

Icelandic Yule lads!

The Icelandic Christmas period is an intriguing mixture of religious practice and traditional folklore, beginning on 12 December and ending on Epiphany, 6 January. As many countries do, Iceland celebrates Christmas mostly with good food and gifts to loved ones, but unlike most countries that have a single Father Christmas / Santa Claus character, Icelandic children are fortunate enough to be visited by 13 Yule Lads.

Grýla

From a relatively young age Icelandic children are told the story of Grýla, the ogress living in



the Icelandic mountains. She is a dreadful character, described as part troll and part animal and the mother of 13 precocious boys (the Yule Lads). Grýla lives in the mountains with her third husband, Leppalúði, her thirteen children and a black cat. Every Christmas, Grýla and her sons

come down from the mountains: Grýla in search of naughty children to boil in her cauldron and the boys in search of mischief. She can only capture children who misbehave but those who repent must be released.



The Yule Lads

Icelandic children place a shoe in their bedroom window each evening in the 13 days before Christmas. Every night one Yuletide lad visits, leaving sweets and small gifts or rotting potatoes, depending on how that particular child has behaved on the preceding day. Each Yuletide lad has a specific idiosyncrasy and will therefore behave in a particular manner.

The Icelandic Yule Lads



Stekkjastaur (Sheep-Cote Clod)
Harnesses sheep, impaired by his stiff peg-legs



Giljagaur (Gully Gawk)
Hides in gullies, waiting for an opportunity to sneak into the cowshed and steal milk.



Stúfur (Stubby)
Abnormally short. Steals pans to eat the crust left on them



Þvörusleikr (Spoon-Licker)
Steals Þvödur (a type of a wooden spoon) to lick. Is extremely thin due to malnutrition



Pottasleikr (Pot-Licker)
Steals leftovers from pots



Askasleikr (Bowl-Licker)
Hides under beds waiting for someone to put down their "askur" (a type of bowl), which he then steals



Hurðaskellir (Door-Slammer)
Likes to slam doors, especially during the night



Skyrgámr (Skyr-Gobbler)
A Yule Lad with an affinity for skyr



Bjúgnakrækir (Sausage-Swiper)
Would hide in the rafters and snatch sausages that were being smoked



Gluggagægir (Window-Peeper)
A voyeur who would look through windows in search of things to steal



Gáttapefur (Doorway-Sniffer)
Has an abnormally large nose and an acute sense of smell which he uses to locate laufabraud



Ketkrókur (Meat-Hook)
Uses a hook to steal meat



Kertasnikir (Candle-Stealer)
Follows children in order to steal their candles (which in those days was made of tallow and thus edible)



Grýla
The mother of the Yule Lads. Icelandic parents did scare their children from misbehaving by telling them that Grýla could come and abduct them



Leppalúði
The husband of Grýla. Not that evil, but a lazy one.



The Christmas Cat

Old Icelandic folklore states that every Icelander must receive a new piece of clothing for Christmas or they will find themselves in mortal danger. An enormous black cat prowls Iceland on Christmas Eve and eats anyone who doesn't follow this simple rule. This obnoxious feline is known as the Christmas Cat.

