

# Iceland – Gyrfalcons & the Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour Report

4th – 8th February 2023

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Barrow's Goldeneye



Northern Lights



Scenic Grjótagjá (near Lake Myvatn)



White-tailed Eagle

Tour report and images by Dave Jackson

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Tour participants: Dave Jackson (leader) with six Naturetrek clients

Six adventurous clients and leader arrived at Keflavik airport from England, Scotland and North America to experience Iceland in winter all hopeful for a showing of the Northern Lights and a supporting cast of special birds.

We explored the south-west corner of the Reykjanes peninsula around Grindavik where Iceland and Glaucous Gulls battled against the wind while Great Northern Divers and Common Eider are sheltered by the harbour wall. Most surprising was the unseasonal Atlantic Puffin that zoomed over our heads in the strong wind - perplexing indeed!

We visited the gleaming Sun Voyager sculpture with a wonderful snowy mountain back-drop before our re-scheduled late morning flight to Akureyri.

Goðafoss gave us spectacular views of the waterfall with thundering water cascading over huge icicles that looked like they'd been there forever in this frozen landscape and the sight of displaying Barrow's Goldeneye on the Laxá river was a thrill to watch.

We explored sites close to Mývatn including Grjótagjá, a small lava cave and hot spring and the 'black castles' lava formations of Dimmuborgir during the full day spent in the north of Iceland.

## Day 1

**Saturday 4th February**

### Heathrow - Keflavik

With two of the group and leader flying from Heathrow, arrangements had been made for the rest of the group to meet at Keflavik and it wasn't long before we were loading our luggage into the minibus for the 50-minute journey to our first hotel. A small flock of Ravens searched for food in a snow-covered field as we arrived at the hotel on the edge of a lake with the temperature at 6°C (42.8 Fahrenheit) although the lake was still frozen over.

We were soon checked into our rooms and looking forward to our first Icelandic dinner cooked to perfection by our affable Hungarian chef as we made plans for an early breakfast before our 9.30am flight. A message from Icelandair put paid to those plans as the flight had been changed to 8am due to high winds meaning an earlier start and buffet breakfast.

## Day 2

**Sunday 5th February**

### Reykjavik - Grindavik - Krysuvik. Strong winds, rain showers, fog, 6°C

The high winds overnight showed no sign of abating and with forecast gusts up to 93kmph it was little surprise to receive a text from Icelandair stating that our flight had been cancelled and with no updates we checked out and made our way to the airport to check the situation. With the news that all flights were cancelled for the day, we re-booked on a late morning flight the next day and returned to the hotel having checked that they could accommodate us for another night's stay.

The forecast was looking slightly better as we made plans for a day around the peninsula and Accuweather was showing that rain would stop in two minutes. They obviously hadn't consulted the rain gods as there didn't appear to be any let-up as we ventured out with the rain eventually giving way to fog as we crossed the mountain pass bringing very poor visibility.

At lower level, Snow Buntings flew over the road and were lost to sight as a distant flock of Pink-footed Geese landed a distance away. Waves crashed against Krísuvíkurborg Cliffs as we passed the car parks for the dormant Fagradalsfjall volcano which last erupted in August 2022 to the relief of residents as the very road we were travelling on was in danger of being swept away by the lava along with all the services, including broadband for that part of Iceland that followed the course of the road.

The wind was fierce as we approached Grindavík harbour and the first year Iceland Gull didn't stop to have its photo taken and flew up to join the many gulls including Glaucous, Great Black-backed and Black-legged Kittiwakes along with Northern Fulmars being buffeted by the wind.

Between three & five Great Northern Divers were keeping close to the harbour wall as Pat B. spotted a European Shag in amongst the Great Cormorants. Common Eider and Red-breasted Mergansers fed in the shelter of the wall with the photographers struggling to hold their cameras still enough for a shot, even with image stabilized lenses, such was the strength of the wind.

We were pleased to see the café open on a Sunday in February for lunch so we placed our orders and watched a flock of Common (European) Starlings wheeling around from the comfort of the café whilst awaiting our meals.

Satiated, we took the narrow road west from Grindavík where Whooper Swans and a number of ducks roosted by a frozen lake where tough Icelandic horses fed on the hay put out for them. A little further on and an appropriate stop overlooked the beach at Arfadalsvík where we held onto our hats and walked along the beach exploring the mini rifts in the rock. Mallards and Wigeon flocks struggled against the wind and a single bird flew towards us. A wader? Turnstone? A little larger. Golden Plover? Wrong colouration, it appeared black and white, and as it approached the conical bill could be seen - Puffin! What was an Atlantic Puffin doing in Iceland in February? E-bird thought the same after Marion submitted the record, unsurprisingly perhaps, questioning the identification!

We returned to view the harbour from a different place, but no new birds were seen so we carried on east turning off at Krýsuvík, a geothermal area with sulphur springs created by a fissure on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. The hardy members of the group walked the well-maintained boardwalk circuit while others had a quick look at the hot springs and bubbling mud pools before retreating to the bus as the temperature dropped and fog descended.

We returned to the hotel where we met up for dinner and to complete the checklist of birds for the day still not quite believing the Puffin sighting we'd had - unexpected to say the least.

## Day 3

Monday 6th February

Reykjavik – Akureyri - Goðafoss – Mývatn. Snow, strong winds, 0°C

Overnight temperatures dropped below freezing and a light sprinkling of snow greeted us as we met for breakfast. We were packed and ready to leave when Mic asked if they had any fermented shark, hákarl in Icelandic. We were brought small chunks of this delicacy to try. The lingering smell could be described as a rancid mixture of ammonia and putrid flesh but that didn't put most of the group off trying it though no-one described it as edible! It's an acquired taste, apparently.

The re-scheduled flight meant we were able to visit the gleaming Sun Voyager, a stainless steel sculpture that resembles a Viking long-ship symbolizing light and hope, where many photos were taken in the snow.

Just to the north of Reykjavik lies the Seltjarnarnes peninsula where Common Eiders bobbed about on the sea in the shadow of the old lighthouse. A heavy hailstorm arrived as we made our way to the airport in good time for our 50-minute flight to Akureyri in the north of Iceland.

A stop half way between the airport and our hotel for a late lunch at Goðafoss gave us spectacular views of waterfall with thundering water cascading over huge icicles that looked like they'd been there forever in this frozen landscape.

It's widely thought that the waterfall was named after a local chieftain in 1,000AD who supposedly threw his statues of the Norse gods into the falls when Christianity was adopted in Iceland. This tale is thought to have originated in Denmark. Another version according to a linguist and place-name expert, is derived from two crags at the falls that resemble pagan idols. Whatever version is accurate, it's a breath-taking sight, especially in winter when it's enveloped in snow.

There were several flocks of Barrow's Goldeneye as we drove alongside the fast flowing Laxá river and Pat W. spotted a drake Goodander and as we pulled into the car park a number of drake Barrow's Goldeneye were displaying as if spring had already arrived. The ducks were named after Sir John Barrow, a writer and geographer who devoted himself to writing a history of the modern Arctic voyages of discovery when he retired from the civil service in 1845.

The forecast for the Northern Lights was showing as moderate as we checked in at the hotel overlooking the rootless cones at Skútustaðir. Also known as 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 and those lucky enough to have a room overlooking the cones were treated to an amazing moonrise over the snow-covered mountains.

We had a three-course dinner of lasagne or stuffed peppers depending on our choice of diet and some of us sampled the owner's craft ale brewed on the premises before venturing out in the hope of seeing the Northern Lights. Initially they were very faint although the green shimmer could be seen. A little later when the clouds had cleared, a far better showing was enjoyed by the group, some from the warmth and comfort of their rooms, delighting everyone as the green hues filled the sky fulfilling many bucket-list ambitions.

## Day 4

Tuesday 7th February

Laxá – Húsavík – Grjótagjá – Dimmuborgir. Snow, strong winds, 0°C

With severe wind forecast we had our breakfast and left the hotel before daybreak with the intention of finding more ducks and improving on the views we'd had of the Barrow's Goldeneye on the Laxá river. The cold wind made viewing difficult and the ducks were further away and both Harlequin and Long-tailed Ducks eluded us though a male Goosander (Common Merganser) was seen from the moving vehicle. Sheila noticed a large bird being mobbed by smaller birds a long way off, possibly White-tailed Eagle and Ravens? There was no further sign and with the wind increasing we decided to head for Húsavík just in case we needed to seek refuge in a café.

We stopped to admire the magnificent view over the frozen lake with Hverfjall volcano in the distance as the orange glow of the rising sun reflected off the ice as snow clouds gathered up ahead.

We reached Húsavík, the whale-watching capital of Iceland, in a white-out and parked by the harbour where Common Eider flocks and gulls braved the weather conditions. Even the offer of a coffee and cake in the local bakery couldn't tempt us out of the minibus so we drove up to the lighthouse and through the industrial area where Ravens were the only sign of life.

The snow storm had stopped by the time we were back on Route 1 to the north of the lake where several flocks of Snow Buntings were seen flying over the road ahead of us and landing in an unfrozen patch. About 80 birds were seen feeding on grass seeds before being joined by approximately 20 more, quite a flock to see in this snowy landscape!

We reached Mývatn Nature baths in time for lunch and sat down with a view of the blue water lagoons devoid of people. It may have been the thought of freezing hair or the icy walk to the pools however those thinking of returning later for a soak had diminished to none by the time we'd finished lunch!

The active geothermal area at Hverir was only a short distance away but visibility was poor and a motorhome was blocking the entrance trying to get out in the deep snow so we turned around and headed back the way we came thankful that we'd visited Krysuvík a few days earlier.

We turned off the road to Grjótagjá, a small lava cave and hot spring where locals used to bathe before volcanic activity made raised the temperature of the water to more than 50°C making it too hot for comfort. Paul managed to descend into the cave and climb out again over the icy rocks as others climbed up to photograph the fissure above the cave.

Our VW Caravelle made easy work of the icy road conditions as we made our way to our next stop, the rock formations of Dimmuborgir (Dark Fortress or Castles in Icelandic) formed from lava flowing into a lake about 2,300 years ago. In Icelandic culture, the lava caves are allegedly the homes of the nation's brutal trolls and whilst we did see evidence of their gatherings they were in no mood to show themselves. Maybe because visitor numbers were higher than expected at this time of year and a Trolls Iceland tour bus arrived as we were leaving. Maybe they knew where to look.

As we drove down the eastern shores of a frozen Lake Mývatn, Paul spotted large bird lift up and hang in the air. An adult White-tailed Eagle! We watched as it rose and dropped out of view and manged a few shots from the vehicle before finding a suitable stopping spot where we could all get out and admire this huge raptor. Its impressive size was apparent as it banked away from us and out of view for the last time scattering ducks as it went in the fading daylight.

We arrived back at the hotel feeling elated at our sighting and hoped for more Northern Lights although the forecast was less favourable tonight. Pat & Sheila braved the elements to try out the hotel's newly built sauna to make up for not going to the nature baths. Mic celebrated with another sample of fermented shark and whilst it didn't smell as rancid as the first try there were no other takers for this endangered Greenland shark delicacy.

During dinner the clouds started to clear but it seems we'd used up all our luck the previous night as there wasn't the faintest hue of colour in the dark sky and no Aurora wake up calls during the night.

## Day 5

**Wednesday 8th February**

Laxá - Goðafoss – Akureyri – Reykjavik- Heathrow. Heavy snow, strong winds, -6°C

With plenty of time to reach the airport, we enjoyed our last breakfast before checking out of the hotel and with all the luggage loaded into the nicely warmed minibus, we made a final stop by the Laxá river hoping to find Long-tailed Duck or Harlequin but we were out of luck.

Goðafoss looked impressive in the morning sunlight as some of us chose a hot drink and snack and browsed the souvenirs before venturing up the path to the falls. Dave took the minibus further along the road in a final effort to see Ptarmigan but they were still in hiding and well disguised in their winter attire.

The mountain road was impassable, so we took a short cut through the tunnel towards Akureyri and gauged how far we were into the tunnel by the rise and fall of the temperature, at one point reaching +20°C, rapidly dropping again as we neared the exit.

News of heavy snow in Reykjavik and another delayed flight were a little concerning for Dave and Paul who were flying back to Heathrow today and it seemed unlikely we'd make it after landing in a snowstorm. The lady at the hire desk told us we'd most likely arrive around 3.30. Our flight was due to take off at 3.20! Dave cleared the snow off the minibus and joined the queue outside the terminal as our luggage began to arrive while Mic made arrangement to get to his hotel for his extended stay in Iceland.

Driving in conditions that would've brought the whole of the UK to a standstill, we managed to get to the airport with just enough time to drop the rest of the group at the hotel and Paul to the airport before dropping off the hire vehicle. The checks seemed to take an inordinate amount of time but they agreed to drop Dave off saving the crucial five minutes it would've taken to walk, seconds before the check-in closed. Phew!

What a trip it had been; the weather at times was extreme but that didn't stop us venturing out and enjoying the incredible wintery landscape and the birds that survive here. Gyr eluded us though a pro-longed sighting of the Northern Lights made it an all-round amazing experience - regardless or because of the weather!

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## Species lists

| Birds                   |                                   | February 2023 |    |     |     |   |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------|----|-----|-----|---|
| Common name             | Scientific name                   | 4             | 5  | 6   | 7   | 8 |
| Pink-footed Goose       | <i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>       |               | ✓  |     |     | ✓ |
| Whooper Swan            | <i>Cygnus cygnus</i>              | ✓             | 2  | ✓   | 6   | ✓ |
| Eurasian Wigeon         | <i>Mareca penelope</i>            |               | 2  |     |     |   |
| Mallard                 | <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>         |               | ✓  | ✓   | ✓   |   |
| Eurasian Teal           | <i>Anas crecca</i>                |               | ✓  |     |     |   |
| Common Eider            | <i>Somateria mollissima</i>       |               | ✓  | ✓   | ✓   |   |
| Barrow's Goldeneye      | <i>Bucephala islandica</i>        |               |    | 30+ | ✓   | ✓ |
| Goosander               | <i>Mergus merganser</i>           |               |    | 1   | 2   |   |
| Red-breasted Merganser  | <i>Mergus serrator</i>            |               | 6  |     |     |   |
| Black-legged Kittiwake  | <i>Rissa tridactyla</i>           |               | 10 | ✓   |     |   |
| Black-headed Gull       | <i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i> |               |    | ✓   |     |   |
| Great Black-backed Gull | <i>Larus marinus</i>              |               | 7  | ✓   |     |   |
| Glaucous Gull           | <i>Larus hyperboreus</i>          |               | ✓  | ✓   | ✓   |   |
| Iceland Gull            | <i>Larus glaucoides</i>           |               | ✓  | ✓   |     |   |
| European Herring Gull   | <i>Larus argentatus</i>           |               | ✓  | ✓   | ✓   |   |
| Atlantic Puffin         | <i>Fratercula arctica</i>         |               | 1  |     |     |   |
| Northern Fulmar         | <i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>         |               | 10 | 2   |     |   |
| Great Cormorant         | <i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>        |               | ✓  | ✓   |     |   |
| European Shag           | <i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>        |               | 1  |     |     |   |
| White-tailed Eagle      | <i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>       |               |    |     | 1   |   |
| Northern Raven          | <i>Corvus corax</i>               | 9             | ✓  | ✓   | ✓   | ✓ |
| Common Starling         | <i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>           |               | 20 | ✓   |     |   |
| Redwing                 | <i>Turdus iliacus</i>             |               | ✓  |     | 1   |   |
| Snow Bunting            | <i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>      |               | 2  |     | 100 |   |