-streaked mountains, and sweeping, frozen wetlands. Failing to find a falcon at our first attempt we revisited the River Laxá to photograph Barrow's Goldeneye before resuming our mission.

Fortified by a stop at the Cowshed café we next visited the high temperature zone at Hvirir where the geology is spectacular: majestic mountains, gaping fissures with pools of hot water, lava-fields of unusual textures, volcanic craters of all possible types, colourful solfataras, and bubbling pools of hot viscous mud of amazing patterns and colours. The strong, cold winds were not conducive to spending a great deal of time here so we made a reconnaissance visit to the Nature Baths with the promise of returning later in the afternoon.

Dimmuborgie, with its extensive panoramic view over the lake, was our choice of venue for lunch today and we were rewarded when a large falcon landed nearby much to everyone's delight; it was a large, dark female Gyr Falcon. She stayed long enough for us to have reasonably good views before taking flight in the strong wind.

With signs that the weather was about to deteriorate, we returned to the Nature Baths to enjoy its therapeutic qualities. It was worth the goose-pimpled skin as the water was blue, 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. Unfortunately the weather seriously worsened so we made an early return to the safety of the hotel. Once back at the hotel we had time to relax and edit our images before supper.

Following a delicious meal of Iceland lamb we relocated to the bar area and held the daily log and briefing. With low solar activity predicted and almost total cloud-coverage we decided to retire early.

## Day 4

Thursday 26th February

Húsávik (229km); Weather: Bright and sunny, wind SE 2m/s and temp -4°C

This morning we travelled down the Lauger Valley, through some winter wonderland scenery in glorious sunshine and with little wind. There was time to sit back and enjoy the stunning landscape, but not for long! The keen-eyed

soon spotted a falcon sat on a mound in a snow-covered field. It was a beautiful female Gyr Falcon, much paler than the previous two encounters. As she sat soaking-up heat from the early morning sun, the light was perfect and the views incredible, much to everyone's delight.

Soon we had arrived at the coastal fishing town of Husávik where we hoped to find Harlequin Duck amongst other species high on our agenda. On the outskirts of town we took a cinder track down to the sea where a flock of Black-headed Gulls had gathered by the first outlet pipe. We moved to another effluence outflow pipe from the fish processing plant where a flotilla of Mallards had gathered to squabble over the waste. The low sun, while being very welcome, made bad light for watching birds, so we visited the inner harbour and found rafts of Eiders with a few Long-tailed Ducks present. There were plenty of gulls assembled that gave Malcolm the opportunity to talk through the subtle identification differences between Iceland and Glaucous Gulls.

Next we visited the outer sea wall and found a male Harlequin Duck, albeit briefly before it disappeared behind the boulder wall. The streets in the town were almost deserted as we visited the Culture House Museum where we enjoyed an informative hour.

We returned to the outer sea wall and had lunch while scanning around. A few Long-tailed Ducks were obligingly close and the light was good, an opportunity not missed by the keen photographers. With few birds present in the harbour and given the beautiful weather, we returned to Goðafoss and visited the waterfall we had missed during our drive north. The waterfall was stunning: encrusted with blue icicles and the back-lighting made it a wonderful sight. We photographed it from both sides before returning back to the lake where the non-bathers had time to enjoy a walk amongst the pseudo-craters while Malcolm took the rest to the Nature Baths.

Late evening and the sunset was very dramatic, the monochrome landscape now took on a warming tinge of pink, a truly fitting end to our last full day at the magical Lake Mývatn. After supper and the bird log we retired early to start packing and prepare ourselves just in case the northern lights made an appearance.

## Day 5

Friday 27th February

Akureyri – Keflavik Airport (93km); Weather: Light snow, bright, wind NE4 m/s, temp -3°C

An early morning call was a little sooner than we might have expected this morning! At 1am the hotel's phones were ringing to alert everyone that the northern lights were visible. Quickly retrieving warm clothing that had already been packed only a few hours ago and recover cameras and tripods from packed luggage, we stepped out into a chilly night. The landscape was large and white and Jupiter shone like a brilliant dot in the sky as we crossed the road to seek shelter from the biting winds. All of which took time, time in which the clouds had obscured the emerald wands of northern light, so with little to see we crawled back to a warm bed for a few more hours sleep!

After an early breakfast we left the hotel and Lake Mývatn on our journey back to Akureyri and a flight south to Reykjavik. The flight was uneventful, but did offer extensive views of the capital city as we made our descent. The transfer coach was awaiting our arrival, and after a brief tour of 'Old Town' Reykjavik we had a couple of hours to enjoy its ambience before completing the onward journey to Keflavik airport. Managing to miss the crowds and chaos, checking-in was straight forward. Having said farewell to Malcolm, we headed upstairs for a bit of self-indulgent retail therapy before boarding the UK flight.

NB – The northern lights are so capricious that you can never be sure of seeing them, and it has to be considered like winning the lottery when you do see them. We do not control nature, but we enjoy observing what she offers each time. I sincerely trust you enjoyed your brief stay in Iceland, albeit the weather could have been kinder, the lights a little brighter, and you 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)

	Common name	Scientific name	February				
			23	24	25	26	27
1	Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>				✓	
2	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		1		1	
3	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		20	24		50
4	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		12			80
5	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas Penelope</i>				1	
6	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
7	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>					10
8	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		✓		✓	✓
9	King Eider	<i>Somateria spectabilis</i>				1	
10	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyernalis</i>				26	
11	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islansica</i>		30	40	30	
12	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		2		2	1
13	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>			7		
14	Gyr Falcon	<i>Falco rusticus</i>		1	1	3	
15	Merlin	<i>Falco columbaria</i>		1			
16	Rock Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus lagopus</i>		5	4		
17	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>				✓	
18	Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>				1	
19	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		12		✓	
20	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>				20	3
21	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>				10	
22	Feral Pigeon/Rock Dove	<i>Columbia livia</i>					✓
23	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>					24
24	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	50	10	10	8	6
25	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	2	30			40
26	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>	134	141	10	6	