

Paradise found. Lord Howe Island, as viewed from 875m Mt Gower, features lush rainforest, rugged terrain, subtropical beaches, and an idyllic coral-filled lagoon. The Admiralty Islands can be seen to the north.

A NATURAL BEAUTY

Lord Howe Island is a bushwalkers paradise. Its small size means rewarding hikes through mossy forests, close encounters with nesting seabirds and snorkelling in a coral lagoon are all easily achievable in a single day.

STORY BY JOHN PICKRELL PHOTOGRAPHY BY LUKE HANSON AND JOHN PICKRELL

THE SUPERLATIVES TRIP off the tongue with ease when talking about Lord Howe Island. Within a few hours of arriving at the airstrip I had already climbed through a forest of blackbutt, greybark, curly palms and elkhorn ferns to the lookout high on Malabar Hill. Here is one of the most spectacular views in the South Pacific. Splayed out to the south in front of me lay the misshapen crescent of the island, dominated at the far end by the rugged peaks of Mt Lidgbird and Mt Gower, and filled in the middle with meadows, forests, beaches and bays. Protected within the crescent was a shallow lagoon – a line of breakers on its right delineated the boundary of the world's southernmost coral reef.

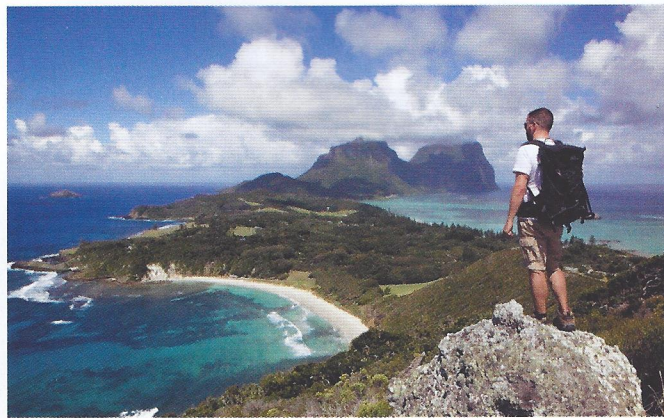
As if that wasn't enough to take in, there I stood amid the world's largest nesting ground for red-tailed tropicbirds, their nests found in pockets of the cliffs beneath my feet. Turning 180° to the north – to take in the view away from Lord Howe and towards the Admiralty Islands – the graceful white forms and screeching calls of these acrobatic seabirds filled the sky as they weaved back and forth above the waves and the mosaic of coral reefs 208m below me.

Just 90 minutes later I'd climbed down to the lagoon and was bobbing in the warm waters and dipping below to snorkel alongside double-headed wrasse, spangled emperors, reef sharks and turtles. Here I made my way through thick gardens of coral, found further from the tropics than any others on Earth. At Erscotts Hole, near the south of the lagoon, I looked up to find myself almost in the shadow of 875m Mt Gower.

"Lord Howe represents the southern extremity to where the East Australian Current drives warm tropical water, 12 months of the year – although in summer it will extend right down into Bass Strait," says Cameron Lay, manager of Lord Howe Island Marine Park. "It means we can maintain a truly tropical ecosystem, and the island's waters are characterised by both tropical and temperate species – one of its defining features. It's got a real mix of climatic zones... The current brings larvae, eggs and spawn down from the Great Barrier Reef to settle around Lord Howe. So we've got more than 500 species of fish, 98 known corals and possibly thousands of invertebrates."

LORD HOWE IS A SPECTACULAR speck in the Pacific; 780km north-east of Sydney, it is just 11km long, and it is this compactness that makes it a brilliant destination for enjoying a wide variety of nature-based activities all within a few days – including bushwalking, kayaking, birding and snorkelling. Hiking along beaches, cliff ledges and forest trails is a fantastic way to encounter some of the 200 species of bird that live or pass through here (including 14 nesting seabirds) and 300 plants (such as 11 orchids, 56 ferns and 105 mosses, which are abundant in the cloud-capped forests atop Mt Gower and Mt Lidgbird).

"One of the great things about Lord Howe Island is that it's an incredibly diverse environment, but it's also very accessible," says Dean Hiscox, who was the island's park ranger for 16 years, and who now runs Lord Howe Environmental Tours with his family. "You can be on the reef in less than 10 minutes, or a mountain in a very short amount of time, and really get an appreciation for the diversity the island has to offer."



Lay of the land. John Pickrell stands on Malabar Hill from where walkers can take in the whole island, all the way to distant Mt Lidgbird and Mt Gower.

Crew members of the First Fleet ship *HMS Supply* caught glimpses of Lord Howe in 1788 while they were en route from Sydney Cove to establish a second colony on Norfolk Island. Merchant vessels plied this route and whaling ships stopped here in the intervening years, but the first settlers didn't arrive until 1834. They made a living trading with passing ships until whaling began to decline, and then developed a trade in the seeds of native thatch or kentia palms, which became enormously popular in the parlours of Victorian Europe. The island's governing body, the Lord Howe Island Board (LHIB), still earns revenue from the cultivation and export of seedlings by a contractor.

It is the island's remoteness and the rugged nature of its 1455ha of land that have kept it in relatively pristine condition compared with other Pacific islands. Today, Lord Howe has just 350 permanent residents, and up to another 400 tourists in peak season. Numbers are controlled by an LHIB restriction on guest beds, limiting development. The island group has been a World Heritage Area since 1982 and a marine park since 1999.

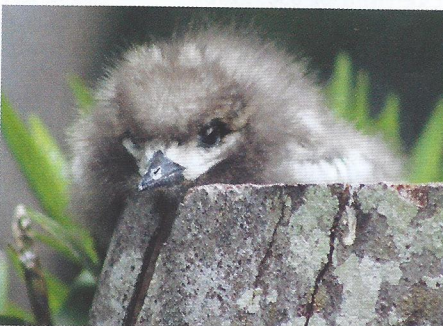
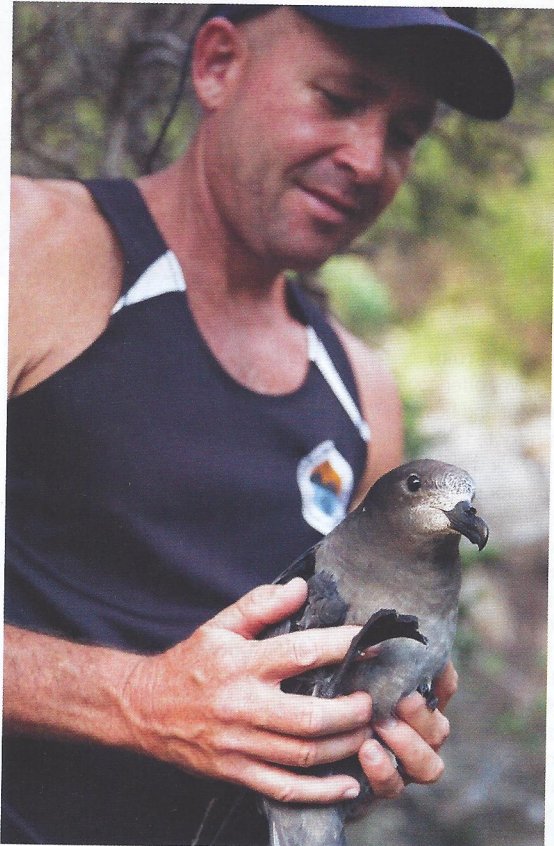
Ecologist-turned-hotelier Luke Hanson and his wife, Dani Rourke, own Pinetrees Lodge, an island institution; with 75 beds, it is the largest provider of accommodation. Dani is the sixth generation of a family who first began taking paying guests on Lord Howe in the 1890s. Luke says the island has a series of delightful bushwalking spots, including the northern hills we'd ventured into earlier that day.

"Without too much effort you can get up to Malabar and Kims Lookout. It's not too steep. There's a nice track up to the ridgeline. And, when you get there, you realise you've climbed up the back of this sea cliff that drops 200m down to the ocean. And it's kind of staggering," he says. "You can walk along that ridgeline for about a kilometre and you get these little viewpoints where you pop through the forest. And this time of year you're surrounded by all the red-tailed tropicbirds and chicks squawking. It's a great wildlife experience."

The red-tailed tropicbirds are all along the island's northern cliffs from November to May, but if you're there over the period from September to January, there will be sooty terns in their tens of thousands instead.

Also worth exploring at that end of the island is Mt Eliza, slightly lower than Malabar at 147m. *Continued page 95* ▶

Wanderers return. Sooty terns return to Blinky Beach for the spring breeding season after their annual migration to the Sea of Japan.



Birding wonderland. Nesting seabirds are abundant on Lord Howe Island, such as this providence petrel scooped up by Dean Hiscox (far left); the large dappled chick of a red-tailed tropicbird (above) tucked in its nest under a bush on Malabar Hill; and the tiny, fluffy nestling of a white tern (left). White terns lay eggs in depressions on bare branches, and here chicks remain, somewhat precariously, until fully fledged.

LORD HOWE ISLAND

A series of great walking tracks allows visitors to explore the island's full range of environments. Most are open year-round, but some are closed in September–December, when seabirds are found nesting along the tracks.

WALKS

TRANSIT HILL

2KM, 2 HOURS RETURN

This easy walk takes you through dry rainforest before emerging into the paddock above Pinetrees; this is the oldest lodge on the island, and dates back to 1842 when the Andrews family arrived. The first paying guests came in the 1890s. The walk ends at a summit viewing platform with 360° views. From here you can return the same way or head down to Blinky Beach.

Access: Starts from the LHIB administration building and goes up Bowker Avenue.

MALABAR HILL AND KIMS LOOKOUT

1.5KM, 2 HOURS RETURN/7KM, 6 HOURS RETURN

The entire loop walk that goes through both Malabar Hill and Kims Lookout takes half a day, but the return walk to Malabar Hill can be done in two hours. This is a popular trek, with a mixture of forest types and great views, and it takes you through nesting grounds of the red-tailed tropicbird. A rocky clearing marks the crash of an RAAF Catalina in 1948; from here you can see Old Settlement Beach and Sylph's Hole, named after a trading vessel that anchored there in the 1860s.

Access: Starts near Neds Beach.

GOAT HOUSE CAVE

6KM, 5 HOURS RETURN

This steep and rocky climb is demanding, but rewards walkers with spectacular views from Goat House Cave, 400m up on Mt Lidgbird. It is a good test track to attempt before the more difficult Mt Gower. It was named for the goats released onto the island by early settlers, and eradicated in 2001. As you ascend you move through lush rainforest and more open patches of dry forest before emerging into a rocky overhang with the help of rope pulls.

Access: Starts from Lagoon Road, just past Capella Lodge.

INTERMEDIATE HILL

1KM, 45 MINUTES RETURN

This is a shorter version of the Goat House track, but is still a challenging climb up to 250m Intermediate Hill, the island's third-highest peak. A great view of the island and Smoking Tree Ridge can now be enjoyed from a new viewing platform, funded by Dick and Pip Smith.

Access: Branches off 200m along from the start of the Coastal Track.

COASTAL TRACK TO ROCKY RUN AND BOAT HARBOUR

3.5KM, 3 HOURS RETURN

This track has several small paths leading off it; you can stop at Mutton Bird Point lookout or follow Rocky Run Creek to the ocean. If you stick to the main track you'll arrive at beautiful Boat Harbour with stunning sea vistas. The walk takes you through verdant forests of giant pandanus trees. In spring and summer trees such as mountain rose and green plum are in flower.

Access: Starts from Lagoon Road near the turn-off for the airport.

MT GOWER

10KM, 9 HOURS RETURN

This strenuous walk along often unmarked tracks requires an expert guide. For those who make it, the climb ends at the 875m summit of Mt Gower, with breathtaking views and a colony of providence petrels from March to October. The walk passes through constantly changing scenery, and is the best way to enjoy the range of island flora.

Access: Guided treks offered by Lord Howe Environmental Tours (02 6563 2214); Sea to Summit Expeditions (02 6563 2218).

MT ELIZA

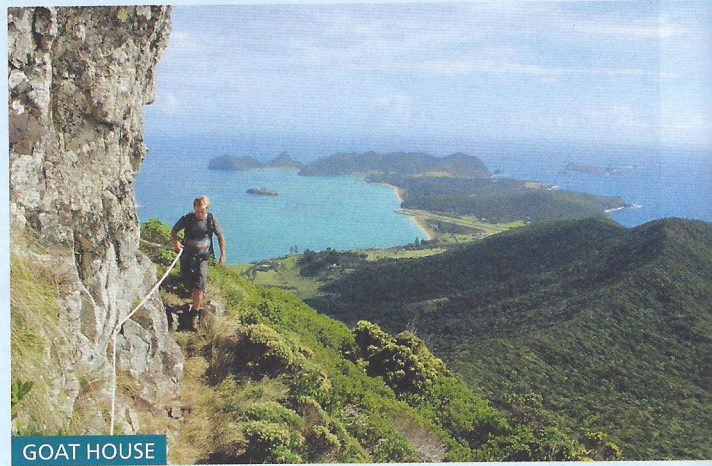
0.6KM, 30 MINUTES RETURN

This short but steep track ends at the top of 147m Mt Eliza, which has fantastic views over North Bay. It is closed in September–February to protect sooty terns, which nest along the path.

Access: Starts from the picnic area at North Bay.



NORTH HEAD



GOAT HOUSE



NEDS BEACH

CLEAR PLACE

1.2KM, 1.5 HOURS RETURN

Kentia palm groves offer cool respite in the heat and host a colony of flesh-footed shearwaters. This easy walk is also a good way to spot muttonbirds, sooty terns, woodhens and masked boobies. Banyan trees and roots form tunnels around the track.

Access: Starts at the southern end of Anderson Road.

MAX NICHOLLS TRACK TO NORTH BAY

4KM, 4 HOURS RETURN

This is a demanding track, but rewards walkers with great views. Old Settlement Beach is where

the island's first families set up home in 1834. From here you can see wrecks of ships sunk here in 1965 and 1954. This walk ends at North Bay, which has toilets and barbecue facilities; from here you can walk back or head to Malabar and Neds Beach.

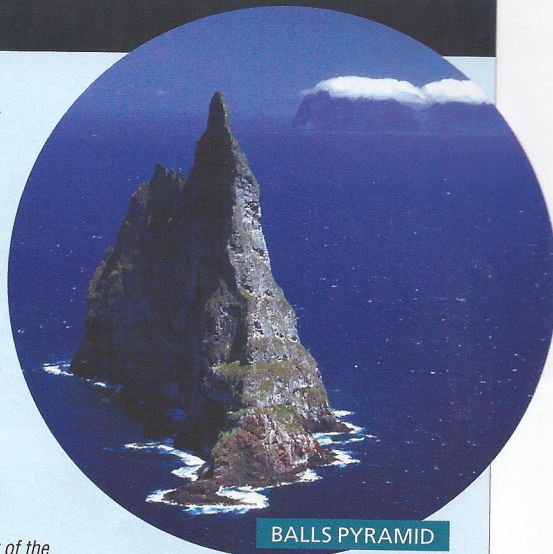
Access: Starts from Old Settlement Beach.

LITTLE ISLAND

3KM, 1 HOUR RETURN

This easy track follows a disused road through palm groves with an abundance of birdlife, including rare Lord Howe Island woodhens.

Access: Starts from the southern end of Lagoon Road.



BALLS PYRAMID



Lord Howe
AREA ENLARGED



GETTING THERE

Lord Howe Island, officially part of NSW, is 780km north-east of Sydney and 740km south-east of Brisbane. It is a short flight (under 2 hours) on QantasLink from either city and 15 flights (in peak season) are offered per week.

CLIMATE

Temperatures are mild and comfortable, with an average maximum of 19°C in winter and 25°C in summer.

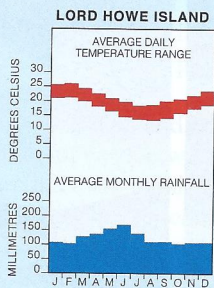
WHERE TO STAY

Accommodation options on Lord Howe can be found at: www.lordhoweisland.info/accommodation-and-dining. Popular places to stay include Somerset Apartments (02 6563 2061), Pinetrees Lodge (02 9262 6585) and the Ocean View Apartments (02 6563 2041). There are no options for camping.

POINTS OF INTEREST

- 1 Mt Eliza
- 2 Malabar Hill
- 3 Neds Beach
- 4 Lord Howe Island Museum
- 5 Lord Howe Island Board
- 6 Transit Hill
- 7 Erscotts Hole
- 8 Goat House Cave
- 9 Mt Lidgbird
- 10 Mt Gower

- WALKS**
- Transit Hill
 - Malabar Hill & Kims Lookout
 - Goat House Cave
 - Intermediate Hill
 - Coastal Track
 - Mount Gower
 - Mount Eliza
 - Clear Place
 - Max Nicholls Track
 - Little Island



Balls Pyramid
(24km south-east of Lord Howe Island)

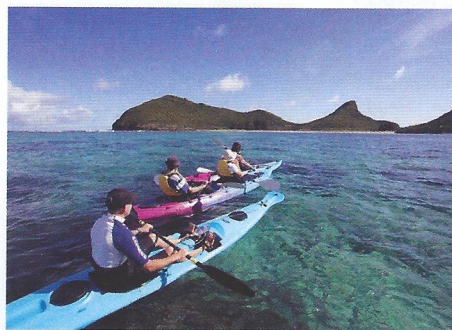
Tasman Sea

SAME SCALE AS MAIN MAP

Hidden heights. Mt Lidgbird cloaked in cloud. Lidgbird is rugged and inaccessible, with no marked track to the summit, although islanders know of some routes.



From turf to surf. Bushwalkers and birders can easily find time out for a dip in Lord Howe's superb lagoon, much of which is 1–3m in depth. Erscotts Hole (far right), 800m from shore, is easily reached in a glass-bottomed boat and is a favoured spot for snorkelling. Kayaks (right) are a great way to explore, and reach other snorkelling spots, such as Comets Hole. Surge wrasse (above) come in for a feed at Neds Beach.



“In the ‘50s and ‘60s it became a fashionable honeymoon destination... Lord Howe was seen as incredibly exotic.”

Getting there involves a climb up a ridge to a spot where you view the island as an amphitheatre below you. “It’s where you get that postcard view of Lord Howe – and the mountains and the curved beach of North Bay,” Luke says. “The lagoon is this beautiful turquoise/aqua colour and the ocean on the other side of the island is a cobalt blue, and it’s just a beautiful place.”

A 45-MINUTE WALK down from Malabar Hill is Neds Beach on the island’s east. Here you can feed the fish, another iconic Lord Howe experience. Visitors get a thrill from standing amid a writhing vortex of neon-coloured moon wrasse and parrot fish, trevally, garfish, silver drummer, spangled emperors and huge green-backed kingfish. Even little reef sharks occasionally cruise through at sunrise and sunset.

The tradition dates back to the 1920s or ‘30s, when islanders were already protecting some of the special places and had prohibited fishing on Neds Beach. “They’d throw food scraps and bread in the water and subtropical reef fish would come in to feed,” Luke says. “As time went by, a lot of the fish bred and stayed, so there’s a whole population there because of feeding.”

Feeding with bread was stopped by the LHIB several years ago, after some kingfish developed growths on their heads, and fish pellets are now provided instead. “People come and put a dollar in the old bubble gum vending machine and get their cup of fish food. They go down [into the surf] and throw it out and get absolutely surrounded by hundreds of fish. Some people lie in the water and...have fish jumping all over them.”

Of course, many visitors here are avid birders and come to have close-up encounters – like few other on Earth – with birds. And it is these remarkable experiences that make a visit to Lord Howe unique. It is an important rookery for 14 seabirds – including several petrels, shearwaters, boobies and terns. The forest behind Neds Beach is a good spot to see flesh-footed shearwaters returning to their burrows at sunset in September–April, but an encounter with the providence petrel is perhaps the island’s biggest drawcard.

Late afternoon one day, as the sun dipped low in the sky, I climbed with Dean and Luke from the black boulder beach at Little Island up the flanks of Mt Lidgbird. On the walk down to the beach from the road we’d passed through groves of kentia palms and seen endangered Lord Howe Island woodhens. As we reached the beach, the skies were already thick with wheeling providence petrels returning after a day foraging at sea. Here it is possible to attract petrels to perform the trick for which they are famous, but Dean told me we’d have more luck if we climbed up to the Lower Road, a grassy ledge part of the way up the track to Mt Gower.

Forty minutes and a vigorous scramble later, we reached our destination and Dean began to clap and loudly imitate the ▶



A tradition begins. Following the arrival of flying boats, honeymooners – such as these, pictured at Pinetrees in the 1950s – flocked to Lord Howe.



EARLY AVIATION GLAMOUR

THE FIRST PLANE at Lord Howe was the gypsy moth *Madame Elijah*, piloted by Francis Chichester on his 1931 crossing of the Tasman from New Zealand to Australia. It flipped on the lagoon in a storm and he stayed on for nine weeks to repair it. Later, during World War II, RAAF Catalina flying boats visited to service meteorological and radio bases.

From 1947 to 1974, Catalina and Sandringham flying boats – run by Qantas and then Ansett and Trans Oceanic Airways – served the island, landing on the lagoon at high tide. They would take off from Rose Bay in Sydney Harbour in the very early morning carrying up to 46 passengers, many of them honeymooners. “In the ‘50s and ‘60s it became a fashionable honeymoon destination in the Sydney scene. Lord Howe was seen as incredibly exotic,” says Luke Hanson, co-owner of the Pinetrees Lodge. “In early photos everyone is travelling in their very

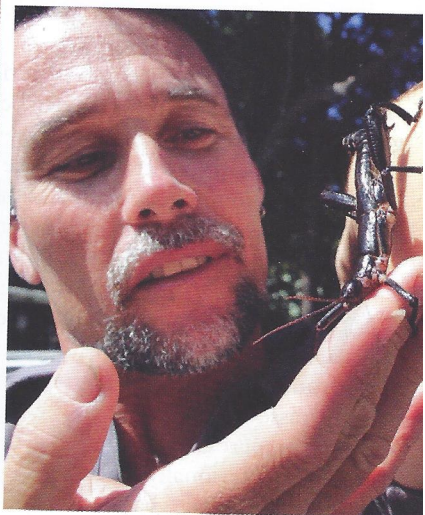
best. All the men are wearing suits; all the women are wearing lovely dresses and heels.”

It was a four-hour flight and the planes weren’t pressurised, so they flew below 10,000 feet. “Some were two-storey, so people moved around on board. Parts of the plane were like a bar and there was a fully-decked kitchen, where they cooked with an open flame. It was classy travel for its time.” A lot of those honeymooners fell in love with Lord Howe and they’ve come back every few years or for a significant anniversary, Luke adds. “There’s this great lineage of people who came a long time ago and are now bringing their kids and grandkids.”

It wasn’t until 1974 that the 886m airstrip opened. Qantas now operates up to 15 flights a week from Sydney and Brisbane aboard 36-seater Dash 8-200 turboprops. In part it was the lack of an airstrip and limited access that protected the island from overdevelopment.



Critically endangered. At up to 15cm and 25g, Lord Howe Island phasmids – also known as tree lobsters – are among Australia's heftiest insects. Following their rediscovery on Balls Pyramid, four were collected by a team in 2002, including LHIB ranger Chris Haselden (below) and brought into captivity at Melbourne Zoo. From those four, the zoo has now bred more than 11,000 offspring, some of which are kept by the board on the island.



Balls Pyramid has the only wild population of one of the world's largest invertebrates – the Lord Howe Island stick insect or phasmid.

chattering, squeaky calls of the petrels. Within moments there was a “THUD, THUD, THUD” and curious birds crashed to the ground all around us. They are clumsy and useless on land and have absolutely no fear of people; several fought among themselves, flapping their wings, while another nonchalantly pecked at my shoelaces. Dean scooped one up and noted that its heart rate was languid – it was utterly nonplussed by the experience. I had never seen anything like it in my life.

“To climb up the mountain, call these birds and have them land all around you – and gently pick one up – is incredible and surreal,” Luke says. “These birds nest nowhere else on the planet, so to experience that – especially in the mist on the summit – is really amazing and a great thing to introduce people to.”

If you continue from the Lower Road up to the summit of Mt Gower, you experience a rapid drop in temperature and a change in environment. Finally, you emerge into a cloud forest with ferns, mosses and *Fitzgeraldii* trees, which would look more at home in temperate Tasmania. The ground there feels spongy, because it is honeycombed by the burrows of providence petrels. Lord Howe is now the only place where they breed. The rugged habitat protected them better than at Norfolk Island, 900km to the north-east. There colonists and convicts survived by harvesting the birds in huge numbers, hence the species' common name. In April–July 1790 alone, 171,362 were slaughtered. Within 10 years the petrel was locally extinct.

ANOTHER GREAT WALK at the south of the island is the Goat House hike, which takes you to a 400m-high overhang on the north-eastern side of Mt Lidgbird. This is a great climb if you don't have the time to make the challenging nine-hour trek up Mt Gower. If you make it far enough around the corner at Goat House, you can enjoy the view of Lidgbird's wild south-eastern flank, and see out to Balls Pyramid, 23km away. This 551m rocky outcrop was once part of the Lord Howe volcano and its summit was reached – following other ascents – by AG's founder, Dick Smith, in 1980 (see AG 123).

Balls Pyramid is home to the only wild population of one of the world's largest invertebrates – the Lord Howe Island stick insect or phasmid. These, fat, black, waxy-looking creatures are flightless and up to 15cm long. At the turn of the 20th century, they were so abundant that South Australian Museum entomologist Arthur Mills Lea described finding 68 in one tree hollow. “Phasmids were once incredibly common over the whole of Lord Howe,” Dean says. “They were a pest and would get into ceilings of the early homes. If you were walking through the bush and picked up a hollow log there would be dozens crammed into it.”

But in 1918 the *Makambo* ran aground off Neds Beach. In its hold were black rats, which soon made themselves at home on Lord Howe – an event naturalist Ian Hutton describes as the “greatest single disaster” to befall the island. With few predators, they ate their way through the stick insects and the eggs of



LORD HOWE ISLAND SCIENTIFIC EXPEDITION

Come with the Australian Geographic Society to the South Pacific in 2016.

RUN IN PARTNERSHIP with Pinetrees Lodge and the Lord Howe Island Board, this scientific expedition is an opportunity for 20 readers to enjoy the bushwalks and nature experiences, while also helping scientists from the Australian Museum to survey endemic snails, beetles and other insects that are thought to be close to extinction. Many species remain undescribed or unrecorded, so the expedition stands to make a significant contribution to conservation. Opportunities for coral and bird surveys will be available and evening lectures provided. A proportion of the fees will go towards supporting the important work of the AGS and the museum scientists.

DATES: 16–23 October 2016

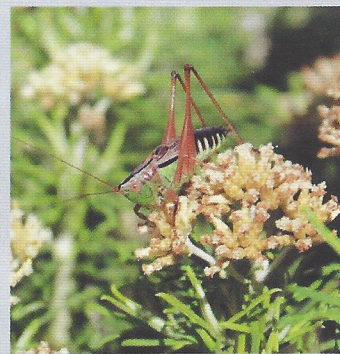
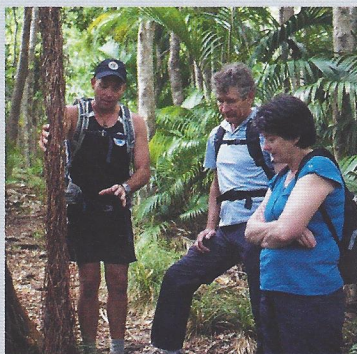
COST: From \$4250 per person, twin share

INCLUSIONS: Return airfares from Sydney; local transfers; seven nights accommodation and breakfasts, lunches and dinners at Pinetrees Lodge; sunset drinks and afternoon teas; bushwalking activities

BOOKINGS: Contact Pinetrees on 02 9262 6585 or info@pinetrees.com.au



AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM



ground-nesting birds. Within decades the phasmids were extinct.

That was thought to be the case until 2001, when the island board and the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) arranged for a team of entomologists led by Dean to make an exploratory expedition to Balls Pyramid. Climbers had reported finding pieces of insect exoskeleton there in the 1960s. “There was always a question about what was actually going on, on Balls Pyramid. Was this a small extant population of phasmids? Or another insect that was similar? Either way it was worth exploring,” says Dean, who was then the LHIB ranger.

Several days of searching resulted in the discovery of heavily grazed melaleuca bushes on a high ledge, which had lots of insect droppings under them. But several visits during daylight hours had not turned up anything more. On the last evening, Dean and Nick Carlyle, also of the NPWS, decided that, seeing as they had nothing else to do, they’d climb up to the ledge at night.

“We made our way along the sea cliffs and climbed up to this ledge where a couple of large melaleuca were growing in fractures of the basalt that had water seeping through,” Dean says. “We tentatively peeked across, and in the torchlight I saw a large insect. A closer look revealed it was indeed a phasmid. It was absolutely mind blowing. We didn’t really have any expectation that we’d find them at all. It was a moment that I’ll never forget.”

The wild population on Balls Pyramid is estimated to number fewer than 50, but a breeding program at Melbourne Zoo

has been a great success. There’s now a captive insurance population kept by the board on Lord Howe itself, and there’s talk of reintroducing them to neighbouring islands free of rats.

“The zoo found that they were prolific breeders and after a few years had a surplus,” says Chris Haselden, current LHIB ranger. “They sent back the descendants from the original four that Dean and I collected [from Balls Pyramid]...and now we’re housing a population estimated at up to 200 individuals.”

ASOUTH PACIFIC squall sets in on the afternoon before I’m meant to depart. Fat droplets of rain and powerful gusts of wind pound the kentia palms and Norfolk Island pines, littering the roads with debris. Because landing on the tiny airstrip is a precarious activity at the best of times, all flights in and out are cancelled when the weather turns bad, and I was stuck on Lord Howe for 24 hours longer than I’d planned.

But on my last morning, I awake to glorious sunshine and – walking barefoot in the surf of the lagoon with Mt Lidgbird and Mt Gower towering over me – I decide this isn’t really such a bad place to be stranded. From its southernmost coral reefs to its unrivalled birding opportunities and peerless bushwalks, my visit to Lord Howe has been a superlative experience. 📷

► **FIND** more stories and galleries about Lord Howe Island online at www.australiangeographic.com.au/issue129