

Lord Howe Island

by Attila Kaszo

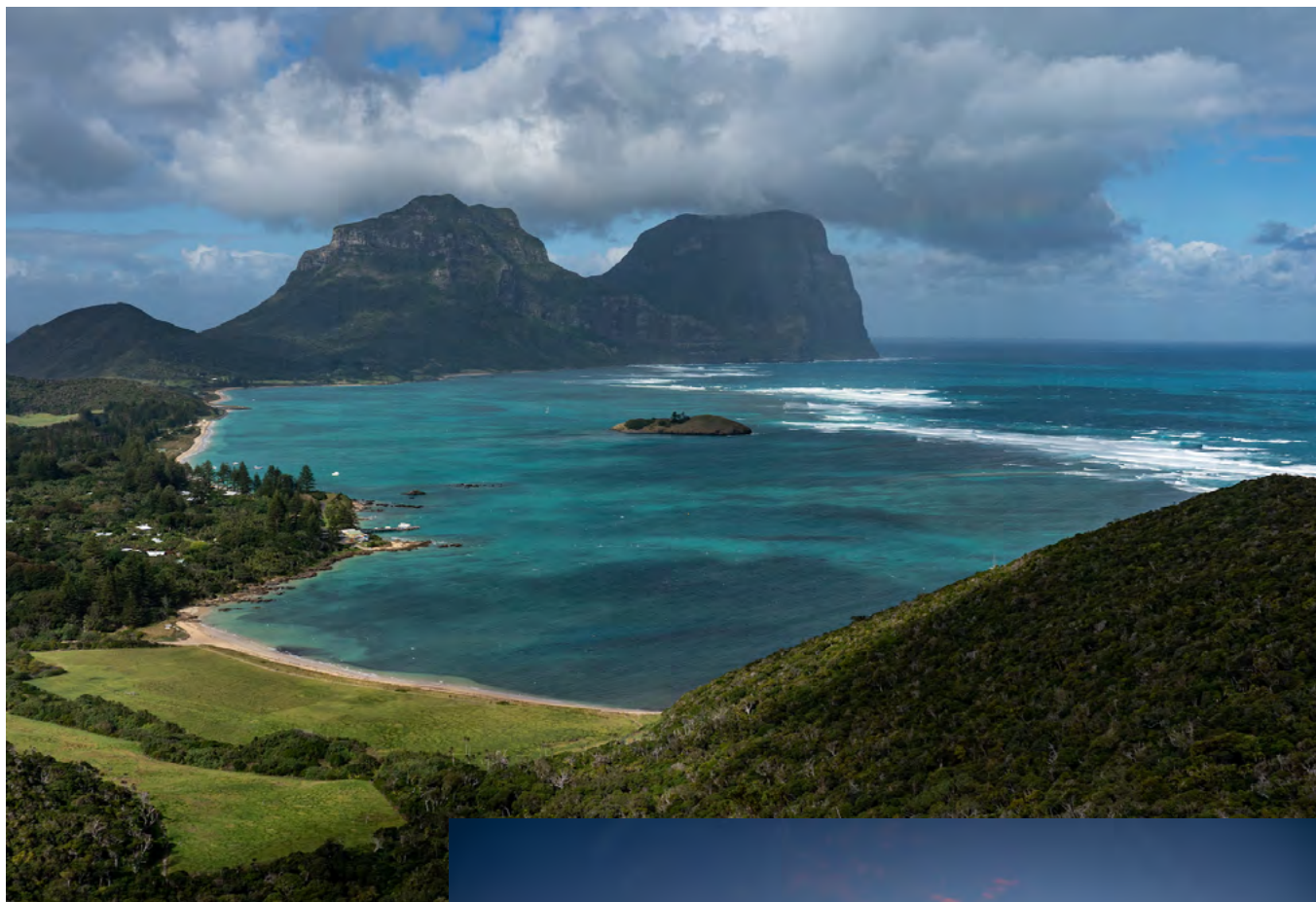
Situated 600 kilometres to the East of New South Wales, Australia, in the Tasman Sea, is a small group of islands with habitat like no other.

Listed as a UNESCO World Heritage area in 1982, Lord Howe Island has often been described as an oasis and even the Galapagos of the Asia Pacific. Many world renowned naturalists and scientists including Sir David Attenborough have been awed at the sheer beauty of the place and its unique and rare flora and fauna, in many cases, endemic to its biosphere.

Being the world's southmost coral barrier reef, the waters surrounding the islands are protected by a marine park with levels of zoning, providing protection to its inhabitants and also offering recreational opportunities for visitors and the local community.

Australia holds the dubious title for the fourth highest animal extinctions in the world, according to statistics by the IUCN in 2018. Considering that Australia has only had white settlement since 1788, it has managed 40 extinctions and 106 critically engaged species. Lord Howe Island however, is a good example of how potential ecological disasters can be averted by dedicated and conscientious people.

Prior to discovery in 1788 by Lieutenant Ball, the islands and its surrounding waters had flourished with animals and plants not known on the mainland. Settled in 1834, the island named for Admiral Lord Howe of the British Navy, became a supply station for whaling fleets. So began the gradual destruction of the island and its marine life.



At dawn Ned's Beach comes alive with schools of fish moving into the shallows. These Sand Mullet were in water half a meter deep. The difficulty in getting images is that the fish swim and touch the lens port, believing the contents to contain food. Patience and a fair bit of luck is needed as well, especially with split shots. Nikon D800 / 2x INON Strobes Sigma 15mm @15mm, f2.8 F6.3 / 80th





Ball's Pyramid lies 23km from Lord Howe Island and takes about two hours to reach by boat. A remnant Shield Volcano which now hosts thousands of seabirds and offers protection to many marine creatures. Diving around the stack can be demanding, with strong currents and ocean swells pushing divers abilities to the limit.

Of the 28 islands in the group, the largest and most easily settled was Lord Howe Island. It offered all the necessary attributes for settlement including fresh water and animal food sources, the latter from the surrounding waters and on land, in the form of birds, of which two species were eaten into extinction. As crops were planted a further species of parakeet was destroyed because it was considered a pest. In 1918 rats arrived on the island and within ten years five

more bird species became extinct.

By 1970 it was estimated that just a handful of endemic Woodhens were surviving and they too were heading for extinction. Many other smaller invertebrates faced similar challenges, the most noted was the Lord Howe Island stick insect or Phasmid. It was considered extinct until rediscovered in 2001 on an isolated ledge of Ball's Pyramid, an extinct shield volcano extending some 562m vertically, at a distance of 23 kilometres from Lord



Double-header Wrasse a species which resembles the Humphead Wrasse is found in a few isolated pockets of reef around Lord Howe Island, Norfolk Island and the northern New South Wales coastline. There is some debate regarding a possible sub species occurring only around Lord Howe Island. Nikon D800 / 2x INON Strobes Tokina 16-28mm @28mm, f2.8 F8 / 160th

Howe Island. The insect has not been reintroduced to the island to date, and is still considered as critically endangered and listed as the rarest insect in the world.

Gradually action began to eliminate, cats, wild pigs, rats, mice, introduced owls, and to a large extent sheep and goats. By 2019, a successful rodent eradication program had been carried out and around 90 thousands rats and mice had been removed. The last 3 years of the management

program to 2021 was primarily a success due to the diligence of the islands Administrator Peter Adams, who with his outstanding managerial ability and dedicated staff propelled the program to a new level, ensuring its resounding success.

The western side of the island has a large semi-enclosed sheltered coral reef lagoon filled with dominant coral outcrops on white sand. Being so remote from other landforms, the lagoon offers a wide variety for



Pro Dive boat in the Lagoon just before the next storm broke.

marine species some of which are only found there.

By contrast to the west, a picturesque beach and shallow reef on the north eastern side of the island known as Ned's Beach has an attraction like no other. Schools of Sand Mullet, large Silver Drummer and a few odd sorts like Spangled Emperor and Green-blocked wrasse are regular visitors, due mainly to the fact that the Parks Service provides

fish food encouraging the fish to the delight of both visitors and locals. I may add, that while I benefited from encountering all these fish, I don't support the feeding of wildlife unless there are extenuating circumstances such as the preservation of the species.

We decided to attempt some sunrise pictures at Ned's Beach with the 4 meter rolling swells. To make the exercise more difficult, I decided to try a few split shots as well. As predicted



The stunning Galapagos shark, is more commonly found in current lines at the seaward side of the Lagoon. The best time to see them in numbers is late afternoon when it is not unusual to have 30-40 sharks swimming alongside divers. I found it best to swim at about 5m below the surface to the back of other divers.

Nikon D800 / 2x INON Strobes Tokina 16-28mm @16mm, f2.8 F14 / 250th

the fish rolled up as expected, but the sun was partially blocked by cloud and the waves were very difficult to negotiate. To add to frustration, I only had about 30 minutes to get the pictures before the sun was too high. The fish very quickly realised that I didn't have any food for them, and word got around...they vanished!

Day two and we tried the same technique. Sand Mullet seemed to dominate but became over friendly,

trying to eat the dome port of my housing. Obviously too close for pictures, I waited for my wife to get close enough to entice the fish to her, which she did. I finally got a few snaps and that was the end of the exercise.

While we were visiting a large low pressure system moved in, making diving even in the lagoon difficult. Five to seven meter swells hammered the island, turning the water into a swirling mass. Visibility usually

20-30m reduced to about 5m with suspended particles so dense at times that I didn't bother to get shots at all.

After a few days the water settled in the lagoon, so photography was limited but achievable so we made an attempt to dive Ball's Pyramid in 5m swells, with some amount of success. Currents around the island were particularly strong, running in several directions on the same site. Our expert dive operator Aaron Ralph of Pro Dive managed to rig cross lines so that descent could be achieved by most, but not me unfortunately. My camera rig weighs 11.7kg and to manoeuvre that while holding cross lines and trying to descend was not on my agenda.

The second attempt was more fruitful, current still running but more manageable. Water clarity was about 15m but with considerable suspended matter in the water column. A cave nearby at 26m offered some protection and opened up a gallery of Painted Rock lobsters and Southern Slipper lobsters. They were wedged into crevices, probably due to the heavy sea conditions so photography was again challenging to say the least. Hard to estimate numbers, but at a guess three to four hundred packed the cave. I was told that "usually" the crustacea are freely moving about the cave floor rather than the situation we found them in.

Unlike diving around the mainland, this region is best explored in summer months, when seas are relatively calm and water clarity exceeds 30m. Mainland ocean conditions are the direct opposite.

The diving highlight for me was a drift dive just before sunset on the outside of the coral reef. Galapagos sharks school in this area on most occasions and seem happy incorporate divers in their family groups. They swim alongside some at arms length. A few more adventurous ones took a liking to my yellow fins but I quickly dissuaded them of their choice.

Galapagos sharks (*Carcharhinus galapagensis*) are a species of requiem sharks found worldwide around tropical oceanic islands. The sharks we swam with were about 2m long but we had three that were more around 3 meters. I found them beautiful, but then I am biased toward sharks.

Fish such as the Double Header wrasse, Green-blocked wrasse, Lord Howe Island Coralfish, McCulloch's Anemonefish, Painted Morwong and the Three-striped Butterfly fish are all unique to the island group.

While I'm not in a position to rate the established dive sites of the region, simply because I couldn't get to them, from what I saw, the potential looked well in line with the best sub tropical regions I have visited. The



One of the most beautiful fish found at Lord Howe is the Green-blocked Wrasse or Surge Wrasse. Nikon D800 / 2x INON Strobes Sigma 15mm @15mm, f2.8 F8 / 100th

marine environment includes the unusual combination of both tropical and temperate species of both animal and plant. That together with rare fish only found around the islands makes Lord Howe well worth the effort.

I'll add a footnote to this essay, that being, that Lord Howe Island is not a low budget attraction. Anyone

intending to visit is well advised to research the available accommodation facilities and book well in advance as the island has a ceiling cap of 400 people at any one time.

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