

This island paradise is like a giant garden, with more than 240 indigenous plant species living in its rainforests, grasslands and other ecosystems, writes LIANI SOLARI

the gardener's bucket list

LORD HOWE ISLAND in Australia

Lord Howe Island is so extraordinary it is almost unbelievable," wrote Sir David Attenborough of his 1998 visit to the World Heritage-listed isle located 600km east of the Australian mainland. A biodiverse paradise, the ancient volcanic island was untouched by humans until its discovery in 1788 by First Fleeters, who thought they'd chanced upon "the Golden Age as described by Ovid". It's a comparison echoed today in references to the 15km² island as "the last paradise on earth" and "Australia's own Garden of Eden".

Since the isle's discovery, a number of indigenous species of flora and fauna have been threatened, even decimated, by human activity, weeds and exotic pests, and a giant black nocturnal stick insect has become the improbable pin-up for conservation efforts to protect the island paradise. Dubbed the tree lobster, the Lord Howe Island stick insect (*Dryococelus australis*) was assumed extinct for 80 years until it was rediscovered in 2001 on Ball's Pyramid, a barren sea stack 23km offshore. This 'Lazarus species' was saved by a plant: the single tea tree (*Melaleuca howeana*) on which the flightless creatures were found clinging to life, the shrub itself defying death on the sheer, exposed rock face.

While the insurance population of the world's rarest insect waits to be reintroduced to its ideal forest habitat, there's nothing stopping you from exploring the two-thirds of the island



CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE PAGE

Giant banyan trees occur in the forests of the coastal lowlands; the island is a remnant of a seven-million-year-old shield volcano; the critically endangered Lord Howe Island stick insect is being bred at Melbourne Zoo to save the species; walking track in a kentia forest.

covered in natural forest, including oceanic rainforests dominated by banyans (*Ficus macrophylla* subsp. *columnaris*), forky-trees (*Pandanus forsteri*) or the endemic kentia palm (*Howea forsteriana*) that became all the rage as an indoor plant in Victorian Europe.

You can navigate much of the forest yourself via well-marked walking tracks graded from Class 2 (no bushwalking experience required) to Class 4 (suitable for experienced bushwalkers). Several easy and intermediate walks start from the middle of the island, where the homes

and tourism businesses of the 350 residents are concentrated. Other habitats to explore include maritime grasslands and white-sand beaches, swamp forests, saltmarsh, and the shrublands of coastal rock shelves and cliffs.

For very experienced hikers, the Class 5 rope-assisted walk to the peak of Mount Gower (875m elevation) takes 8–10 hours with a licensed guide. It's the only way to see all four of the island's native palm species on the one walk, as the critically endangered little mountain palm (*Lepidorrhachis mooreana*) grows exclusively at the summit. ►



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE

It's an easy walk along the Little Island Track to the base of Mount Gower; the providence petrel flies all the way from the North Pacific Ocean and Bering Sea to breed on the slopes of the mountain; in the gnarled mossy cloud forest at the summit, this fallen tree branch hosts the epiphytic orchid *Dendrobium moorei*.



When you reach the gnarled mossy cloud forest at the top of Mount Gower, take in a breath of moist, cool air, along with the remarkable fact that most of the vascular plant species at the island's highest point occur nowhere else on earth. On a clear day you can see the entire island. But if your view is obscured by clouds, know that the moisture-dependent plants at the summit, such as the delicate epiphytic orchid *Dendrobium moorei*, are in their happy place.



From March to October, the upper slopes of Mount Gower (and adjacent Mount Lidgbird) are virtually the only breeding places in the world of the migratory providence petrel. Unafraid of humans, these wild seabirds will come to you when called. And you won't miss out on seeing them if you don't scale the mountain, as the Little Island Track is a flat walk to the base, via a light-speckled kentia grove, where you can also summon the birds. Paradise found.

WHILE YOU ARE THERE

• Lord Howe Island Museum and Visitor Centre

Orientate yourself with the island through exhibits about its geology, biodiversity, settlement history and ongoing conservation programs.

lhimuseum.com

• Coral garden

Do a glass-bottom boat trip or go snorkelling in the lagoon to see the world's southernmost coral reef, which has about 90 species of coral and 500 species of tropical, subtropical and temperate fish.

lordhoweislandtours.com

• Bush regeneration

Join local naturalist Ian Hutton on a week-long tour (May and August) to eradicate weeds, replant ideal species, and learn about the island's unique plants, birds and marine life through walks and lectures.

lordhowe-tours.com.au

NEED TO KNOW

Lord Howe Island is a two-hour QantasLink flight from Sydney or Brisbane, or an Eastern Air Services flight from Port Macquarie. There's no mobile phone coverage, but public phones and internet are available in town. Accommodation includes lodges, guesthouses and apartments. Most amenities are within walking distance, but there are bicycles and some rental cars for hire. Before you visit, read *The Australian Geographic Book of Lord Howe Island* by Ian Hutton with the foreword by Sir David Attenborough (1998), and watch the 2013 animated short film *Sticky* (vimeo.com/76647062) about how the Lord Howe Island stick insect was saved from extinction. **GA**