

# Oh, MY LORD

On the remote island of Lord Howe, **Catherine Best** discovers an untouched wilderness of rainforest, reef and razorback cliffs and finds herself falling for the local wildlife.

Photography by **Luke Hanson, Catherine Best** and **Kenny Lees**

The view from Malabar Hill, looking out over Ned's Beach at Mount Lidgbird and Mount Gower.

I've met a bird travelling and I'm smitten. She has exquisite brown eyes, a goth-black pecker, voluptuous bust and a body that feels like heaven's velvet.

"Look how calm and content she is with you," local guide Kenny says, sensing the chemistry between us. I almost don't hear him. We're sharing a moment, locked in a delicate embrace that elicits the kind of first-date goosebumps you get when two souls connect. It doesn't matter that it's raining buckets. Thick pellets whip my face, others detonate on my raincoat, finding chinks in my waterproof armour and seeping through to my skin. It's a total whiteout but I'm completely oblivious.

I'm on Lord Howe Island and the bird that has won my affections is a providence petrel – a rare seabird that breeds nowhere else on Earth. I'm not a twitcher and you'd never catch me stalking out a hide in a camouflage vest and explorer hat – binos at the ready – but this experience has really moved me.

We've come to the base of Mount Lidgbird, one of the dramatic twin peaks symbolic of Lord Howe, to witness a rare and extraordinary weather event. A cyclonic-force low on the mainland has dumped 230 millimetres of rain in two days, transforming the volcanic rock faces that loom over the island into spectacular silvery cascades. Being here for this spectacle, on an island renowned for its mild climate,

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is akin to watching waterfalls tumbling off Uluru. But getting close to the action is going to involve getting wet. We stomp through mud, wade through shin-deep water and negotiate a knee-high crossing powerful enough to sweep the feeble-footed out to sea. The track burrows through tunnels of forest turned into gushing rivers, the overhead foliage blunting the force of the rain until we arrive at a grassy headland, hemmed in by the brooding Tasman Sea on one side and the basalt escarpment of Lidgbird on the other.

There's an auditory deluge as the distant waterfalls compete with the thumping downpour on the hood of my raincoat. But there's another sound too, the squawking of black-boomerang silhouettes circling overhead. It's late afternoon and the curious petrels are coming home to roost. They respond to noise, and soon I'm cooing and howling like a banshee, calling the birds down. They literally drop out of the sky, one then another – gently carpet-bombing the ground until there are half a dozen clumsily flapping at our feet.

Our guides encourage me to pick one up. It's not normally the done thing interacting with wildlife like this, but I really want to. I have to. I delicately slip my fingers under a bird's ribcage and tuck it into the crook of my arm against my tummy. Its little webbed feet retreat under a plumage of fine brown-grey feathers in trustful submission. I stroke

its chest, a little heartbeat pulsing against my fingers, and study the white-scaled pattern around its face and the rain droplets, forming like tiny diamantes, on the crown of its head. The bird is so relaxed it's almost in a trance-like state. That's what happens when you inhabit a remote island largely isolated from human contact. Birds have no fear.

Lord Howe is the Galapagos of Australia, renowned for its proliferation of wildlife and plants, including many rare and endemic species. Thrust out of the Tasman Sea by volcanic eruptions almost seven million years ago and sculpted by molten rock and erosion, the island – a speck 600

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kilometres off the NSW coast of Port Macquarie – nurtures a unique biodiversity that earned it world heritage status in 1982.

The island's topography is staggering – 1455 hectares of subtropical rainforest and volcanic rock, fringed by white-sand beaches, grottoes, a sapphire lagoon, the world's southernmost coral reef and sheer basalt cliffs. Not bad considering 97.5 per cent of the island is below water; in another 200,000 years it will all be submerged. On high ground, the interior is a veritable greenhouse of pandanus, banyan trees, ferns and kentia palms (once the lifeblood of the island). This is a remarkable habitat where the animal kingdom is, well, king. With a permanent population of just 350 people and visitors capped at 400, Lord Howe sees to it that humans are dramatically outnumbered. There are more than 300 plant species, a third of those endemic, and 166 types of birds (but only one mammal – a bat). This is all bookended in the north by the Admiralty Islands and in the south by Mount Lidgbird

and Mount Gower – imposing humpback peaks visible from almost anywhere on the island. Except when the weather is foul.

When I visit, the small Dash-8 aircraft that service the island are grounded for two days, cutting Lord Howe off from the world, and Gower (a tantalising 875-metre hike) retreats behind a veil of mist, then disappears altogether. The lagoon turns from translucent to opaque and the entire island hums to the patter of rain – a regenerative force that keeps the landscape green – and the guests watered. A couple of weeks before my arrival, two months had passed without rain and the polite suggestion to limit showers to five minutes became a fervent request. Now Pinetrees Lodge – the oldest and biggest guesthouse on the island, situated on a lowland flat – is running pumps to keep rooms dry.

“This is almost miserable,” co-owner Luke Hanson says with a grin. He's wearing his “wet-weather uniform”, a Gortex jacket and bare feet, and is armed with a cloth. “You don't think this is miserable?” I respond. “No, no, this in mid-winter, day four with a howling south-westa, that's miserable.”

I could think of worse places to be stranded. Even in the wet Lord Howe is captivating – a true wilderness with a dramatic landscape reminiscent of Hawaii, and unbridled adventure opportunities. I'm ostensibly here for an organised walking and photography week, though I'm not sure my photos will do the island justice.

When the rain eases we take a boat over the glassy lagoon to North Bay, a postcard cove that in summer teems with 100,000 pairs of sooty terns nesting in the sand. We climb to the top of Mount Eliza, the north-westernmost point on the island, and watch as cobalt ribbons of water smash into the cliffs and volcanic dykes below. Staring out over the island, the peaks of Gower and Lidgbird dominate the horizon, each topped with a beret of white cloud. Another hike takes us to neighbouring Kim's Lookout and along a ridgeline to Malabar Hill, where we spy in the rock crevices red-tailed tropicbird chicks.



Hold on tight: The cliff-line walk across Mount Lidgbird should be trodden carefully.

Image: Luke Hanson



Wet but wonderful: Kenny Lees enjoys the view from the top of Mount Eliza.



Old settlement Beach is the starting point for the Kim's Lookout walk. Or a good excuse to lounge on the sand.



A providence petrel.



About 70 per cent of Lord Howe Island is a declared park reserve.

Image: Kenny Lees

Lord Howe is a chameleon, and one morning I wake to blazing sunshine. I hire a bike (the primary mode of transport on the island) and ride through the sleepy blink-and-you'd-miss-it centre of town to Ned's Beach, a horseshoe alcove on the north-east coast. There's a rustic shelter with tubs of snorkelling gear and an honesty box, as well as an old-school gumball machine that dispenses fish food pellets. I put in \$1 and crank out a handful to take to the beach. I'm instantly accosted by dozens of mullet that almost suck the ends

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off my fingertips. A big bluefish swims up for a nibble, grazing my finger with its teeth, and I spot a beautiful trumpet fish floating past like a colourful piece of driftwood.

Some 100 varieties of coral and 500 species of fish populate the sublime waters of Lord Howe thanks to a warm North Queensland current that flows easterly from the mainland. Snorkelling in North Bay, I glide over coral gardens festooned with marine life and heaving with colourful fish. On the boat journey back three green turtles float to the surface, momentarily poking their noses out of the water. This island is such a tease.

Gower has been beckoning all week but is off-limits given the recent weather conditions.

Even local guide Dean Hiscox, who with his daughter and a mate went canyoning in the valley between Gower and Lidgbird at the height of the downpour, is cautious. “Gower will be an adventure... possibly life threatening,” he says, deadpan.

Instead I recruit Kenny Lees, a local photographer who has been leading our activity week, and the two of us set off for a plateau on the shoulder of Lidgbird. We retrace the path we took earlier in the week and my shoes, still damp, are soon sopping. When we get to the

grassy headland where we encountered the petrels we keep going, bounding over boulders before disappearing into the forest. A 100-metre elevation climb using guide ropes takes us to a rock overhang lined with palm trees. From here we edge across a narrow pass, the cliff dropping away beside us into the ocean. (On the way back a rock will come crashing down near me and I'm petrified of a landslide. It doesn't help when Kenny tells me he's never experienced a close call like it before.)

Soon we are off the path and freestyling – scrambling up over mossy rocks, lichen-covered branches and noodles of browned pandanus leaves that act as booby-traps hiding ankle-twisting cavities. It's raining and

I think we're lost. Kenny mumbles something about looking for a tree. He finds it and we step out onto a plateau, dodging webs of golden orb spiders to stand on the precipice – it's breathtaking and we're not even half the height of Gower. I experience a moment of vertigo as we take in the sweeping panorama. Then I spot the familiar silhouette of petrels in the sky. I funnel my fists to my mouth and summon them down. Within minutes one sits dutifully in my hands. Others watch on quizzically, perhaps waiting for their turn.

Before long I'm getting cosy with another big bird, only I'm not so enamoured with this one. It has twin propellers, fixed wings and roaring engines, and is shunting me back to the mainland. And I'm not quite ready to leave. ☒

GET PLANNING



GET THERE

QantasLink flies to Lord Howe Island from Sydney (and from Brisbane on weekends) from about \$975 return. [qantas.com.au](http://qantas.com.au)



STAY THERE

Pinetrees Lodge occupies prime position by the lagoon. The recently refurbished rooms have king-size beds but no room keys or wi-fi (you won't need either). Five-night all-inclusive packages cost from \$1500 including an excellent gourmet spread of meals (dine-in, picnic hampers and barbeque provisions), as well as an extravagant daily afternoon tea. There is a spacious lounge, bar and day spa on site. Walking and photography weeks are held in autumn and spring. [pinetrees.com.au](http://pinetrees.com.au)

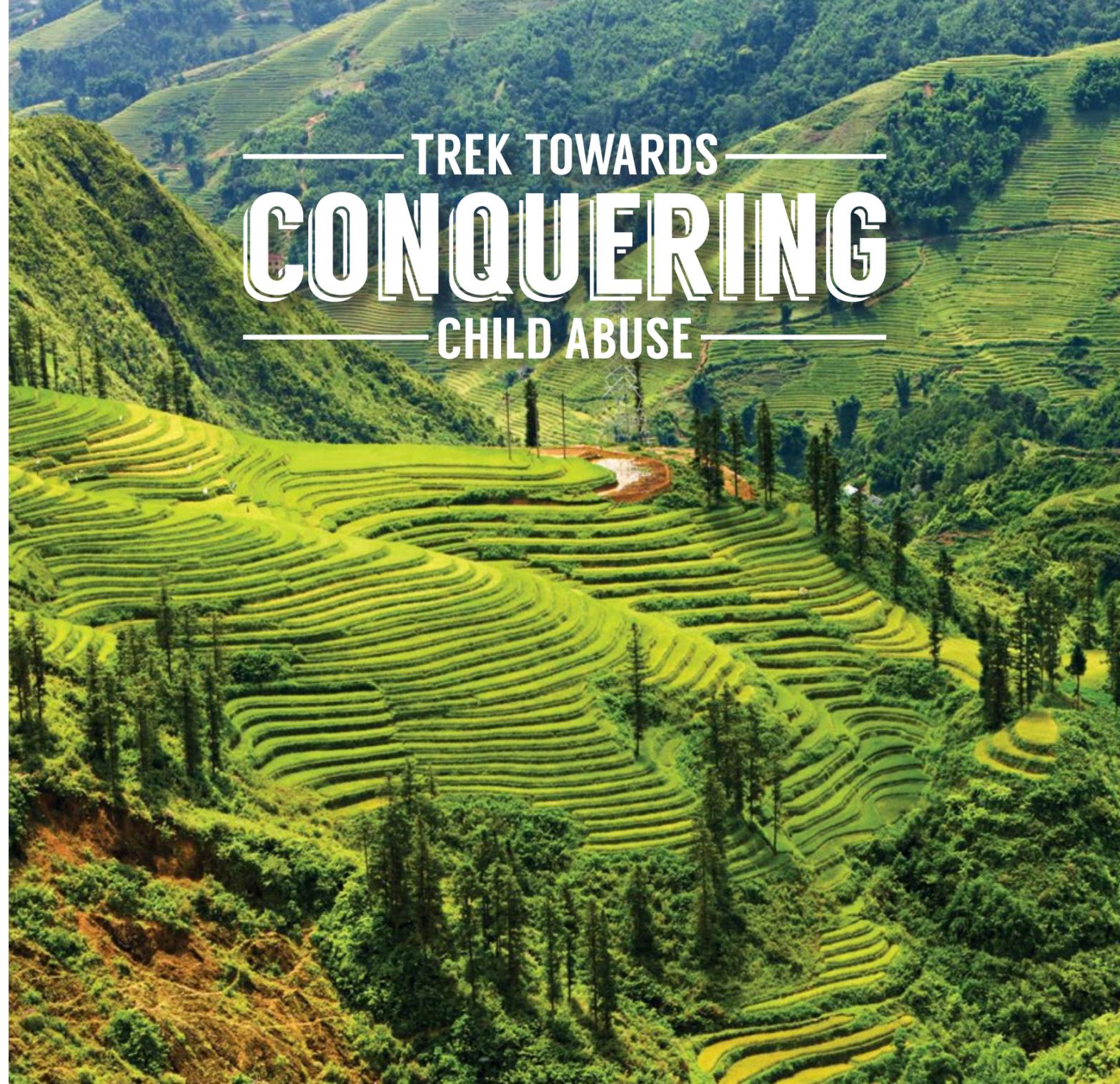


TOUR THERE

If you've got the stamina to tackle Mount Gower, Dean Hiscox – a former island park ranger of 16 years – is your man. Book at the Boatshed: 6563 2260. For snorkelling, diving, kayaking and turtle-spotting tours try Islander Cruises. [islandercruises.com.au](http://islandercruises.com.au)



Swapping pedal power for a pew at Signal Point.



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QUICK FACTS

Trip dates	30 Sep - 8 Oct 2015
Duration	9 days
Grading	Introductory to moderate
Joining fee	\$200
Travel cost	\$3,450 (incl. tour and flights from Australia)
Fundraising	Minimum of \$2,000



**Act for kids**

Preventing and treating child abuse and neglect  
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 1300 228 000