

# Iceland - Gyrfalcons & the Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour Report

13 – 17 February 2017



Northern Lights



Male Common Eider



Harlequin Ducks



Dettifoss

Tour report compiled by Marcus John  
Images courtesy of Kim Goodger



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Tour Participants: Marcus John (leader) with a group of 12 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 Myvatn, 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 Myvatn 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 Laxa river. We also found several Harlequin Ducks; the drakes looked spectacular in their breeding plumage. We visited the coast at Husavik, 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 enjoyed a longer walk through the bizarre lava formations of Dimmuborgir. On our last afternoon, we had great views of a majestic Gyrfalcon and that night, finally witnessed the Northern Lights; a fantastic end to a memorable tour!

## Day 1

**Monday 13th February**

### UK - Keflavik – Hotel Kriunes

After flying from the UK, we met up without a hitch at Keflavik International Airport and set off for the 45-minute transfer to Hotel Kriunes, which lies on the shore of a small lake. We had a good hour of daylight in which to look for birds and were rewarded with Whooper Swan, Goosander, Red-breasted Merganser, and Glaucous and Iceland Gulls. We still 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, who outlined the itinerary for the coming days.

## Day 2

**Tuesday 14th February**

### Akureyri - Goðafoss - Mývatn

We rose early to get the transfer bus to Reykjavik airport, in order to catch the plane to Akureyri. The short flight went smoothly and we landed to find mild, dry weather in the north. After a short delay (the minibus had a flat battery!) we set off down the main ring road towards Akureyri.

Almost immediately, we stopped at a service station to check the wide fjord, where good numbers of wildfowl are usually present. We found twenty or so Common Eider but better still, we watched several pairs of Long-tailed Ducks as they dived for food. The males looked particularly fine in their immaculate winter plumage. Digby spotted a small, black and white bird that must have been a winter-plumaged Slavonian Grebe - a good

find this early in the year. As we drove through the open landscape, Digby struck again, finding a Merlin perched on a roadside fence post. When we reversed back it flew off but soon perched again, allowing everyone to appreciate this beautiful little falcon.

We broke the journey with a visit to the mighty Godafoss waterfall, which looked magnificent as it cascaded in full spate. After a hot drink in the cafe, we continued on to the excellent Sel Hotel, on the southern shores of Lake Myvatn.

After settling into our comfortable 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 a drake Barrow's Goldeneye as he fed in the fast flowing waters of the Laxa River. Close by, we found a pair of Harlequin Ducks sleeping on a tussock just above the water; the mild weather seemed to be encouraging early breeding activity.

We drove on around the top of the lake and through the small town of Reykjahlid, before continuing down the eastern side and back to our hotel, just as the last of the daylight faded. Despite being a day devoted mainly to travel, we had all enjoyed a great introduction to the birdlife of north-east Iceland.

## Day 3

Wednesday 15th February

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

After another delicious buffet breakfast, we set off to revisit the Laxa river. Despite the low cloud and drizzle, we had fantastic views of Harlequin Ducks. We stood just above the fast flowing water as three females pursued a lone drake, chasing him across the river and to within about twenty metres of where we stood. Several Barrow's Goldeneyes were feeding nearby, but despite careful scanning, no Gyrfalcons were to be seen.

We drove around the lake and turned east on the main ring road towards Egilsstadir. We crossed the rocky uplands and turned onto the minor road that leads up to the famous waterfalls at Dettifoss. The wet weather could not detract from the superb scenery; deep snow still clung to the remote, rocky plateau.

It was quite a long walk over the snow and black rocks, but thoroughly enjoyable. We came first to the waterfall of Selfoss, which plunges into a long ravine of columnar basalt. Farther on, the main falls of Dettifoss are even more impressive. This is reckoned to be the most powerful waterfall in Europe, being 100 metres wide and with a 44 metre drop; it was an awe-inspiring sight. Robin was temporarily separated from the group when he stopped to photograph the first waterfall; everyone was envious that he saw an adult Gyrfalcon, flying low over the snowy rocks!

We ate our packed lunch and enjoyed a cup of hot chocolate before driving back down to Lake Myvatn to visit the unique landscape of Dimmuborgir. On the way we stopped to check a fast flying raptor that Donna had spotted as it raced past the bus. We were rewarded with good views of another Merlin, perched up on an outcrop of black lava rock.

At Dimmuborgir, 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.

Most of the group spent the last hour of daylight enjoying the warm waters of the Myvatn Nature Baths, whilst the rest of us drove back to check the southern end of Lake Myvatn for Gyrfalcon. Alas, we could not find any raptors in the remains of the misty day.

## Day 4

Thursday 16th February

### Husavik - Laxa River – Hofdi (Myvatn)

Before setting off on the drive north to Husavik, we spent an hour looking for Gyrfalcons around the southern end of Lake Myvatn. Snow had fallen overnight and the whole landscape was transformed. There was hardly a breath of wind as we stood on a hill overlooking the south-east corner of the lake, the dark water a superb contrast to the dusting of pristine snow. Despite patient scanning here and at the Laxa river, we found no Gyrfalcons.

It was a cold but bright morning when we arrived in Husavik harbour. The most obvious birds were the Iceland Gulls: there were literally hundreds! It is always a pleasure 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. Sitting on the rocks at the harbour's edge were several Purple Sandpipers, who allowed us to approach to within a few metres. Out on the calm water was a pair of Long-tailed Ducks; the drake in particular made a great subject for photographers. Large flocks of Common Eider were rafting just beyond the harbour wall, with several Fulmars, more Long-tailed Ducks and more gulls, including two Glaucous Gulls.

We took a different route back towards Mývatn, driving over high ground that was still covered in snow. We continued on through Reykjahlid to the fumaroles and mud-pools of Namafjall Hverir; the sights, sounds and smells of this amazing geothermal site are unforgettable! Robin left the rest of us to explore, using his telescope to scan the rocky ridges. His persistence paid off when he found a Gyrfalcon perched in the distance. We all had a quick look before climbing back into the bus and driving along the Krafla road to get a closer look. We were soon enjoying excellent views of this iconic bird of prey, as it perched on a high bluff, surveying its territory.

We then drove up into the hills, past the Krafla geothermal power station, and finished our day at the volcanic crater of Viti. Here, we watched the sun set over the snow-covered landscape whilst enjoying a cup of hot chocolate.

The aurora forecast was quite positive so we headed out into the night and waited patiently until about midnight. The clouds cleared, and at last we could see a faint greenish light in the northern sky. This grew and brightened into a proper aurora; however, it did not last as a low mist crept across the sky. Reluctantly we went to bed, but later that night, Digby and Anna alerted us to more activity. Everyone re-emerged into the night to witness a longer display of Northern Lights - an amazing experience that will live long in our memories!

## Day 5

Friday 17th February

### Akureyri - Reykjavik – Keflavik - UK

We set off early to drive back across the hills to Akureyri. As we descended to the shores of the fjord, a low fog was covering the water. We arrived at the airport in good time to catch the short flight back to Reykjavik, which took off on time. After a short coach tour of the centre of the city, we made our way out to Keflavik, dropping three of our number at their hotel before arriving at the airport for the flight home. It had been a very successful tour to north-east Iceland, where snowy landscapes, Gyrfalcons and the wonderful Northern Lights all combined to provide a unique experience.

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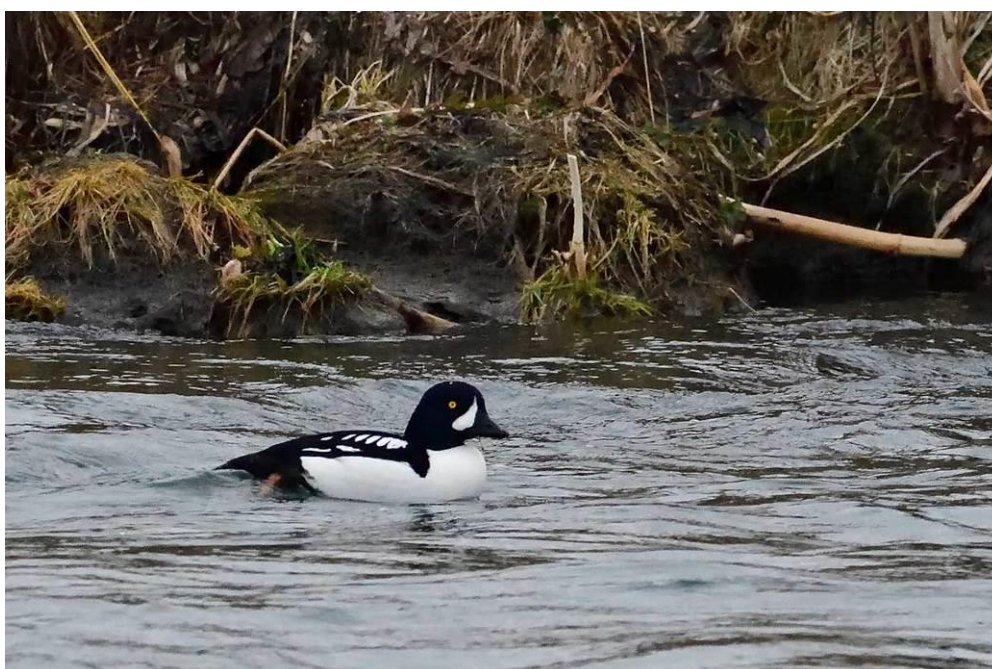


Mývatn

## Species List

### Birds

	Common Name	Scientific Name	February				
			13	14	15	16	17
1	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>				10	
2	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	20	4			3
3	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	12	30	15	40	25
4	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	3	2	3	3	50
5	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	2				
6	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	6	110	40	60	30
7	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		150		500	100
8	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>		2	6	8	
9	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyernalis</i>		21		25	
10	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>		12	20	40	
11	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	6				
12	Common Merganser (Goosander)	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	1				
13	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>	1	1	1	1	
14	Gyrfalcon	<i>Falco rusticolus</i>			1	1	
15	Rock Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus muta</i>			2	1	
16	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>				5	
17	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	10	1		50	30
18	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	3	2		12	3
19	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>	1			2	5
20	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>	3			200	10
21	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	1	1		6	2
22	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		2			
23	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	2	20			3
24	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	10	10	6	20	10
25	Common Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea rostrata</i>		8			
26	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>				180	



Male Barrow's Goldeneye