

Iceland - Gyrfalcons & the Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour Report

10 – 13 February 2016

Report compiled by Marcus John



Naturetrek Mingledown Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour Participants: Marcus John (leader) with a group of Naturetrek clients

Introduction

Northern Iceland is arguably the most exceptional winter destination in Europe: here, the dramatic landscapes are shaped by violent volcanic activity; statuesque black rock formations and birch woodland are often covered in deep snow. Our tour is based on Lake Mývatn, famous for its summer breeding birds but which retains open water even in the harshest conditions, due to the warm springs that well up beneath its surface. Here, the hardy Barrow's Goldeneye remains throughout the winter, alongside other wildfowl, which sometimes fall prey to the majestic Gyrfalcon. Around the lake are several sites of geothermal activity, with sulphurous mud pools and hissing fumaroles. Also nearby are the therapeutic Mývatn Nature Baths, which rival the more famous Blue Lagoon. In the skies above the lake, clear nights afford a good chance of witnessing the incredible Aurora Borealis, which can fill the sky with curtains of multi-coloured light. The tour is an opportunity to witness nature at its most extreme and extraordinary.

The weather was snowy throughout our time in the north, which created a magical landscape, especially when the sun shone over Lake Mývatn. We saw dozens of Barrow's Goldeneye, on the lake and the fast-flowing Laxá River, where they were joined by a group of eclipse-plumaged Harlequin Ducks. Even better, this was also where we found two Gyrfalcons, both of which were perched up on telegraph poles, giving us the opportunity to admire them for several minutes, before they flew off low above the snowfields. We visited the coast at Húsavík, where a variety of wildfowl and gulls were present in the attractive harbour, including several pairs of stunning Long-tailed Ducks. We walked through deep snow to visit the fumaroles at Hverir and the wonderful woodland at Höfði. It was a shame that the snow clouds prevented us from seeing the Northern Lights; however, we all agreed that this had not spoiled an amazing trip to a stunning part of Iceland.

Day 1

Wednesday 10th February

Keflavik - Northern Lights Inn - Blue Lagoon

The Icelandair flight landed on schedule, Marcus greeted everyone at Arrivals and we all climbed aboard the bus for the half-hour ride to the Northern Lights Inn, along the snow-covered Reykjanes peninsula. We quickly checked in so that most of the group could make their way over to the Blue Lagoon. Everyone agreed that this was a unique experience and a thoroughly enjoyable way to start a holiday in Iceland.

We met for a brief introductory talk in the comfortable sitting room before going into dinner. The three-course meal was excellent, especially the locally caught cod, which was cooked to perfection. We had a quick check for any sign of Aurora activity but all was quiet, despite the clear skies. We signed up for an Aurora wake-up call but, sadly, there was no activity during our first night. We could only hope for better luck in the north!

Day 2

Thursday 11th February

Akureyri - Goðafoss - Mývatn

We rose early to get the transfer bus to Reykjavik Airport for our flight to Akureyri. Despite heavy snow, the flight went smoothly and we landed to find clear weather in the north. Eider Ducks were present in good numbers as we drove across the causeway that leads east towards Mývatn. After about an hour, we stopped to

walk through the snow and admire the partially frozen Goðafoss waterfall, which looked magnificent in the sunshine.

As we approached Lake Mývatn, we saw good numbers of Barrow's Goldeneyes on the River Laxá, swimming together on the surging water. Lower down, they were accompanied by a tight-knit group of little Harlequin Ducks, already back on their traditional breeding site. When we arrived at the lake, we drove right around the shore; the extraordinary volcanic scenery was even more beautiful under a layer of deep snow.

After settling into our comfortable hotel, we drove back out in the late afternoon to look for birds around the lake. The sun was low in the sky when we stopped by the bridge over the River Laxá to photograph ducks; luckily Tony was looking the other way and saw an immature Gyrfalcon fly in and perch on a nearby telegraph pole. We all crossed the road for a closer look and watched as the huge falcon took flight and flew low across the snowy landscape - an unforgettable sight!

The setting sun was creating wonderful snow scapes and we spent some time trying to capture the colours created in the sky, over the rocky land and on the water. As the sun set, we reluctantly returned to the hotel for a celebratory drink in the bar, before getting an early night, in anticipation of the possibility of Northern Lights.

Day 3

Friday 12th February

Hverir - Höfði - Nature Baths - Krafla

We awoke to find that fresh snow had fallen overnight. We set off for Húsavík but, after driving for several kilometres, a virtual white-out forced us to turn back and return to Mývatn. Undaunted, we decided to visit the fumaroles and mud pools of Hverir. The road to the car park was covered in thick snow and we were obviously the first visitors that day, so we had to forge a path out to the viewpoint. The mud pools bubbled and gave off a characteristic sulphurous smell but more impressive were the fumaroles, which hissed loudly as they poured grey steam into the milky sky. We drove on to the nearby Krafla geothermal power station, stopping to photograph a roadside stream that had carved its way through the snow, creating beautifully sculpted banks.

After walking through all that snow, we felt we had earned a break and so we called in for coffee and cakes at the Cowshed Cafe. We stopped on the way to watch a flock of Redpolls in a small area of birch woodland that straddled the road. They soon scattered when, to our delight, a male Merlin flew through, just above the trees! We were managed another look at the Merlin on our way back to Mývatn Nature Baths, this time perched in a birch tree. Everyone greatly enjoyed their session in the hot baths, which most felt were even better than the Blue Lagoon!

We finished the afternoon at Höfði Nature Reserve, where extensive woodland covers a rocky peninsula that protrudes into Lake Mývatn. We followed a path through deep snow, which lay pristine over the ground and trees. We soon found a big flock of Redpoll in the snowy branches; we had great views of these characterful little finches as they fed together on birch seeds. The path turned a corner, continued alongside the lake shore and ended at a viewpoint over the water, with columns of dark lava rock rising from the still surface. A pair of Barrow's Goldeneye swam across to complete the scene. We all agreed that this walk had been a real highlight of the whole tour.

Day 4

Saturday 13th February

Húsavík - Mývatn

We set off for Húsavík along the Akureyri road and, this time, we found our way clear, so we arrived in the harbour in good time. The most obvious birds were the gulls, mainly Herring mixed in with good numbers of Iceland Gulls. Flocks of Eider were everywhere, along with several pairs of Long-tailed Ducks, the drakes in immaculate spring plumage. We walked around the inner harbour before heading up into town for a coffee break. We then walked around the outer harbour where we found a pair of Red-breasted Mergansers and watched several Fulmars flying fast and low over the water. Close in to the harbour wall were three pairs of winter plumaged Black Guillemots. It was very enjoyable getting so close to a range of wintering birds and we spent some time enjoying the scene and getting photographs.

After a walk down to the black sand beach (partially covered in snow), we boarded the coach and drove back to Lake Mývatn, eating our lunch on the move. When we stopped to admire the Barrow's Goldeneye and Harlequin Ducks on the River Laxá, another Gyrfalcon perched up in the same line of telegraph poles as before! This time it was a beautiful adult, gazing imperiously over the winter landscape before flying off towards the river. Everyone enjoyed superb views through the scope.

Our last stop was at the Flugarsafn or bird museum, where we enjoyed the well-presented exhibitions of stuffed birds and local history. Another attraction was the flock of Snow Buntings, which flew around the buildings and regularly sat up on the roof in full view. As the sun set, we drove back along the eastern shore of the lake and stopped to take our last photos of the magical landscape. It had been another day of special birds and stunning views, a fitting end to our time in the north-east.

Day 5

Sunday 14th February

Akureyri - Reykjavik - Keflavik

We set off early to drive back through the snowy hills to Akureyri. As we descended to the shores of the fjord, we had great views of the city, still lit up in the early morning. We arrived at the airport in plenty of time to catch the short flight back to Reykjavik.

We had two hours in the capital and enjoyed a walk around the small lake Tjörnin, most of which was sufficiently frozen for people to walk across. In the small area of open water, there were lots of Whooper Swans and Greylag Geese, and we also enjoyed very close views of superb drake Red-breasted Mergansers. From here we walked to the Old Harbour, where Glaucous Gulls outnumbered other species. We had time for coffee and snacks in the welcoming Haiti Coffee Shop, before it was time to board the bus and drive back across the Reykjanes peninsula to the airport.

Everyone enjoyed their time in Iceland, where the dramatic winter landscapes more than made up for the absence of Northern Lights. The group was very sociable and we enjoyed each other's company. We had seen all the special birds that manage to survive throughout the year in the frozen lands of the north east. The awesome scenery and the majestic Gyrfalcons left memories that will last a lifetime.

Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted; M = male; F = Female)

	Common Name	Scientific Name	February				
			10	11	12	13	14
1	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>				12	
2	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		1			
3	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		2	10	4	20
4	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>					2
5	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>			5		
6	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		8	7	50	
7	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		100		200	30
8	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>		7		7	
9	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>				10	
10	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>		100	20	80	
11	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Merganser serrator</i>				2	3
12	Common Merganser (Goosander)	<i>Merganser merganser</i>	1M			1F	
13	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>			1		
14	Gyrfalcon	<i>Falco rusticolus</i>		1		1	
15	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>				3	
16	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>				50	
17	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>				3	20
18	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucooides</i>				50	5
19	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		1		6	5
20	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>				6	
21	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>					✓
22	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	6	12	3	30	6
23	Common Redpoll (Iceland race)	<i>Acanthis flammea islandica</i>			52	3	
24	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>	1	55	6	150	

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