

Iceland – Gyr Falcons & the Northern Lights

Naturetrek Tour Report

3rd – 7th February 2024



Fumaroles at Namafjall Hverir



Barrow's Goldeneyes



Humpback Whales



Aurora

Tour report and images by Matt Eade



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This short, but very successful, five-day holiday to northern Iceland thankfully produced the aforementioned targets in the tour title, plus a wonderful array of other highlights, whether that be geological or wildlife! Our base at Myvatn S. was well positioned to circumnavigate the frozen expanse, which is locally translated to 'Midge Lake', but no signs of these in the -15 degree temperatures. Before it felt we had even started, we lucked into two Humpback Whales at Akureyri, while other group highlights were some excellent Aurora formations on our second evening, the large flocks of Barrow's Goldeneye along torrent rivers, a Gyr Falcon taking out a Goosander mid-air, a surprise Short-eared Owl and Merlin, but maybe the best was saved until last where a day of biblical snow blizzards thankfully cleared to allow us to find some splendid flocks of the stupendous Harlequin Duck! A dip in the nature baths, the ever-impressive fumaroles and a landscape unmatched were also firm favourites, not to mention the excellent lunches and group comradery throughout!

Day 1

Saturday 3rd February

The group gathered at London Heathrow Terminal 2 for an early afternoon flight with Iceland Air to Keflavik in south-west Iceland. An on-time arrival meant we could get to our accommodation before it got dark, just as well as the heavy snow that afternoon meant for an interesting drive, but our 4x4 9-seater minibus coped well and we arrived at the beautiful Hotel Kruines just after dark. We swiftly checked in and settled into our one-night stay here with a fine first dinner together. A cloudy night meant no Aurora for us, although those that had had a gin or two may have seen differently!

Day 2

Sunday 4th February

It was a 7am breakfast before departing for the 25-minute journey to the capital's small airport. The 35-minute flight up to Akureyri was relatively uneventful as it was mostly cloudy, but there were some gaps which intensified the sunrise. Upon arrival, it was another easy exit, and our vehicle was there ready for us, so we left and started our journey eastwards. We had only got out of town a few minutes when we stopped to observe the town from a viewpoint, which was beautiful with the sunlit snow-capped peaks looking vibrant in the early morning sunshine. Various birds such as Iceland Gull, Common Eider and a few Greylag Geese were found, then out of nowhere, the blow of a Humpback Whale was spotted. Two animals surfaced together and over the next half-hour, after descending to their level, we saw breaching, 'dancing' and lots of feeding, all before a whale-watching boat came in and sadly made the two gentle giants scarper out of the bay. However, what an incredible start to our holiday! We continued eastwards towards Myvatn and found a few Raven and a perched Merlin before arriving at the incredible Godafoss. 'Foss' meaning waterfall, and there are few better than that of Godafoss and we admired this pristine natural waterfall at close quarters. Unfortunately, the establishment (named Soup, Pizza and Shop) had run out of a third of its offering, so we were to have pizza instead!

The final leg of the journey to our hotel was straightforward, stopping off for a large flock of Barrow's Goldeneye and a few Goosander. Once at the hotel and waiting a short time to check in, we relaxed before walking from the hotel to the nearby pseudocraters, a rather interesting geological feature. Once these were admired, we did the same to a large flock of Snow Bunting down the road, before retiring for the day. The checklist was completed before dinner – a theme for the trip – and plans for the next day were explained before the first of three darts competitions commenced!

However, when we were playing darts, a member of staff casually explained that the Aurora was showing. WHAT!! It was a rush to put on the several layers required before stepping outside and looking up to reveal a solid Aurora glow, stretching entirely from west to east - WOW. The next hour, despite slowly dissipating, revealed several interesting shapes and glows and we felt very lucky to have witnessed this awesome happening (and unbeknown to us at the time, this was to be our only opportunity).

Day 3

Monday 5th February

After a decent kip, we convened in the reception and ready for the off at 9.30am, as it doesn't get to a good level of light here until 9am. Today we were to circumnavigate Lake Myvatn at a slow pace to see what we could see. Things got off to a flying start as a Gyr Falcon was expertly spotted sat atop a small rocky outcrop. Although relatively distant, there was no haste in the identification, and once good scope views were had, we walked back towards the bridge to view the ducks on the river, only to have the Gyr fly past us at close quarters and hurtling towards a Goosander, which it caught with ease – this was a huge relief (not for the Goosander) to see and was to be our only Gyr of the trip! The river held good numbers of Barrow's Goldeneye, with the odd Mallard, Goosander and Whooper Swan thrown in too.

We continued driving northwards but had few places to stop due to a distinct lack of laybys in Iceland, but we did stop next at Myvatn 'town' where a large gathering of Snow Bunting were seen perched in trees, but there was unsurprisingly little else doing, so we headed for the nature baths for lunch and, for just Matt, a swim in the naturally-heated pools. The food was excellent and most welcome as the outside temperature was a bleak -15 Celsius. Next up was the geothermally active area of Namafjall Hverir for a tad of fumaroles action, some of the finest in Iceland and being able to walk right up to them really put into context how 'alive' the area is, and also how smelly the immediate vicinity was as hydrogen sulphide released from the ground. The sound of the gas being released was quite something and a major highlight of the day!

The remainder of the afternoon was spent going down the west side of the frozen lake, although a few open waterbodies did produce the odd Barrow's Goldeneye, and most unexpectedly, two drake Common Goldeneye. The next shock find was a Short-eared Owl flying along the edges, plus more dramatic landscape views and the ubiquitous Snow Buntings. The day sadly came to an end, but it had been brilliant with a whole mix of subjects seen.

Round two of the darts ended a great day!

Day 4

Tuesday 6th February

We left the hotel slightly earlier today as we were to drive north to the town of Husavik. All was going well along the drive, other than the icy roads, until we were 10 minutes out from Husavik when a huge snow blizzard blew in, and bizarrely, lasted most of the day. Our target of finding Harlequin Duck had become much harder and our first few attempts in the harbour and along the coastline failed to produce any, although several Long-tailed Duck and Iceland Gull were worthy compensation, as was a Brunnich's Guillemot. With the weather reluctant to clear, we had little choice to visit a bakery, but this was only granted with such a sterling effort from everyone in bracing the elements and searching for our quarry. Promised fish & chips were tarnished when it was closed, but instead we ate at a lovely establishment, which gave us the warm insides and energy to venture out once more in search of

the Harlequin. Improved weather north of town meant we could go out walking along the beautiful Hedinshofn beach without being blown around, and to much relief, a quartet of Harlequin Duck were sighted, but only at an extreme distance. Many Purple Sandpiper here were great to see as they trotted along the black sand, but we still wanted better Harlequin views. Looking at the map, a bay further north looked promising and so with one final push, we tried our luck. The vast bay of Breidavik looked good and again we found a few Harlequin, albeit distantly, but at least everyone had now seen one. Matt encroached the cliff edge and to his amazement, directly below was a large flock of Harlequin Duck. With health and safety measures in place, the majority stood atop the cliff edge, gazed down and were rewarded with quite fine views of what is surely one of the world's smartest ducks! It was hard to pull ourselves away, but reluctantly we did, although it wasn't without a beaming smile.

The journey back was smooth despite the condition of the roads, and we arrived back at base with still plenty of time before dinner to reflect on another wonderful day. It appeared to be cloudy again, so no one opted to stay up and watch for the Aurora, but instead were quite happy playing the final round of darts!

Day 5

Wednesday 7th February

We departed the hotel after breakfast and 90 minutes later we were back to Akureyri for our early afternoon flight to Reykjavik. Before this, we scanned the same bay and found mostly the same duck, although one final surprise for us were two Common Seals chilling out on the ice. Lots of Greylag Geese were here and several Black Guillemots and many Iceland Gulls rounded off our birding for the trip. One final café stop, and soon we were at the airport and flying back.

A swift 9-seater pick-up for the final journey to Keflavik Airport meant we arrived in good time, ready for our on-time international flight back to Heathrow. It was a jolly good farewell to one and all at baggage reclaim, with many memories no doubt cherished from a quite superb holiday to the 'Land of Ice and Fire'!

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Species lists

Birds

Common name	Scientific name	February 2024				
		3	4	5	6	7
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓			✓
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>				✓	
Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>				✓	✓
Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>					
Barrow's Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala islandica</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		✓	✓		✓
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>				✓	
Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>				✓	
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>				✓	
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		✓		✓	✓
Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>		✓		✓	
Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>		✓		✓	✓
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		✓		✓	✓
Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>				✓	✓
Brünnich's Guillemot	<i>Uri lomvia</i>		✓		✓	
Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>		✓		✓	✓
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>		✓		✓	✓
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>				✓	✓
European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>		✓		✓	
Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>			✓		
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>		✓			
Gyr Falcon	<i>Falco rusticolus</i>			✓		
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓				
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓			✓	
Common Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>			✓	✓	✓
Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓

Mammals

Common name	Scientific name	February 2024				
		3	4	5	6	7
Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>		✓			
Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>					✓