

Howe wonderful!

WORDS BY
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With its towering volcanic landscape, splendid seabirds and glorious coral reef it is little wonder that Australia's remote, wildlife-rich Lord Howe Island is a World Heritage Area

A flock of sooty terns stream past at eye level when you make the climb to the top of the island

Clockwise from left: a strenuous climb up the rocky peaks of the island is rewarded by a glorious view and great photo opportunities; the trusting and tasty woodhens almost became extinct for those two reasons; an aerial view of Lord Howe shows its varied habitats; a flock of flesh-footed shearwaters dive for fish; the sacred kingfisher; a shoal of three-stripe butterfly fish



THE SPEED LIMIT ON LORD HOWE ISLAND IS 15 MILES AN HOUR.

There are two main reasons for this – the wobbling tourists on bicycles and the flightless woodhen, which has very little road sense.

We see one of these endangered and endemic birds as we leave the airport. An unassuming brown rail, it is rummaging around by the roadside, unaware that 30 years ago it was one of the rarest birds on the planet. It almost feels like cheating to see it so easily.

The woodhen must once have been able to fly. When the volcano that created Lord Howe Island erupted out of the Tasman Sea between Australia and New Zealand nearly seven million years ago, it was about 600km from the nearest land. The plants and animals that eventually colonised this lump of lava had to be travellers.

The Lord Howe woodhen almost shared the fate of its close relative, the New Caledonian woodhen, unseen since the 1930s. When humans discovered the island in 1788 the woodhen was abundant, tasty and unafraid. A surgeon on one of the first ships to arrive described it as “... walking totally fearless and unconcern'd ... we had

nothing more to do than to stand still a minute or two and knock down as many as we please'd.”

Not surprisingly, by 1853 a visitor was unable to find any.

Also targeted by feral cats and pigs, by 1969 fewer than 30 woodhens remained, restricted to the inaccessible slopes of the highest mountains. In 1980, three pairs were brought to a captive breeding centre and by 1984, following the removal of cats and pigs, more than 90 woodhens had been released. It is now estimated that over 200 live on the island and they can be seen easily, probing for invertebrates in the forests and continuing to pay little heed to the humans that once brought them so close to extinction.

Lord Howe has borne the brunt of oceanic buffeting. Just 2.5 per cent of the original volcano remains, an irregular 12km long crescent, embracing a tranquil lagoon. The central section has been reduced to low sandhills and beaches but to the north the land slopes up to formidable sea cliffs. The south is dominated by two massive basalt piles, Mounts Lidgbird and Gower, rising sheer from the ocean to 777m and 875m respectively.

At the top of Malabar Head, after a heart-exercising ➤



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A white tern offers sand eels to its hungry chick



attracting more breeding species, in greater numbers, than anywhere else in Australia. The beaches and rocky shores are thronged with sooty terns, many with offspring masquerading as balls of brown fluff; these summer visitors are known as ‘wide-awake birds’ for the screaming cacophony they produce 24/7. Nearby, common noddies select seaweed scraps to build nests in ocean-view shrubs and, at North Bay, we find black noddies carrying their seaweed booty to nests high in the branches of Norfolk Island pine trees.

These introduced trees now host breeding colonies of one of the most endearing and approachable of all the seabirds, white terns. Almost pure white, with large black eyes, they lay their speckled

200m climb, we have a front row seat for the red-tailed tropicbird spectacular. Every year these streamlined white seabirds showcase their aerial abilities when nesting on Lord Howe’s northern cliffs. They sail past us, the filamentous red tail streamers for which they are named switching like rudders to adjust their swooping trajectories. Pairs fly in perfect tandem, sometimes suddenly reversing their wings to fly backwards.

This oceanic island is a haven for nesting seabirds,

eggs directly on the bare branches of the Norfolk Island pines which line the shoreline of Lord Howe’s modest town centre. Many of the brooding birds sit within reach and, undeterred by their very pointy black beaks, the man from whom we hire bicycles stretches up and strokes one sitting on a tree limb next to his shop. Elsewhere, advanced hatchlings sit tight, with parents flying in with beaks full of very tiny fish, untroubled by human observers.

Much of the eastern side of the island is riddled with

Eratification

When the steamship Makambo accidentally ran aground off Lord Howe Island in 1918 it was carrying a lethal cargo: black rats

In 1921 the naturalist Alan McCulloch wrote, “But two short years ago the forests of Lord Howe Island were joyous with the notes of myriads of birds... Today, however, the ravages of rats... have made the note of a bird rare.”

With no native mammal predators, apart from a small bat, the local wildlife had few defences against these predators. Five species of endemic land birds had disappeared within 10 years and, as the rats ate eggs and chicks, as well as the invertebrates, fruits and shoots that fed other animals, at least 11 species of endemic beetle, snails and many other invertebrates, along with two plant species, also became extinct. Several types of seabird and the endemic stick insect retreated to offshore islands, and the local skink and gecko became rare.

Residents have long sought to control the

rats – particularly those threatening the kentia palm industry – with poisoned baits. But an ambitious plan is afoot to finally eradicate the rodents by broadcasting a second-generation rodenticide, brodifacoum, throughout the island. Modelled on successful rat eradications from 284 islands worldwide, the plan is to hand-bait the settled areas and, in rugged terrain, broadcast the poison from a helicopter in two drops made 14 days apart.

Cattle and chickens would be removed temporarily from the island to prevent accidental poisoning and a substantial percentage of

vulnerable endemic native birds – notably woodhens and currawongs – would be held in captivity during the 100 days required for the baits to completely break down. Seabirds

don’t feed on land and so baiting would be done in winter when most are absent.

Some of the residents oppose the plan but those in favour are optimistic that the island forests could once again become places that are joyous with their birdsong.



Clockwise from here: a masked booby keeps watch over its chick; the colourful toadstool rock cod; the world's tallest stack, Balls Pyramid; a solitary flesh-footed shearwater



burrows of flesh-footed shearwaters. Better known as muttonbirds, they collect in offshore rafts in the late afternoon and, as the sun sets, circle closer to land. As the light fades they swoop over our heads until, one by one, they crash-land on the ground and scuttle past our feet towards their nesting burrows.

Some of the summer-nesting birds are still arriving. On Neds Beach a black-winged petrel zooms closer to the vegetated cliff faces as if plucking up courage to land. Eventually it does and we watch it staggering incompetently through the vegetation, perhaps searching for last year's nesting burrow.

Offshore, rat-free islets are popular with nesting seabirds. Muttonbird Point hosts a year-round colony of masked boobies, while Roach Island attracts thousands of birds, including several, such as wedge-tailed shearwaters, white-bellied storm petrels and grey ternlets, which avoid the main island. Although it is too rough to land, we are treated to a close view of the wheeling masses.

As our boat rounds the southern coast of the island, past the looming rock walls of Mounts Lidgbird and Gower, we spy in the distance what looks like an enchanted castle from Tolkein. The world's tallest stack, Balls Pyramid rises 2,500m from the

seafloor, the final 551m forming an extraordinary spire. This stronghold is the remaining natural home for the endemic giant phasmid, an enormous 14cm long stick insect. Wiped out by rats on the main island it was assumed to be extinct until rediscovered on Balls Pyramid in 2001.

A deep ocean trench and 23km of choppy water separate Balls Pyramid from Lord Howe Island. Those who making the crossing (often not possible) are rewarded with pelagic sightings of white-bellied storm petrels, flesh-footed and wedge-tailed shearwaters and, in winter, huge numbers of providence petrels. A major compensation for seasick-prone birders, it is also the only known Australian breeding site for the Kermadec petrel. Balls Pyramid also features on the wish list of experienced divers who may

find a range of open water fishes, including marlin, wahoo, and the ballina angelfish, normally not found above 100m.

Far from polluting rivers and coasts, the sea around Lord Howe Island is gin-clear and, thanks to a southward sweeping East Australian Current, warm enough for the larvae of tropical corals and fish which hitch a ride to flourish. Over 90 species of coral and 500 of fish are found here.

I live right next to the Great Barrier Reef, so when we board a glass-bottomed boat for snorkelling in the lagoon my

This oceanic island is a haven for breeding seabirds, attracting more species than anywhere else in Australia

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LORD HOWE ISLAND, AUSTRALIA

expectations are not high – but I'm astonished. Corals on the world's most southerly reef are abundant and teeming with tropical fish. Some are familiar but many are new; the double header wrasse and McCulloch's anemonefish are among 13 endemic species. Turtles also frequent the lagoon and our guide points out Houdini, a huge green turtle.

Then there is the diving. Although the coral at depth is not abundant, we cruise through rocky canyons inhabited by dense schools of swirling striped catfish, cruising semi-circular angelfish, orange-spined urchins and big blotchy seastars. Painted crays peer from under rock ledges and toothsome moray eels watch warily from their lairs.

We spend much of our week walking the 20km or so of short and long trails. Over 50 plant species on this small island are endemic, including four palms that lend a tropical feel to the temperate forests. One, the kentia palm, has been exported in large numbers, and is familiar in offices and homes around the world. In places spreading groves of entangled giant banyan trees form intriguing, gothic labyrinths, and on higher slopes flowering mountain rose bushes are covered with scarlet pompoms.

In addition to the ubiquitous woodhen, three other endemic land birds – the Lord Howe currawong, white-eye and golden whistler – keep us company. Along with other long-time natives, notably the lovely emerald dove, they are remarkably confiding.

As we are driven back to the airport we scan the small swamp behind the runway, a popular site for ducks and migratory waders escaping the northern winter. Among the busy, prodding bar-tailed godwits and ruddy turnstones we spot a Pacific golden plover still partially clothed in breeding plumage and being mobbed by another for his audacity.

You see a lot when the speed limit is 15 miles an hour.



Above: a tropicbird displays its unusual long tail streamer. Left: snorkelling in the shallow lagoons can reveal a rich variety of underwater wildlife

TRIP ADVISER

COST RATING ★★☆☆☆

SAMPLE PACKAGE TOUR:

Each year Lord Howe Island Nature Tours runs special week-long tours such as Birdweek – a seven-night package departing in November and March with local naturalist Ian Hutton, which costs from £1442. This includes return QantasLink flights from Sydney, Brisbane or Port Macquarie, accommodation, all evening meals, boat tours, daily supervised walks and evening slide talks.

Bookings can be made through Oxley Travel at www.oxleytravel.com.au.

Return flights from London airports

to Sydney or Brisbane will cost from around £770.

GETTING THERE: QantasLink flies from Sydney on most days, and from Brisbane at weekends. A weekly service is also available from Port Macquarie from February to June, and September to December. Flight time is about two hours.

VISA REQUIREMENTS FROM THE UK: British passport holders can apply on-line for free, three-month tourist visas: www.immi.gov.au/e_visa/evisitor.htm

TIPS & WARNINGS: Only 400 visitors are permitted on the island at any one time. If you are travelling

independently make sure to book accommodation at the same time as your flights. For more info visit www.lordhoweisland.info.

Accommodation costs from £70/30 peak/off-peak per person per night with luxury options at £490/350. The weight limit on Lord Howe flights is 14kg per person of checked baggage and 4kg of hand luggage. Flights are sometimes unable to land on the island due to weather, so allow for this when booking onward travel.

WHEN TO GO: The driest months are November to February; winter months – June to August – can be wet and windy. Most summer-nesting seabirds have arrived by November, but March is a good time to catch

winter breeders such as providence petrels, that arrive before summer breeders have left.

TOUR OPERATORS

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