

Diving Lord Howe Island

By Tom Davis

Lord Howe is an isolated and unspoilt island about 500 kilometres off the east coast of Australia, roughly two hours flight from Brisbane or Sydney. The island was declared a World Heritage site in 1982, because of its unique flora and fauna and its exceptional natural beauty. As you approach the island, on one of the light planes which fly the route from the mainland, you are greeted by the sight of a wonderful sheltered lagoon surrounded by towering peaks, and you land on a tiny grass runway stretching across virtually the entire width of the island. Lord Howe Island is just 11 kilometres long, 2.5 kilometres wide, and it is surrounded by the clear waters of the Pacific Ocean. The island has many beautiful sandy beaches, the world's southernmost coral reef, and birdlife and walks that attract people to the island from all around the world.

We were on the island to conduct marine life surveys, for the island's Marine Parks Authority, as part of an ongoing program of monitoring the condition of the marine park. The marine park totally surrounds the island out to a distance of 3 nautical miles and large sections of it are

designated Sanctuary Zones where all forms of fishing are prohibited and the fish life abounds in these areas. Because the island is distant from the mainland there are no substantial river systems causing runoff, and visibility surrounding the island is typically 20m-30m, and when the East Australia Current sweeps clear blue waters down from the Coral Sea visibility can be up to 50m. The East-Australia current also brings tropical larva with it, and the island is surrounded by coral reefs and the majority of fish species are of tropical origin, even though the island itself lies at a more temperate latitude.

The island's isolation also means that Lord Howe is blessed with a very high number of endemic species both above and below the water. Photographers searching for photos of unusual animals have a range of subjects to choose from including Lord Howe's very own species of Anemone fish – Mcculloch's Anemonefish – Amphiprion mccullochi, the Half-Banded Angelfish - Genicanthus semicinctus, and the Three-Striped Butterflyfish - Chaetodon tricinctus.

The western side of the island



A Galapagos whaler shark cuts through a school of Spotted Sawtails in the lagoon". Olympus C-5060WZ, Olympus PT-020 housing, Natural light, F8.0, 1/125s, ISO 100

Lord Howe Island from Malabar Hill", Olympus C-5060WZ, Olympus PT-020 housing, F4.0, 1/1000s, ISO 80

shelters a large lagoon fringed by coral reefs, towered over by the twin sentinels of Mt Gower (875m) and Mt Lidgbird (777m). This lagoon provides excellent shallow diving in a



number of holes in the reef, and in the passages from the lagoon to the waters outside. Comets hole and Erscotts hole in the lagoon were two of the best sites we explored, with a very high diversity of fish species and a bewildering mixture of tropical corals, interspersed with temperate algae, and fields of seagrass.

The sites in the lagoon were also the best places to get photos of Galapagos Whaler sharks, which are very inquisitive. If you behaved calmly these sharks would sometimes approach within arm's reach, after circling a few times, providing the opportunity to get beautiful shots of these handsome sharks with clear shallow water as a backdrop. Or you could observe the shark's interaction with other fish, seeing them hunting, herding fish, or being cleaned by the cleaner wrasse which are abundant in the lagoon. Also present in the lagoon were large schools of the endemic Three-Striped Butterflyfish. Seeing schools of these striking yellow-finned fish, with three vertical black bands, is perhaps one of the most memorable sights when diving Lord Howe. Usually butterflyfish are encountered in pairs or small groups, but this species seems to gather in groups of 50 to 100 fish, making striking photographic subjects, although it can be frustrating trying to get all the fish facing the same way.



Divers return to the diveboat at Malabar". Olympus C-5060WZ, Olympus PT-020 housing, Natural light, F3.5, 1/125s, ISO 100

Diving outside the lagoon provides a wilder and more rugged experience with steep walls, caves, exposed reefs, and many small islands. Perhaps the most wild and rugged site of all is Ball's Pyramid. This towering volcanic stack is situated 20km southeast of Lord Howe and rises as a sheer spire from the ocean bed to a height of 562m. To get to Ball's Pyramid requires crossing a totally exposed stretch of



Lionfish hunting above the reef at Malabar Divesite", Olympus C-5060WZ, Olympus PT-020 housing, Internal flash, F4.0, 1/90s, ISO 80

the Pacific Ocean, which means that it can only be reached when calm weather is guaranteed. However if the opportunity presents itself this site should not be missed. Divers who are first into the water will be met by large numbers of Galapagos Whaler sharks circling curiously under the boat. However these sharks tend to descend out of sight as other divers enter the water, so it pays to get in early. This is a really good dive for

seeing pelagic fish, we were buzzed by large Black Trevally, big Kingfish, Amberjacks, and of course more Galapagos Whalers. But perhaps the most amazing thing was huge schools of iridescent Blue Mao-Mao which are a New Zealand species which has strayed to the wrong side of the Tasman Sea to get to Lord Howe. This is also the site where the rare Ballina Angelfish can be found on the deep walls surrounding the pyramid.

In the opposite direction from Ball's Pyramid, at the northern end of the island, lies Malabar and the Admiralty Islands which also provide outstanding diving. The Admiralty Island's was where we encountered the legendary "Blue Current" which I have heard older divers describe on the New South Wales coast, but which I had never encountered before. From the surface the water was an incredible Cobalt-blue colour, making a striking contrast against the rugged cliffs above. On entering the water the visibility was incredible, over 50m! Now I know that claims about exceptional visibility are often made in diving articles, but the visibility here was so striking that we made the effort to confirm it by checking it along the 50m transect tapes we were laying out for our marine life surveys. Once the tapes were laid we could see the whole 50m tape stretching out behind us, and you could make out the small figures of other divers at the far end, and see their bubbles rising to the surface above.

The Admiralty Islands had a stark and rugged beauty above the water and this was reflected in the underwater scenery. Sheer walls dropped down from the face of the islands to a bottom cut by deep groves and crevices. Large schools of grey drummer circled above, with every now and then a bright yellow drummer putting in an appearance like a huge goldfish. A Hawksbill turtle cruised past and schools of One-Spot Pullers and Damsels hugged the steep rock walls as protection against passing Kingfish and Trevally.

The Malabar divesite is nearby, situated at the northernmost tip of Lord Howe, it lies under the vertical cliff of Malabar hill which towers 200m above. The cliff extends below the water down to a steeply sloping rocky bottom at a depth of



A spectacular shrimp hides amongst the coral rubble at Erscotts hole". Olympus C-5060WZ, Olympus PT-020 housing, Internal flash, F4.8, 1/90s, ISO 80

20m. Here the bottom is carved by deep gulleys which harbour a range of tropical species including lionfish, butterflyfish, and various wrasse species. McCulloch's Anemonefish could be seen hovering above spectacular bulb-tentacle anemones, which also played host to Three-spot Dascyllus and commensal shrimp.

On the eastern side of the island Ned's beach is a sheltered swimming spot for tourists and has some lovely snorkelling over sheltered coral reefs. This is also where tourists come and feed the fish, and on entering the water you are met by schools of big Kingfish, Australian Salmon, trevally, and drummer. The shallow reefs harbour plenty of the islands iconic species including anemones with resident anemone fish, Double-Header Wrasse, and the ever present Three-Striped butterflyfish. Further offshore the coral reefs continue, becoming deeper and more jagged. These reefs harbour large



A Mozaic Moray Eel twists itself into a knot at Balls Pyramid", Olympus C-5060WZ, Olympus PT-020 housing, Internal flash, F4.0, 1/90s, ISO 80

schools of drummer plus a range of tropical species, and a varied range of invertebrate life, such as nudibranchs, starfish, featherstars, and urchins can be found sheltering in the reef crevices and under overhangs.

Apart from incredible and varied diving, Lord Howe also offers a range of land based activities. The island has a network of spectacular walking tracks, and the guided walk to the top of Mt Gower is counted as one of the top 10 walks in Australia. The walk to the top of Malabar hill is also spectacular providing panoramic view of the entire island and out to the Admiralty islands beyond. There is good swimming, snorkelling and kayaking all around the island and bird watchers come from all around the world to observe the spectacular seabirds and land based bird species that call the island home.

A range of accommodation is available on the



Juvenile Half-Banded Angelfish photographed freediving in Mermaid rockpools". Olympus C-5060WZ, Olympus PT-020 housing, Internal flash, F4.0, 1/90s, ISO 80

island. Only 400 visitors are allowed to visit the island at any one time, and there are only about 400 permanent residents on the island, so things never get crowded or busy.

Flights to Lord Howe Island leave from Sydney and Brisbane with the carrier Qantaslink. There are severe restrictions on luggage, with a limit of 14kg on checked in baggage, and 4kg of hand baggage. These luggage restrictions are a major hassle for visiting divers and photographers, and usually some compromise is required as to what diving and photographic equipment can be taken to the island. Fortunately the island has two well equipped dive operations, where dive gear can be hired if it can't be carried on the flight.

Pro-Dive Lord Howe, and Howe Divers, both provide an excellent service with gear hire, and have well set up dive boats, which will take groups of divers to the many excellent dive sites around the island.

Tom Davis

Tom Davis has been diving and taking photos underwater since 2001 and currently uses an Olympus C-5060WZ, and a Nikon D200 for taking underwater photos. He lives in Shoal Bay, Australia, where he spends much of his leisure time diving in Port Stephens, and conducting marine life surveys for the Reef Life Survey foundation.

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