

Iceland - Gyrfalcons & the Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour Report

17 – 21 February 2016



Akureyri fiord



Reykjavik fiord

Report compiled by Marcus John
Images courtesy of Doreen & David Allen



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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 often sunny during our time in the north, which combined with thick-lying snow to create a magical landscape, especially when the sun shone over Lake Mývatn. However, on our third day, we drove back from Húsavík through heavy snow and this continued through the night and into the next morning. The forecast was for a big winter storm, which meant that it was almost certain that the road back to Akureyri would be closed. Unfortunately, this meant that we had to forego our last night at the Hotel Mývatn and catch a late afternoon flight back to Reykjavik. On the plus side, we had more time to enjoy a long walk through the capital city, visiting the lake of Tjörnin, the impressive church of Hallgrímskirkja, the main shopping area and finishing in the picturesque Old Harbour.

We enjoyed prolonged views of the Northern Lights on our first night at the aptly-named Northern Lights Inn, where we had time to capture some great images. We witnessed this amazing phenomenon again on our second night, outside the Hotel Mývatn. Although more elusive, when the Aurora developed, it was actually much brighter in the north and even more impressive.

It is amazing that so many birds are able to survive the winter around Lake Mývatn. We saw dozens of Barrow's Goldeneye, on the lake and on the fast-flowing Laxá River, where they were joined by other wildfowl, including a group of eclipse-plumaged Harlequin Ducks. 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. On our last morning in Mývatn, we walked through deep snow to visit the wonderful woodland at Höfði. Before we parked the bus, we found not one, but two Gyrfalcons, a fantastic way to finish our time in the north!

Day 1

Wednesday 17th February

Keflavik - Northern Lights Inn - Blue Lagoon

Marcus met both groups at Keflavik Airport, with some arriving from Manchester and others from Heathrow. Everyone arrived at the Northern Lights Inn in time for transfers to the Blue Lagoon, which was greatly enjoyed by those who chose to visit.

We all met for a brief introductory chat before going into dinner at 8.20pm. No sooner had we sat down than a member of staff told us that the Aurora was showing - needless to say, we all rushed outside! A bright green band of light shifted above the horizon but, sadly, it very quickly dissipated. We finished our meal and waited up but as there was only a hint of light, we reluctantly went to bed. However, we were woken by the night manager at about 2am and went outside to watch more lights across the sky, glowing white and green with sometimes a hint of pink; although not as bright as before, it lasted through to at least 4am. Several of the group managed to capture some excellent images - and on our very first night!

Day 2

Thursday 18th February

Akureyri - Goðafoss - Mývatn

We did not have to get up too early as our transfer bus did not arrive until 9.45, taking us to Reykjavik domestic airport for our 12.15 flight to Akureyri. Driving through the city, we saw our first Whooper Swans and Greylag Geese and, at the airport, we watched a flock of Snow Buntings flying around nearby houses.

We landed in bright sunshine which lasted throughout the day, affording spectacular views of the snowy scenery on route to Lake Mývatn. We stopped to walk across the frozen snow to view Goðafoss, where the water thundered down through huge icicles that had formed around the top of the waterfall.

We stopped to admire our first Barrow's Goldeneye by the bridge over the River Laxá, where we also found a small group of eclipse-plumaged Harlequin Ducks. We drove right around the lake, pausing to enjoy the superb scenery and to photograph some beautiful Icelandic horses, which seemed quite impervious to the cold, despite the fact that the temperature was around -6°C!

We met before dinner to go through the checklist and to discuss plans for the following day. As we were waiting for our dessert, the Northern Lights began to show in the north-eastern sky, so we raced up to our rooms to get some warm clothing, before heading out into the freezing night. Although the light show was intermittent, at times the Aurora was very bright, forming a curtain across the sky, mainly pale green but with clear pink-red edges. It really was impressive and a much stronger show than the previous night. The sky finally began to cloud over so we retired early to bed, very pleased to have witnessed the Aurora once again.

Day 3

Friday 19th February

Húsavík - Mývatn Nature Baths

After another excellent buffet breakfast, we set off under cloudy skies to visit the small town of Húsavík. This is the most important fishing port on the north-east coast, though it is now more famous as perhaps the best whale-watching location in Europe. The whale-watching boats were tied up for the winter when we arrived in the attractive harbour, where we quickly located a few pairs of beautiful summer plumaged Long-tailed Ducks amongst larger numbers of Common Eiders. Several Black Guillemots were still in winter plumage as they fed quite close in to the harbour walls.

We drove on to the outer harbour, where Fulmars were already visiting the cliffs where they will breed in the summer months. The gull flock contained several white-winged Iceland Gulls. Though this attractive species does not breed in the country, it is a common winter visitor, particularly to the north coast.

We drove up into town and warmed ourselves over coffee and cakes in a pleasant local cafe. Next we visited the local museum, which had some very interesting exhibits on life in this part of Iceland from 1850-1950. The stoicism and fortitude of earlier generations of Icelanders was quite humbling. It had started snowing when we left to visit the nearby black sand beach, where we found more gulls, including a couple of Kittiwakes. The snow was getting heavier so we did not linger but re-boarded the bus for our return to Mývatn.

After driving slowly through increasingly wintry weather, we arrived at the Mývatn Nature Baths by mid-afternoon. Here most of the group enjoyed the unusual sensation of bathing in hot thermal waters with snow all around them! After that, it was time to drive carefully back to the hotel, along roads covered in an increasingly deep layer of snow. Although the weather during the afternoon had prevented us from seeing much scenery (let alone birds), we appreciated the experience of driving through the arctic weather conditions, which is part of everyday life in northern Iceland.

Day 4

Saturday 20th February

Mývatn (Höfði) - Akureyri - Reykjavik - Keflavik

We awoke to the news that a big winter storm was forecast to blow across the north for the next two days. As the road back to the airport at Akureyri seemed certain to be closed, we reluctantly decided to leave early. Luckily, we were able to secure seats on a late afternoon flight, leaving us time to visit the woodland nature reserve at Höfði before returning to the hotel for an early lunch.

We drove past Höfði because the car park was inaccessible and so we needed to turn around and park by the road. As we slowed down, we saw not one, but two Gyrfalcons! Both flew off in different directions, so we continued towards Reykjahlíð and soon found one falcon perched about 200 metres from the road. We watched it from the bus before it flew off; we managed a second sighting but this time it seemed to fly a long distance, so we decided to return past Höfði to look for the other bird. We were distracted by the chance to photograph a pair of Barrow's Goldeneye on a roadside pool, when we spotted the other Gyrfalcon perched on a rock above the shore. This time it stayed for about 10 minutes and everyone enjoyed great views through the scope. We went for our walk through the birch trees in high spirits and the superb scenery, with a pristine covering of snow, completed what had been a truly memorable morning.

After a welcome lunch of hot soup, we packed the bus and drove to Akureyri; the afternoon sunshine gave no clue as to the extreme weather that was to arrive that night. We enjoyed a smooth flight back to Reykjavik, where a bus waited to take us to a hotel situated in the old US base near Keflavik. The hotel was pleasant with good facilities, except that it did not serve evening meals. However, we were able to arrange takeaway food and the hotel provided crockery and cutlery so nobody went hungry! In fact, the lounge was very warm and comfortable so we enjoyed a sociable final evening reflecting on the weather, Gyrfalcons and the Northern Lights.

Day 5

Sunday 21st February

Keflavik - Reykjavik

We enjoyed an excellent breakfast before our bus arrived at 9am to take us into Reykjavik. We started off with a visit to the superb Hallgrímskirkja church, which dominates the skyline of the capital. We were impressed with the spartan but atmospheric interior but it is the exterior that is most remarkable. The tall, cursive columns of the landmark tower are said to have been designed to resemble the basalt lava flows of Iceland's landscape. In front of the church is a large statue of Leif Eriksson, who sailed from Iceland to establish a settlement in North America some 500 years before Columbus.

We walked through the freezing wind to visit the largely frozen lake of Tjörnin, where a range of birds can be found right in the city centre. Clustered around the small area of open water were good numbers of Greylag Geese and Whooper Swans. Joining them were several interesting species including Pink-footed Goose, Wigeon, Pintail and Red-breasted Merganser. Walking down to the harbour, we found a small number of Blackbirds and Redwings feeding in garden trees.

After enjoying delicious coffee and food in Café Haiti, we walked around the Old Harbour, where Glaucous Gulls take over from the Iceland Gulls that are more common in the north. The biting wind kept us on the move and we were quite relieved when our bus arrived to take us back out to Keflavik. After a short search, we found the hotel where those flying to Manchester were to stay that night. We said our farewells and then the rest of us went on to the airport, arriving in plenty of time for our flight back to Heathrow.

It had been a truly memorable trip and the positive nature of our group was reflected in the way that everyone accepted a significant change to the normal itinerary. We enjoyed each other's company and everyone contributed to a very successful tour.

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Species Lists

Birds

	Common Name	Scientific Nmae	February				
			17	18	19	20	21
1	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>			12	30	
2	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			1	1	
3	Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>					1
4	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		11		1	20
5	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>					1
6	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		30			20
7	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>			1		4
8	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		6	40	20	4
9	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>					1
10	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>					4
11	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		20	100	50	10
12	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>		7			
13	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>			14		
14	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>		100	20	50	
15	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Merganser serrator</i>				1	4
16	Common Merganser (Goosander)	<i>Merganser merganser</i>		8		4	
17	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>					1
18	Gyrfalcon	<i>Falco rusticolus</i>				2	
19	Rock Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus muta</i>		2			
20	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>				20	
21	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>			20	10	
22	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>			3		
23	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>			100	2	6
24	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>		6	1	30	6
25	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>			100	10	
26	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		3	6	4	2
27	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>			4		
28	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>					10
29	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>					5
30	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>					3
31	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		20		1	
32	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	2	10	8	15	10
33	Common Redpoll (Iceland race)	<i>Acanthis flammea islandica</i>				10	
34	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>		50	10	50	