

Iceland - Gyrfalcons & the Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour Report

8 - 12 February 2018



Barrow's Goldeneye by Marcus l'Anson



Dimmuborgir by Andrew Bray



Iceland Gull by Andrew Bray



Harlequin Duck by Marcus l'Anson

Report compiled by Andrew Bray
Images courtesy of Marcus l'Anson & Andrew Bray



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Tour participants: Andrew Bray (leader) with eight Naturetrek clients.

Summary

The tour did do exactly what it said on the tin, with spectacular Northern Lights and an impressive powerful Gyrfalcon that flew low over us. The weather was atrocious at times, with closed roads, strong winds, and some snow. However, we did manage to see most birds even if they were seen through the snow. When it cleared the views were tremendous and the light brilliant. The snow was fine and covered the roads in the wind, but the yellow posts kept us steady. We did not see the impressive Dettifoss as even Route 1 was closed. (The road off this to the falls had a large question mark against it rather than a colour.) The hotels were warm and the food plentiful and tasty. Those of us who took the tour had a very pleasant time and will remember the trip.

Day 1

Thursday 8th February

It was an uneventful flight to Reykjavik, though the plane had been delayed leaving Iceland due to bad weather. We were met at airport by drivers from Hotel Kruines and driven to the hotel in strong winds with snow blowing across the roads. Two of us had a quick look at the lake, which was 99% frozen, and the trees around the hotel. All we saw were a few Starlings, though on the drive to the hotel a few other species were observed. There were no Northern Lights due to the cloud cover.

Day 2

Friday 9th February

After breakfast we went for a walk along the road in the snow and ice as there had been more snow the previous night. All we saw were Starlings. It was then a drive to the airport for a local flight to Akureyri. Most of the flight was above cloud; however, we flew along the valley and over the runway landing from the north. Our first stop was at the service station as we joined Route 1. Here we saw Long-tailed Duck, Eider, Red-breasted Merganser, Glaucous Gull and Iceland Gull, and a Red-throated Diver was only yards from us. We then drove over the mountain and down the other side until we came to Godafoss – the waterfalls of the Gods. After managing to walk on the ice and taking photos in the very strong winds, we retired to the local cafe for a hot drink.

We then continued until we approached the Laxa River that flows out from Lake Myvatn. The fast-flowing river held lots of Barrow's Goldeneye. Once we had seen plenty of them, we drove to the Hotel Myvatn and booked in. We drove back to the area where we had seen the Barrow's Goldeneye and saw Mallard. A local birdwatcher informed us that he had found Harlequin Duck the other side of the bridge. Sure enough, we found a male with four females as well as more Barrow's Goldeneye. We drove past the hotel to the eastern side where the water had not frozen (there were cars driving on the ice). Here we found seven Whooper Swans before we headed back to the hotel and eventually dinner.

That night we all got to see the spectacular Northern Lights. By 10.45pm they were in all their glory and even danced. They formed a huge arc across the sky with greys and greens and even a touch of reddish-pink. It was a fantastic finish to our first day in northern Iceland.

Day 3

Saturday 10th February

We awoke to blizzards, and that was the course for most of the day. We drove to Husavik where we visited the port. In a creek, sheltering from the wind, were 100+ Mallard. There were seven Purple Sandpiper in an area of the port, racing up and down the very small beach with the tide. They allowed us to get close to them. In the main harbour, amongst the smaller boats, were a pair of Long-tailed Duck. Out by the sea walls there were large numbers of Eider and gulls, with the bigger Glaucous Gulls as well as the Iceland Gulls that were very common. We retreated to a garage, going out of town with views of the sea, for a warm lunch.

We then headed back to the hotel, driving around the lake; however, we did not stop as the snowfall became heavier. Half an hour later there was neither wind nor snow, so we walked around the pseudo-craters opposite the hotel. It was a lovely walk with great light, and so still compared to the rest of the day. The pseudo-craters were formed 2300 years ago as lava flowed across a marshy ground, trapping and super-heating the water beneath and resulting in explosions. This type of crater has also been identified on Mars. Following the walk, the group retired to the hotel to watch the rugby before an evening meal. Unfortunately, the cloud cover prevented us from seeing Northern Lights.

Day 4

Sunday 11th February

The strong wind was blowing the snow about and it took over 15 minutes to open the doors of the minibus as they had frozen solid overnight; the temperature out of the wind was -9°C and the wind speed was over 40mph. We eventually set off, but no birds were about. The main road was closed so we could not get to Dettifoss. We did try the geo-thermal power station but the road up to the viewpoint from the valley was covered in deep snow. The road at times disappeared in the wind as the snow blew across and the next yellow post could not be seen. The mud pools at Hverir were not visible due to the snow blowing in the wind. The restaurant at the Baths did not open until midday so we headed back to Reykjavik, where everything was closed, so back to the hotel we drove. We had lunch at the hotel and waited for the wind to die down. The Baths were also cold at midday according to the person who gave us the information, dressed in his finest cold-weather clothes, complete with goggles.

After lunch we visited Dimmuborgir with its vents that formed when it was a lake. We then went to the mud pools at Hverir in strong wind, before going back to Krafla and the geo-thermal station where Andrew got stuck in the snow with only a few metres to go after some deep snow. With a quick push it was out on the tarmac. He turned around and sped through the snow until back on tarmac. We did not walk to the very top to look at the crater. We then drove to Reykjavik and drove down the suburban roads to take photographs of the hundreds of Snow Buntings that were in the trees and on the roofs. We then stopped at the Cow Shed cafe for a hot drink. The name gives it away as through the window we could see the cows in their stalls (milking was at 5pm).

We then continued along the eastern side of the lake. Between Hverfall Crater and Dimmuborgir Andrew stopped to take a photo of the crater and Marcus and Rachel found a Gyrfalcon. As Andrew took the telescope out of the minibus it took off and headed towards us and flew low over the van to chase two ducks which it did not catch. We drove up and down the road between the two points and had fleeting glimpses. We eventually saw it in the scope on a rock at the crater's edge, but it was far away. So, the tour managed to live up to its name. Back at the hotel Andrew parked the van by the road out of the strong wind. No-one wanted to go for a swim

as they were so cold, and anyway, the water was not hot as the wind cooled it down. Once again there were no Northern Lights, and at one stage, it started to snow.

Day 5

Monday 12th February

We left still in the dark, so we were at Godafoss at first light. The falls were impressive, with huge ice crystals formed from the spray hanging down to the water. As we drove west the sun shone on the mountains with a lovely colour. All too soon, we had arrived at the sea, and on a hotel tower spotted a Merlin. We filled up the minibus and then drove to the airport where the flight was delayed about 20 minutes. On arrival at Reykjavik it was then a direct drive to Keflavik where the airport was very busy. After checking in and dropping bags automatically, it was once again an uneventful flight to London where we said our goodbyes.

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Road around Lake Myvat by Marcus l'Anson

Species Lists

Birds

| | Common name | Scientific name | February | | | | |
|----|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------|----|-----|-----|----|
| | | | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 |
| 1 | Greylag Goose | <i>Anser anser</i> | 10 | | | | 2 |
| 2 | Whooper Swan | <i>Cygnus cygnus</i> | | 7 | 5 | 20 | 7 |
| 3 | Mallard | <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i> | | 20 | 100 | 10 | |
| 4 | Tufted Duck | <i>Aythya fuligula</i> | | | | | 20 |
| 5 | Common Eider | <i>Somateria mollissima</i> | | 30 | 200 | | |
| 6 | Harlequin Duck | <i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i> | | 5 | | | |
| 7 | Long-tailed Duck | <i>Clangula hyemalis</i> | | 2 | 5 | | |
| 8 | Barrow's Goldeneye | <i>Bucephala islandica</i> | | 50 | 100 | 2 | 7 |
| 9 | Red-breasted Merganser | <i>Mergus serrator</i> | | 2 | 7 | | 2 |
| 10 | Common Merganser (Goosander) | <i>Mergus merganser</i> | | | | 5 | 2 |
| 11 | Red-throated Diver | <i>Gavia stellata</i> | | 1 | | | |
| 12 | Great Cormorant | <i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i> | | 2 | 1 | | 5 |
| 13 | Purple Sandpiper | <i>Calidris maritima</i> | | | 7 | | |
| 14 | Black-headed Gull | <i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i> | | 20 | 10 | | 50 |
| 15 | Great Black-backed Gull | <i>Larus marinus</i> | | 6 | 50 | | 2 |
| 16 | Glaucous Gull | <i>Larus hyperboreus</i> | | 3 | 10 | | |
| 17 | Iceland Gull | <i>Larus glaucoides</i> | | 20 | 200 | | |
| 18 | European Herring Gull | <i>Larus argentatus</i> | | 40 | 50 | | |
| 19 | Gyrfalcon | <i>Falco rusticolus</i> | | | | 1 | |
| 20 | Merlin | <i>Falco columbarius</i> | | | | | 1 |
| 21 | Feral Pigeon | <i>Columba livia</i> | | | | 1 | |
| 22 | Northern Raven | <i>Corvus corax</i> | 8 | 25 | 15 | 2 | 7 |
| 23 | Common Blackbird | <i>Turdus merula</i> | 1 | | | | |
| 24 | Common Starling | <i>Sturnus vulgaris</i> | 6 | 30 | | | 6 |
| 25 | Redwing | <i>Turdus iliacus</i> | 2 | 2 | | | 1 |
| 26 | Common Redpoll | <i>Acanthis flammea</i> | | 30 | | | |
| 27 | Snow Bunting | <i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i> | | 20 | 250 | 500 | |

Mammals

Seal (species)