

Iceland - Gyrfalcons & the Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour Report

7 - 11 February 2020



Godafoss



Barrow's Goldeneye



Whooper Swan



Myvatn

Report & Images by Andrew Bray



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

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

Summary

In winter, Iceland is a country of ice and snow with fast flowing rivers cutting through stunning landscapes. It is a land of volcanic activity and we learnt that the land near the Blue Lagoon had risen by 5cm in recent weeks due to movement of magma 3km beneath the surface. We learnt that there had been earthquakes daily but we didn't feel them. In the north, the main road to the most powerful waterfall in Europe was closed as the snow was too deep. We therefore did not see the Northern Lights but we did see some wonderful wintery landscape and sightings of four Gyrfalcons and a White-tailed Eagle that should not normally have been present

Day 1

Friday 7th February

The seven members of the group travelled independently to Iceland with four arriving in the country a day before the tour started. Those arriving from London had to wait for a while on the tarmac for at Keflavik Airport as a storm passed. When the storm abated in the evening, we all met at the Hotel Kriunes for a delicious evening meal. Following a briefing, the group were ready for the morning and the adventure in the North.

Day 2

Saturday 8th February

We left the hotel early for the short drive to Reykjavik's domestic airport from where we took the 8:30 flight to the town of Akureyri in the north of Iceland. Akureyri's airport lies at the end of a long, narrow fjord called Eyjafjörður, so once we had disembarked the plane and loaded up our vehicle, it was just a short drive to a point where we could look across the fjord and bird watch. There were plenty of Common Eider plus two Long-tailed Ducks in view as well as eight Goosander and a Black Guillemot.

We picked up Route 1, (the Icelandic ring-road) which links Akureyri with our eventual destination Lake Mývatn, but rather than taking the new tunnel which opened in 2018, we took the old road which climbs high along the eastern side of the fjord, with expansive views along its length, and then crosses a mountain col to rejoining Route 1 at the eastern end of the tunnel.

Passing the frozen lake of Ljosavatn we soon arrived at the beautiful waterfall of Godafoss. The top of the falls was encrusted in icicles and the surrounding landscape covered with snow. After walking around and enjoying this most photogenic of falls, we retired to the nearby cafe for a warming drink.

Godafoss is so named because it was here in the year 1000AD that a local chieftain, returning from the Alþing (Icelandic parliament), threw his pagan idols into the river when Christianity was adopted by the whole island.

The drive continued, passing a number of small communities and eventually, as we approached Lake Mývatn, we came alongside the Laxa, a fast-flowing river that flows out from the lake. The Laxa is one of the best places to see Barrow's Goldeneye and as we drove along, a few of these ducks were seen. The Barrow's Goldeneye is a predominantly North American species and Iceland is its only breeding ground in Europe. The River Laxa is also home to the other North American species, the Harlequin Duck, which moves up onto the river to breed in the

Spring. Sometimes they arrive early so it is worth looking for the duck along the river but unfortunately, we didn't see any.

On the south shore of Lake Mývatn lies the small community of Skútustaðir and the Hotel Sel which was to be our base for the next three nights. Following check-in, we convened for a bowl of warming soup for lunch. The afternoon was spent going back to the Laxa River and looking for Gyrfalcon as we drove around Lake Mývatn. On the lake in areas where it had not frozen, there were masses of Barrow's Goldeneye and Whooper Swans. The highlight was a Merlin close to the road but it soon flew off to a nearby post where all had superb views. All too soon we had to call it a day and headed back to the hotel for a hearty dinner and to go through the checklist of the day's birds.

Day 3

Sunday 9th February

After a good breakfast, we set out on foot for a walk around the pseudo-craters of Skútstaðagígir which are just across the road from the hotel. We had to take the walk slowly as care was required to walk on the paths coated in powered snow over ice. The pseudo-craters were created several thousand years ago when lava flowed across marshy ground and the trapped super-heated water erupted through as steam. These rare features occur only in a few places on Earth and on Mars.

Returning from the walk, we drove along the southern and eastern shores of Lake Mývatn to the rock formations called Dimmuborgir (Dark Fortress in Icelandic). Here craggy columns of lava cover the area and the paths that cut through them provide the chance of seeing Gyrfalcon. Two of the group were fortunate to see Ptarmigan (the Gyrfalcon's main prey) in its fantastically camouflaged white winter plumage. A small group of Common Redpoll were also seen.

Mývatn lies within Iceland's volcanic belt where the North American and Eurasian plates are pulling apart. Our journey around the lake took us to a number of fascinating locations where geologically recent events have shaped the landscape. East of the village of Reykjahlíð, we visited the tectonic fissure of Grjótagjá where the Eurasian and North American plates meet and are pulling apart at 1cm per year, and then we drove over a ridge to the geothermal area of Hverir. Here the mud pools boil, the fumaroles steam and the air is thick with the smell of hydrogen sulphide.

To the north, the road climbed slowly to the Krafla geothermal power station and a region that famously erupted with fountains of lava during a volcanic period between 1975 and 1984. The eruption was known as the Krafla Fires and appears in an episode of David Attenborough's *Trials of Life*. The lava spilled out of craters and gashes into the land heading north and east. The land is still warm and of course younger than the participants on the tour. Unfortunately, the road to the top was closed but we had a look at the power station and the water it collects before heading back past the famous shower, which has been photographed many times, to look for Gyrfalcon.

Our final stop was at the Mývatn Naturebaths where we soaked our bodies in the gloriously warm water and enjoyed the steam rooms. On the way back we looked again for Gyrfalcon but found a White-tailed Eagle! This is not a species that is usually encountered around the lake, but a pair is now living here and feeding on the fish caught from the open stretches of water. We returned to the hotel for a fish supper.

Day 4

Monday 10th February

This morning, after checking for Harlequin Duck on the Laxa River once again, we travelled on the new road to Húsavík. We stopped at a garage for the toilets and a hot drink before heading to the port. The fishing village of Húsavík has become the whale-watching capital of Iceland with Humpback and Minke Whales seen regularly during the Spring and Summer but in winter it is still a great place to look for sea-birds. The sea was very rough with huge breakers, but we saw lots of Eiders and Long-tailed Ducks. There was Black Guillemot as well as a range of gulls though they were mainly Icelandic Gulls which breed in Greenland.

We then travelled to the other side of the port where the sea water came over the edge and flooded large areas of the port. We parked the vehicle and walked to see the gulls noting two Purple Sandpiper here.

We had lunch in a cafe before heading back along the road we took in the morning. The snow posts became harder to see and eventually they disappeared until we were well past the proceeding post. We headed off this road to the next valley and the area was clear; with little wind and snow.

We spent the afternoon looking for Gyrfalcon and we eventually found one on the southern edge of the lake which hung in the wind when it took off and flew north. We drove further north and near Dimmuborgir we found another two with one perched on a post. This was a fitting end to our search especially as it started to fly and showed us the white belly with the markings. We then drove around the lake and returned to the hotel for as a superb buffet dinner.

Day 5

Tuesday 11th February

The final day had come all too soon and, after defrosting the minibus, we had to say goodbye to the friendly staff at the Hotel Sel and head back towards Akureyri.

Driving back past the Laxa River we scanned for Barrow's Goldeneye and hoped again for Harlequin Duck but instead we had brilliant views of a pair of Ptarmigan before they flew away and a Gyrfalcon flew past. It was then onto Akureyri where we filled up and visited the local supermarket before heading for the airport. Following the short flight back to Reykjavik's domestic airport we were collected and whisked onwards to Keflavik Airport. We said goodbye to two of the group who were going on a tour of Route 1 around Iceland. The others returned to Keflavik for flights back to the UK.

We had an enjoyable time with great company and fantastic food. We saw 26 species of bird as well as gorgeous scenery. It was unfortunate to miss out on the Northern Lights but we did see birds of prey every day, several other Icelandic specialities, wonderful scenery and a lot of snow!

Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek e-mailing list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers. Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk to sign up.

Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	February				
			7	8	9	10	11
1	Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓		3	2
2	Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	1			1	1
3	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓				
4	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	✓	✓		3	✓
5	Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>					
6	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	3
7	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓				
8	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓
9	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyernalis</i>		2		✓	
10	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		8			
12	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>				2	1
13	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>			1		
14	Gyrfalcon	<i>Falco rusticolus</i>				3	1
15	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		1			
16	Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus mutus</i>			1		2
17	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>				2	
18	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>				✓	✓
19	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		✓		✓	
20	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>		1		2	
21	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucooides</i>				✓	✓
22	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		6		2	
23	Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>		1		3	
24	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓				
25	Common Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>			7		
26	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	2	4	✓
27	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>		10	✓	✓	

Social Media

We're social! Follow us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and be the first to hear about the launch of new tours, offers and exciting sightings and photos from our recently returned holidays.



www.facebook.com/naturetrekwildlifeholidays



www.twitter.com/naturetrektours



www.instagram.com/naturetrek_wildlife_holidays