



**Landmarks:** Mt  
Lidgbird, left,  
and Mt Gower



By Katrina Lobley

# HIGH & MIGHTY

Challenging hikes, unique wildlife, stunning views... Lord Howe has it all



I had huffed and puffed and hauled my way up the formidable haunches of Mt Gower towards the gnarled, mossy cloud forest crowning its summit plateau. It was April, a time when

Providence petrels, having flown in from as far as Japan and the Gulf of Alaska, get busy on Lord Howe Island, one of two remaining breeding strongholds after they were driven to extinction on Norfolk Island in the 18th century.

The slate-grey, pigeon-sized birds are as cheeky as hell, and the moment I stood still on the mountainside, one bounced off my head to conveniently stagger its journey from tree to ground. Like the wildlife of the Galapagos Islands, the petrels are unafraid of humans, and you can make silly noises to call them down. I picked up one of the wild birds and cradled it in my hands, feeling its heartbeat through feathers. That was quite a moment, up there on Gower.

Having conquered the island's tallest peak during that visit a few years ago, I'm back to eye off Mt Lidgbird, the neighbouring block of rock that clocks in at 777m to Gower's 875. Summiting Lidgbird isn't feasible for mere mortals – there's no track to the top – but you can hike to Goat House Cave roughly halfway up its flank.

It's the height of summer; I'm not expecting another bird moment. After hiking from my base at Pinetrees Lodge by Lagoon Beach to the north, skirting the runway that shimmers in the heat, I plunge into the luxuriant rainforest, trotting along boardwalks and over a bridge. As I start to climb, an emerald dove appears on the path before me. It's as unafraid as those petrels. It pecks at the ground while leading the way upwards like some kind of avian messiah before it finally whirs away, leaving me to reach a junction of walking tracks on Smoking Tree Ridge, so named because kentia palm seed collectors would once stop here for smoko under a large tree. I take the track that pushes on to the cave. A map screwed onto a signpost warns that the climb will become steep – but I study its contour lines and tell myself I can do it. As I clamber over tree roots and boulders, I keep wondering whether I've reached the steep bit. Fixed ropes finally signal the part I was dreading.

I'm drenched in sweat, and cursing the fact I brought only one bottle of water, when I meet a woman and her 12-year-old daughter on their way down. The hike is a practice run to test



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Good Lord: on the climb;  
petrels; rockpooling



whether the schoolgirl is up for Gower (*no way, she says*). They say I won't see Ball's Pyramid – a gothic-looking rock spire that rises from the ocean 25km south-east of Lord Howe – but it turns out they just didn't try hard enough. When I reach Goat House Cave and wander right to its end, I'm delighted to spot it.

Red-tailed tropicbirds wheel and screech overhead as I soak up the view over the World Heritage-listed island and its pretty lagoon. Only about a quarter of Lord Howe, which lies 780km north-east of Sydney, is settled; the rest is wilder than you might imagine. Experienced hikers can get to know it a whole lot better, including a few secret spots, on Pinetrees Lodge's Seven Peaks Walk, a five-day adventure launched in 2017 as part of the Great Walks of Australia collective of privately owned, multi-day guided walks.

Visitors can explore the island on their own (apart from the Gower climb, which can only be done with a guide) but those on the Seven Peaks package will also learn all about the fascinating flora, fauna and geography. The series of day outings includes moderate to challenging hikes plus snorkelling and swimming when there's time. Participants return at the end of the day to Pinetrees Lodge, with its comforts including a hot shower, drinks, a four-course dinner and a pillowy bed in a private Under the Pines room.

Lodge co-owner Luke Hanson leads the walks with assistance from Dean Hiscox, a former island ranger turned mountain guide. "You don't have to think about where to go – we take you to the best places on the best day," says Hanson, an affable mainlander who arrived on Lord Howe after marrying sixth-generation islander Dani Rourke. "It's more than just a walk – we like to push people's boundaries a little bit. We push them through little thresholds they wouldn't go through by themselves."

I reach my own threshold after descending from Mt Lidgbird to the main road. I'm parched and footsore, unable to face the trek back to the lodge. I flag down a ute – it's Hiscox's wife Ros with daughter Kayla, who's just finished guiding a Gower group. She must be wearier than me but bounces out of the cab and into the tray so I can sit upfront. It's just the island way. ●

Seven Peaks Walk packages, which include six nights' accommodation and all meals, start from \$3766 per person (excluding airfares). QantasLink flies to Lord Howe Island. [pinetrees.com.au](http://pinetrees.com.au)