

# Iceland - Gyrfalcons & the Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour Report

8 – 12 February 2017



Northern Lights



Male Barrow's Goldeneye



Male Harlequin Duck



Moon over Lake Mývatn

Tour report compiled by Marcus John  
Images courtesy of Mick Hout



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

## Introduction

Northern Iceland is arguably the most exceptional winter destination in Europe. Here the dramatic landscapes are shaped by violent volcanic activity; where 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 this year was unusually mild, with little snow, but the scenery was still impressive. We saw dozens of Barrow's Goldeneye on the lake and the fast-flowing Laxá River. We also found several Harlequin Ducks; the drakes looked spectacular in their extraordinary breeding plumage. We visited the coast at Húsavík, where a variety of wildfowl and gulls were present in the attractive harbour. We visited the volcanic crater at Krafla and the fumaroles and bubbling mud pools of Hverir. We greatly enjoyed a longer walk through the bizarre lava formations of Dimmuborgir. And on one memorable night, we witnessed the Aurora Borealis, as lights moved across the northern sky for about an hour; a fantastic experience for everyone!

## Day 1

Wednesday 8th February

UK - Keflavik – Hotel Kriunes

The Gatwick flight was a little delayed, but we all met up at Keflavik without a problem. Our transfer coach was waiting to take us on the 45-minute drive to the Hotel Kriunes. Unfortunately, heavy sleet and failing light made it impossible to do any birding before dinner. We had plenty of time to settle into our comfortable rooms before an excellent meal. Later, we gathered together in the cosy lounge for an informal talk from Marcus, all sitting around a roaring fire.

## Day 2

Thursday 9th February

Akureyri - Goðafoss - Mývatn

We rose early to get the transfer bus to Reykjavik airport for our flight to Akureyri. The short flight went smoothly and we landed to find mild, dry weather in the north. We saw Red-breasted Merganser, Eider Duck and a couple of big Glaucous Gulls as we drove across the causeway and along the shore of the fjord. After about an hour, we stopped to admire the mighty Goðafoss waterfall, which looked magnificent in full spate. After a packed lunch and a hot drink in the cafe, we continued on to the excellent Sel Hotel, on the shores of Lake Mývatn.

After settling into our spacious rooms, we drove back out in the late afternoon to look for birds around the lake. Low clouds were now producing light rain, but we still enjoyed our first views of the volcanic landscape. We

stopped to watch feeding Barrow's Goldeneye in a sheltered bay that is always kept free of ice by warm springs. On the opposite side of the road, the skyline was dominated by the tefra crater of Hverafjall.

We drove through the small town of Reykjahlíð to the northern end of the lake, where we stopped to admire the view. From here we headed along the western shore to the point where the road crosses the fast-flowing Laxá River. We were delighted to find a small flock of Harlequin Ducks that were bobbing close to the river's edge, including four drakes in pristine breeding plumage. They soon flew low across the river and began to feed in the surging rapids. At this point, a group of Barrow's Goldeneye appeared in the calmer water close to where we stood; the drakes again in perfect breeding plumage. Despite the failing light, it was a great introduction to the birdlife of Mývatn!

## Day 3

Friday 10th February

### Laxá River - Krafla - Namafjall Hverir - Dimmuborgir - Nature Baths

We awoke to discover that snow had fallen overnight and transformed the landscape. We set off after another excellent buffet breakfast to revisit the road bridge over the Laxá River. This must be the best place in the world to get close views of both Harlequin Duck and Barrow's Goldeneye. The drakes looked superb in the hazy sunshine, against snow covered banks.

We drove back around to Reykjahlíð, turned onto the ring road and then onto the minor road that leads up to the Krafla area. The snow was thicker here and as we drove past the power station and up into the hills, we had to park and walk up to the volcanic crater of Viti. The views from here were breathtaking; a combination of bright sunshine, snow and steam from all the geothermal activity. Nearby, we walked around the steaming fumaroles and bubbling mud pools of Namafjall Hverir; the sights, sounds and the smells were unforgettable!

We drove back to Dimmuborgir to eat our lunch and enjoy the flasks of hot chocolate that the hotel had kindly provided for us. Suitably refreshed, it was time for a walk through this amazing site. A network of paths meanders through a surreal landscape that seems to have been lifted straight from the pages of an Icelandic fairy tale! A wide area was studded with craggy black outcrops, which rose up between the cracked and broken remains of a lava flow. It is thought that a series of rock 'chimneys' formed as gases escaped through a lake of molten lava. Eventually, the lake drained away and the surface (which had cooled into a layer of solid rock) collapsed, leaving the bizarre formations that we can see today. Dusted with a layer of snow, and without a breath of wind, it was a magical experience.

In the late afternoon, some went to enjoy a relaxing swim at the Mývatn Nature Baths (a more low-key version of the famous Blue Lagoon), whilst the rest of returned along the lakeshore to appreciate a large flock of Snow Buntings that were frequenting a farmyard next to the road. We also couldn't resist the opportunity to photograph the Harlequin Ducks on the Laxá.

As the sun set, we arrived back in time for happy hour in the bar before another excellent three course dinner in the hotel dining room. Later that night, we went out around 10pm to check for aurora activity and sure enough, there was a small, greenish curtain of light close to the horizon. Over the next 60 minutes, this developed into a shifting curtain of green and white lights, spreading across a good portion of the northern sky. It was a superb display that will live long in our memories!

## Day 4

Saturday 11th February

### Húsavík - Laxá River – Dettifoss

We set off for Húsavík along the Akureyri road, but stopped at the bridge over the Laxá River to check for Gyrfalcons. We took time to drive along the gravel road that runs parallel to the river but to no avail.

The unusually mild winter meant that the fields were largely free of ice and snow and we encountered a group of grazing Whooper Swans near the road. It remained relatively mild and bright when we arrived in Húsavík harbour. The most obvious birds were the gulls: Black-headed, Herring and good numbers of Iceland Gulls. It is always a delight to get close views of these 'white-winged' gulls and to appreciate the variety of plumages displayed by the different age groups. We walked all around the inner harbour before heading up into town for a coffee break. Large flocks of Common Eider were rafting just beyond the harbour wall; inside the harbour, we had excellent views of two pairs of Long-tailed Ducks, the males in their bright winter plumage.

We took a different route back towards Mývatn, driving over high ground that was still covered in snow. Although the sun was shining, the wind had picked up and we had to drive slowly along the still icy road. We continued through Reykjahlíð and east along the ring road, to visit the remote waterfalls at Dettifoss.

Dettifoss lies on a high plateau and was covered in thick snow. In fact, the normal footpath was closed and we had to follow a circuitous route to the gorge, where two wide waterfalls are just a few hundred metres apart. The river has created a dramatic canyon of black basalt columns; an impressive sight. After an hour-long walk in high winds, we were glad to get back to the bus and enjoy our flasks of hot chocolate! We drove back along the ring road and around Lake Mývatn, as the sun set on another memorable day.

## Day 5

Sunday 12th February

### Akureyri - Reykjavik – Keflavik - UK

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 in the morning light. We arrived at the airport in plenty of time to catch the short flight back to Reykjavik. After dropping four of our number at their hotels in the centre of Reykjavik, we made our way out to Keflavik in plenty of time for the flight home. It had been a very successful tour to north-east Iceland, where snowy landscapes, rare birds and the wonderful Northern Lights all combined to provide a unique experience.

## Naturetrek Facebook

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## Species List

### Birds

	Common Name	Scientific Name	February				
			8	9	10	11	12
1	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		2			
2	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		3	1	9	5
3	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>			5	5	
4	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	2	20	10	12	10
5	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		100		200	100
6	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>		6	11		
7	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>				11	
8	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>		15	60	20	12
9	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		2			
10	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		1		10	
11	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		1		50	
12	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>		2			
13	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>				70	
14	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		2		20	
15	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		6			
16	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		5			
17	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		4		25	5
18	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>		30	120		

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Lake Mývatn