

# Iceland - Gyrfalcons & the Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour Report

8 - 12 February 2019



Barrow's Goldeneye



Godafos



Hverfell



Snow Buntings

Report and images compiled by Andrew Bray



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Tour participants: Andrew Bray (Leader) with seven Naturetrek clients

## Summary

Our short tour to Iceland was memorable for the spectacular Northern Lights, the fantastic weather – cold, with some snow, and perfect light for viewing the wildlife and the stunning scenery. With temperatures dipping to -14C the hot pool was very refreshing with temperatures of about 38C. The hotels used were warm and the food plentiful and tasty

### Day 1

**Friday 8th February**

It was an uneventful flight to Reykjavik and we were met at the airport by drivers from Hotel Kruines and driven to the hotel in lovely conditions, although it was very windy. The lake was frozen and there were a few trees around the hotel. We saw several species of birds driving to the hotel including Starling and Raven. After dinner we observed the northern lights as the sky was clear though the dancing was quite short. It was a fitting end to a long day.

### Day 2

**Saturday 9th February**

After an early breakfast we headed in the dark to the regional airport for a local flight to Akureyri. The snow was deep and the sea by the roadside was frozen, with only one Great Black-backed Gull to be seen along with Mallards. It was only a short trip to the tunnel, so we decided to pay the toll, as it was snowing and the road over the mountain was not worth the risk. We eventually arrived at Godafoss. Only one side was open as there was so much snow so we parked the minibus and walked in the snow to a viewing point on the east. It was here that in 1,000AD the local chieftain threw his pagan idols into the river when Christianity was adopted by the whole island. We then retired to the cafe for a hot drink and in fact we decided that it would also be a good place for an early lunch.

We then continued until we approached the Laxa River. The fast-flowing river held lots of Barrow's Goldeneye and Mallard. Once we had seen plenty of them we drove to the Hotel Myvatn and booked in. We continued around the lake with more duck and Whooper Swans, hoping to see a Gyr Falcon, but we were out of luck. We drove to the village of Reykjahild where there were several hundred Snow Buntings. Continuing around the lake back to the bridge across the River Laxa, we saw five Harlequin Duck including one male. We then drove very slowly past the hotel looking for Gyr Falcon until it started snowing again and the visibility fell. We did see a pair of Goosander on the open water of the lake before we decided to head back to the hotel for a hot drink. The snow had stopped but it was windy.

### Day 3

**Sunday 10th February**

We awoke to an amazing day and after breakfast headed for Dimmuborgir. In contrast to last night there was hardly a breath of wind as we walked around the pinnacles created when steam brought up lava when the area was under water. There were no trolls either! We then travelled to the geo-thermal power station and after parking the minibus we headed up the mountain to the view point. The caldera was all white to the north and Krafla was covered in cloud. This is the area of the Krafla fires; the last volcanic activity was in the late 70s. By

the entrance to the walk to the top there was deep snow. On return we followed our footprints before boarding the minibus and our next stop was by the shower. This is the most photographed shower in the world. The water never ceases!

Our next stop was on Route 1 and we walked to the mud pool at Hverir where we saw the boiling water come out of the ground. It was now lunch time and we headed to the Cow Shed cafe which was full as a coach was there! We eventually had soup at the Myvatn Baths. Some of us went in the baths for about an hour all told and the others came and watched us. The water was not very deep and was about 38C though some places were hotter than others! We went to the Cow Shed for a drink before we travelled back to the hotel. We walked around the pseudo craters at Skutustadagigar caused by steam escaping when molten lava covered the water.

It was now colder than when we started at -12C as the sun set. It had been a brilliant day with little wind but was cold. Fortunately the snow was compacted where people had walked despite it being deep in places. The only birds were huge flocks of Snow Bunting plus Mallard, Barrow's Goldeneye, Whooper Swans, Goosander and a couple of Raven. That night the Northern Lights shone but were hidden by the cloud in the distance and were a shadow of what we had already seen.

## Day 4

## Monday 11th February

After breakfast we headed for Kusavik. The roads were clear until we reached the town where they were covered in snow. We went left at the harbour and parked the minibus. We walked through some deep snow to see all the gulls on the beach with lots of Mallard in the stream. A Purple Sandpiper flew into the end by the vehicles parked in the port and we all had good views. After seeing lots of birds we headed to the garage opposite the road to the port for a drink. Afterwards we went north along the road and saw large flocks of Eider and a small flock of Long-tailed Duck in full plumage.

We headed back to the port as the wind was blowing the snow across the road and turned right in the port, heading for the entrance to the harbour. There were plenty of Iceland Gulls and a few Glaucous Gulls amongst the Herring Gulls. We had lunch at the bakery in town after seeing the Purple Sandpiper on the beach. After lunch we drove back to the hotel where we dropped one of the group off and then continued to Höði (a nature reserve) where there was a path through the snow. We stopped by the water to look at a few Barrow's Goldeneye. A couple of Ravens flew ahead as we scanned the pinnacles by the road for Gyr Falcon.

We eventually gave up and returned the hotel where the person we dropped off had seen three Ptarmigan. Andrew went out to look for them and four flew over him by the church with its large flock of Snow Bunting. We were now 19 species for the trip.

## Day 5

## Tuesday 12th February

We left slightly later today and drove the long way around Lake Myvatn. As we drove west the sun shone on the mountains, bathing them in beautiful colours. All too soon we had arrived at the sea and we turned right at the roundabout to look along the road. We re-fuelled the minibus in Akureyri having looked at the harbour with only Eider on show and then drove to the airport where the flight left at 1245hrs.

On arrival at Reykjavik we had a quick scan of the Civic Building but all we saw were feral pigeons on the roof and wildfowl being fed. The snow had mainly disappeared on our drive to Keflavik airport and there was no time to stop to look for birds. After checking in and dropping our bags automatically we were very quick through security. It was once again an uneventful flight to London where we said our goodbyes.

Unfortunately we had failed to see one of the target species, Gyr Falcon, which according to the locals has been extremely difficult to find this winter, but, as we all know, wildlife is unpredictable, and we didn't let this spoil our enjoyment of the time spent in Iceland.

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## Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	February				
			8	9	10	11	12
1	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>				1	
2	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓				✓
3	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>					✓
6	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓			✓	✓
7	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>		5		5	5
8	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyernalis</i>				✓	✓
9	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>					1
11	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		2	4		
12	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>				2	
13	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>				8	
14	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>				✓	
15	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>				✓	✓
16	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>				✓	
17	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucooides</i>				✓	
18	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>				✓	
19	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>					✓
20	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓				✓
21	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>					
22	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	2	✓	✓
23	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓