

Iceland – Gyrfalcons and the Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour Report

7th –11th February 2022



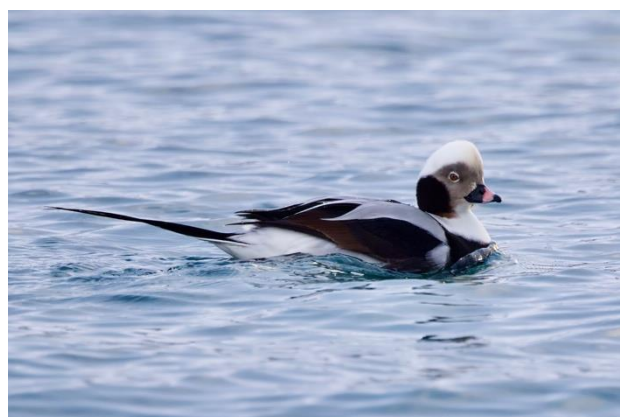
Northern Lights by Glenn Bates



Godafoss by Dave Jackson



Barrows Goldeneye by Glenn Bates



Long-tailed Duck by Dave Jackson

Tour report by Dave Jackson



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: Dave Jackson (leader) with six Naturetrek clients

Introduction

Iceland is an incredible country to visit any time of the year with breath-taking landscapes, waterfalls, geothermal areas, special birds and the possibility of witnessing Aurora Borealis in the winter months when solar activity is high and nights long.

This short five-day tour was successful in all regards: we saw Gyrfalcon, Snow Buntings, Barrow's Goldeneye & Long-tailed Ducks along with Iceland and Glaucous Gulls in the most amazing scenery, whilst enjoying Icelandic hospitality in comfortable accommodation. We soaked in thermal baths with outside temperatures of -8°C and witnessed the Northern Lights on the last night of the tour and came away with photographs of this memorable spectacle.

Day 1

Monday 7th February

Location: UK - Keflavik – Hotel Kriunes

Weather: + 5°C London, -5°C Iceland, blizzards

Our Icelandair flight left on schedule from Gatwick Airport for the three-hour flight to Keflavik and we were soon through customs and our group of five plus leader were on our way through a snowy landscape towards Hotel Kriunes for our first night's stay. Our sixth group member's BA flight had been cancelled and would be arriving in the morning.

We were soon checked in and the view across the frozen lake from our rooms through treble glazing was slightly hampered by driven snow. Those who were tempted to open the patio doors soon slid them back again; it's amazing how efficient these windows are against the elements!

A delicious meal was had and rough plans agreed for the morning, taking in a few scenic places on a round-about route to collect Linda S. from the airport.

Day 2

Tuesday 8th February

Garður, Reykjavik, Akureiri, Mývatn

Overnight snow, -4°C, breezy at the coast.

Glenn observed his breakfast and decided it depicted the tectonic plate boundaries of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge with typical European food on one side and American on the other. Such imagination, we are in Iceland after all!

Our planned 9am departure was delayed by heavy overnight snow blocking the road up from the hotel, so the adventurous members of the group set out to explore the surrounding area while Dave defrosted the minibus and checked the Iceland Roads website for up-to-the-minute information. Ravens sought out any morsels of food they

could find in the wintry landscape and ghostly-white gulls hung in the air, while flocks of starlings landed on telegraph wires as we started our eastward journey to Keflavik. Whooper Swans and Common Eider sheltered in the bays along the roadside as we headed west along the Reykjanes peninsula.

Simon's caffeine-detection radar picked up a café-bakery near the airport, where scrumptious pasties and coffees were served whilst we awaited Linda's arrival and, with a late afternoon domestic flight, we chose made-to-order packed lunches to keep us going for the rest of the day. Flocks of Redwing alighted on trees in gardens on the opposite side of the road as we watched from the warmth of the café.

Soon, Linda and luggage were collected, and we continued along to Garður, first stopping at Útskálakirkja, a picturesque church with a green roof where a flock of 50 Snow Buntings soon reached 200+ as they flew over our heads searching for Mat-grass seeds in a barren field occupied only by a small flock of Greylag Geese.

A mixed flock of Iceland, Glaucous, Great Black-backed, Black-headed and Herring Gulls fed around a fish-processing factory's outlet just off the rocky coastline, while 30+ Purple Sandpipers and three Ruddy Turnstones skirted the rocks before finding somewhere to land away from the crashing waves. A Great Northern Diver with its bulbous forehead and large, steely bill lived up to its name spending more time under the water than above. A flock of 100+ Northern Eider bobbed and dived for molluscs close to the old lighthouse and a pair of Red-breasted Mergansers rode the waves just off-shore as we prepared to leave for the next leg of our journey.

It was a little strange seeing snowdrifts in the centre of Reykjavik, although traffic was flowing smoothly as we pulled into a snow-covered lay-by next to Sun Voyager, a stainless-steel sculpture that resembles a Viking long-ship symbolizing light and hope, where many photos were taken from all angles against a backdrop of snowy mountains across the bay.

We arrived at the airport in good time for our 5pm flight to Akuyreri and with what seemed like a very quick 50 minutes in the air, the pilot skilfully landed the plane on a snowy runway and our luggage was soon being collected from the conveyor. With the vehicle cleared of snow we set out on the hour-long journey to our hotel overlooking the rootless cones at Skútustaðir overlooking (Lake) Mývatn, vatn meaning water or lake in Icelandic. We didn't have to worry about the 'Mý' part as there were no midges or flies about in these temperatures.

Formerly called pseudocraters, the cones were formed by steam explosions from hot lava heating groundwater in underlying rocks although their appearance would mistakenly suggest volcanic eruptions, they looked eerily impressive in semi-darkness covered in snow.

We were all checked in and wasted no time in assembling for dinner in the spacious restaurant where we were efficiently served lasagne or stuffed peppers depending on our choice of diet. One of the waiting staff had recently arrived in Iceland from the Czech Republic and had never experienced scenery like this in her home country and shared with us her excitement of being in such an incredible place.

Day 3

Wednesday 9th February

Mývatn, Laxá, Goðafoss, Húsavík.

Snow showers -8°C daytime, -15°C at night.

We had breakfast at 8am before venturing out northwards around the eastern shore of Mývatn, stopping in various places to take in the views over the frozen lake. Unfrozen pools held small numbers of Tufted Ducks, Mallards and Barrow's Goldeneye and a pair of Goosander were seen from a watchpoint just before the small plantation at Höfði.

Photos were taken of the snow-covered Hverfjall crater as we pulled off the road to check the road conditions at Dimmuborgir for our planned visit the next day, before heading south to the river Laxá where small flocks of Barrow's Goldeneye were seen as we pulled into the car park. Various flocks by the roadside numbered an impressive 100+ birds as we made our way to Goðafoss Waterfall that we'd driven past in the dark the previous evening.

Never wishing to pass up the opportunity for a hot drink and cake we opted to visit the café and browse the souvenirs before venturing up the path to the waterfall. Ravens and Snow Buntings battled the snow showers as we positioned ourselves at various points for the best photos of the waterfall which was looking glorious in the snow and ice. Slow shutter speeds gave the cascading water a silky look as it streamed past the frozen icicles, some over a metre in length. The origin of the waterfall's name is not completely clear as it is widely thought that it was named after the local chieftain in 1,000AD who supposedly threw his statues of the Norse gods into the waterfall when Christianity was adopted in Iceland. A linguist and place-name expert believes this to be a myth originating from Denmark, and suggests that the name derives from two crags at the falls which resemble pagan idols. Whichever version is true, it's a spectacular sight particularly when partially frozen and covered in deep snow.

With increasingly wintery weather and souvenirs purchased we drove to Húsavík, a harbour town on the north coast where we experienced supermarket shopping Iceland-style, before walking around the harbour in search of ducks and gulls, toured the whale museum or relaxed in a quiet cafe before exploring the town.

Iceland, Herring and Black-headed Gulls patrolled the harbour looking for fish scraps from the nearby factories and Eiders rested in the relatively calm water, where a single winter-plumaged Black Guillemot showed off its diving skills. Linda S. wondered what the strange call was, before locating glorious adult male Long-tailed Ducks in courtship display and managed a few shots of these attractive water-birds as the low afternoon sun shimmered across the surface. Claire and Simon had gone searching for the Jaja Ding Dong bar, so named after a song in a Netflix movie starring Will Ferrell and Rachel McAdams - *Eurovision Song Contest: The Story of Fire Saga*, a comedy shot on location in Húsavík, but the owners were away and their parents were just locking up. They did find an interesting lighthouse that they guided us to after Linda D. had finished clearing the wheel arches of packed snow, a good job well done!

Slabs of ice littered the base of the lighthouse as layers of frozen water became too heavy to defy gravity and plunged to the ground; thankfully, we weren't there at the time. This 12-metre-high lighthouse built in 1956 looks

out over the bay where Fulmars patrolled the cliffs searching for suitable nest sites and the temperature dropped rapidly as we made our way back to the minibus for our return to base.

Taking the clockwise route around the lake we stopped off at various points to admire the scenery and to seek out likely locations to watch the Northern Lights, although the auroral forecast didn't look too promising from our various Aurora Watch 'phone apps.

Not to be dissuaded, we returned to the hotel for dinner and met again at 9.30pm, taking a slow ride away from the streetlights along Route 1 and turning off towards Sigurgeir's Bird Museum. Glenn and Pam gave us a masterclass in the night sky, pointing out the Orion Nebula, Ursa Major and other constellations before a thin layer of cloud made viewing difficult. With the temperature dropping to -15°C and with the danger of losing a few fingers and toes, we decided to call it a night, and just as Simon and Dave were looking for a suitable place to turn the vehicle around, Glenn noticed a faint green glow on the horizon.

The Northern Lights were definitely on show - well done Glenn! After a while we all hopped back into the bus with the heater fan on full, before stopping off in a lay-by next to the lake where the green glow could be seen between broken cloud. We'd been out for two hours and with the forecast better for the next night we hoped for cloudless skies and returned to the warmth of our hotel rooms for some well-earned sleep.

Day 4

Thursday 10th February

Dimmuborgir, Hverir, Grjótagjá, Mývatn Nature Baths

-14°C clear skies and slight breeze.

With clear skies forecast for this morning, we made plans to be out at 8.30 am for sunrise an hour later. Our waitress asked if we'd seen the Northern Lights as she'd witnessed an amazing display with dancing streaks of greens and reds at around 1.30 am. Glenn had been up since silly o'clock but not seen them. We tried to look pleased for her.

As we drove through fresh snow to Dimmuborgir, a covey of Ptarmigan in their pure white plumage broke cover and flew ahead of the vehicle and away out of sight. Ravens croned overhead as we negotiated the deep snow at the entrance to the 'black castles' lava formations as the sky turned pink and red over the bizarre-shaped stacks of rock. In Icelandic culture, lava caves are allegedly the homes of the nation's brutal trolls, but we remained quiet as we didn't want to wake them, and Pam's stealth showed when she spotted a Ptarmigan in low silver birch scrub. Dave tried to avert his eyes from the image on Pam's camera screen, but the temptation was too great.

A hand-written 'closed' sign on the café door gave no indication to when it might open so we headed off to Reykjahlíð where we encountered a huge Russian vehicle, each wheel about the same size as our bus. We learned later that there was a film crew making a film supposedly set in Siberia. Similar temperatures, although the hotel food and hospitality is probably better here in Iceland.

As we turned off the road along the road to Hverir a falcon-like shape appeared on the top of rocky crag – Gyr! The world's largest falcon, a splendid adult, sat there waiting for a hapless Ptarmigan to happen along and remained

for a few photos before we continued towards the geothermal area where the smell of sulphur filled the air. The active geothermal area at Hverir with its bubbling mud pools and steam vents looked surreal as everything around was frozen, wooden fences appeared to be carved from ice as the steam gushed through the earth's surface.

With temperature still around -10°C we made our way to Mývatn Nature Baths for lunch, after taking in the magnificent panorama from the watchpoint. We would be returning to bathe in the steaming waters later. With hands warmed and appetites satisfied, our next stop would be Grjótagjá, a small lava cave and hot spring where locals used to bathe before volcanic activity made the water too hot for comfort. It took a while for our eyes to acclimatise to the darkness after descending from the glistening snow as we climbed in and out of the cave.

Few vehicles had driven here, and the road out became impassable, so we turned back and took Route 1 anti-clockwise around the lake and negotiated our way passed the Russian vehicle, film crew and extras in the increasingly hostile weather conditions. Deep snow covered the car park at the Laxá river where Barrow's Goldeneye continued to display in the fast flowing current. No Harlequin Ducks could be found in the blizzard conditions, so we made our way back to the hotel, stopping at the visitors' centre to check out a location for viewing the Northern Lights later.

With flights checked in, passenger locator forms completed, and coffees, teas and hot chocolate consumed, it was time to leave for the 20-minute drive to Mývatn Nature Baths where we would soak in the water which is said to be good for respiratory and skin problems and is packed with minerals and has a velvety texture. Those in the know wore hats to stop their hair freezing in the sub-zero temperatures in these outdoor thermal baths. Some even ordered Icelandic beers from the pool-side bar to drink whilst bathing!

Making our way back to the hotel through drifting snow, our Aurora apps were showing increasing activity though cloud cover prevailed. We sat down for dinner and watched the snow falling as we ate and wished it to stop. We decided to go out later in the hope that it would clear, before Pam announced that it was happening, NOW! We quickly piled on warm layers of clothing to witness the dynamic spectacle of the sky turning green with curtains moving across the sky, sometimes in front and then behind us, cameras capturing the action. This was the last night for us in Iceland and we'd been treated to an amazing spectacle - and the tour can justifiably live up to its title.

Day 5

Friday 11th February

Akureyri, Reykjavik, London

-8°C clear skies.

Overnight snow was forecast and so we decided to make an early start for our 11.10am domestic flight and had breakfast slightly earlier than usual before our 8.30am departure. We watched another impressive sunrise from an elevated position overlooking the lake and made our way towards Akureyri, using the tunnel as the mountain road was still impassable. We'd been somewhat obsessed with the temperature and watched as it rose from below freezing to +18°C inside the tunnel, rapidly dropping again as we neared the exit.

After refuelling we parked up on the road bridge over Eyjafjörður to watch a male Long-tailed Duck close to the vehicle before driving the short distance to the airport.

We were soon on our way back to Reykjavik where Claire and Simon and Linda S. were dropped off at their hotels for an extended stay in Iceland while Dave, Linda D., Pam and Glenn called in at Perlan, a famous landmark with a huge glass dome and revolving restaurant, for refreshments before dropping off the hire vehicle at the airport for our flight home on our final day of this amazing and successful tour in the depths of Iceland's winter wonderland.

We'd witnessed the Northern Lights and breath-taking scenery, seen Gyrfalcons and many other species and enjoyed Icelandic hospitality during our short, February break that will linger long in our memories, I'm sure.

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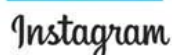
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Northern Lights by Glenn Bates

Checklist

	Codes: I=Introduced		February				
	Common name	Scientific name	7	8	9	10	11
1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		10			
2	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		✓			✓
3	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓		
4	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		✓			
5	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		✓	✓		
6	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>			4		2
7	Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>			100	✓	
8	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>			2		
9	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		2			
10	Rock Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus muta</i>				9	1
11	Rock Dove - I	<i>Columba livia</i>		✓			✓
12	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>		30+			
13	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
14	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		✓	✓		
15	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>		✓	✓		
16	Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>		✓	✓		✓
17	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		✓	✓		✓
18	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>		1			
19	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>		10+			
20	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓			
21	Gyrfalcon	<i>Falco rusticolus</i>				1	
22	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
23	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
24	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		✓	✓	✓	
25	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>		✓	✓	✓	



Ptarmigan by Pamela Noon