Waterhouse Club Lord Howe Island Expedition

31st October to 7th November 2026

Expedition Leaders' Report



Expedition Leaders:

Gill Sneddon and Gary Sjoberg

Expedition members:

Angela Bannon, Charlotte Bright, Bernice Cohen, David Cox, Jan Paterson, Trevor and Carol Ireland, Norman and Christine James, Robert Menz, Miranda Jelbart, Antony Nicholson, Anne Peaston , Andrea Pearce Nindi and Diars Sandi, Tim and Jen Tolley, Tony and Ann Williams.



LHI 2026 Expedition members.

Lord Howe Island Overview

Lord Howe island is the eroded remnant of a large shield volcano that erupted seven million years ago. Now, its 875m-high mountains are covered in rain forest, home to plants related to Australian, New Caledonian and New Zealand species, but with around 50% of species endemic. With no evidence of human habitation prior to discovery in 1778 the first human settlement occurring in 1843 it presents a relatively unspoiled environment.

The island was given a World Heritage Listing in 1982 for its outstanding natural history.

The damage done by human settlement has been redressed by the amazing conservation achievements over the last 40 years. This has included removal of 95 per-cent of the Island’s weeds; removal of pigs and cats in 1980; goats in 1999 and dogs are strictly controlled. However, the largest conservation success has been the total eradication of rodents from the island in 2019. In the five years since this, the Wood-hen numbers have increased tenfold, all land birds and seabirds are increasing, forests of seedlings are sprouting everywhere and all of the insects, snails etc. are increasing dramatically. The marine life is a fascinating blend of tropical and temperate sea creatures, and the island’s coral reef is the most southerly in the world.

The scientist: Ian Hutton

Ian completed a biology degree in 1980 and moved to Lord Howe Island the same year. While working as a weather observer with the Bureau of Meteorology he was able to live on the island and explore all of the diverse habitats. He began holding regular slide lectures at the island museum, and then taking tourists on seashore and rain forest walks. He became the first person to be licensed to take Botanical guided walks to Mount Gower and low tide reef walks on the seashore. He has worked with scientists from many fields, and has contributed to some 60 papers and articles and has published several books.

Organising the expedition

This task was made very easy for us. After contacting Ian Hutton, he linked us the the main agent for travel to Lord Howe Island, Shelly Mansfield of Oxley Travel based in Port Macquarie. There are strict limits to the numbers on the island, 400 residents and a limit of 400 tourists at any time. A room booking is a requirement to purchase a flight ticket. From that contact, all flights, accommodation and our itinerary were put in place.

There was a lot of interest in the expedition, numbers were limited to 22 and the trip was filled very quickly with several people on a stand by list. However there were no cancellations.



Ian Hutton

The expedition

The expedition started in the departure lounge at Sydney Airport as we all gathered for our flight on a dash-8 to Lord Howe Island. On the island we were met by Ian and a representative of our accommodation at Leanda Lei.

We all met for welcome drinks overlooking the ocean lagoon, followed by dinner at the bowling club. We dined at different restaurants every night. The island has a wonderful tradition whereby the transport to the restaurant is arranged by the accommodation provider and transport home by the restaurant. Distances are small but there are no street lights. Traffic is limited to 25 Km/h.

The weather forecast suggested rain could be an issue during the week and Ian adapted the program to try and avoid disruptions. As it happened, there was only 1 hour of heavy rain whilst we were out and it occurred at lunchtime when we had shelter.

Each day was filled with ground or water based activities. Ian led scientific walks to a range of places on the island. Distances and steepness varied, but what never varied was the amazing knowledge that Ian shared with us. Plant’s, birds, insects and reptiles were all interwoven with the history of the island and the conservation efforts that had taken place.

Water activities included a glass bottom boat or snorkelling experience, a circumnavigation of the island and a reef walk at low tide, Yet again Ian shared his amazing knowledge.



White terns

Bird island would be a valid name for this island. At North Bay beach, the black noddies were building multi storey nests in the Norfolk Island Pine Trees, while the white tern's perched on a single branch sitting on their single egg which they glued to the branch. Away from the beaches flightless wood hens and banded rails scuttled around the grassy areas. Testament to the success of the rat eradication program. Endemic Lord Howe Island Currawongs were found near the beach but also in higher woodland areas. Emerald doves were found on the ground in low level forested areas.

On the opposite side of the island, sooty tern's ruled the sand dunes. The nesting birds would be about 30 cms from each other even on paths. The birds were loud and sometimes argumentative. In smaller numbers, we also saw brown noddies. Higher up on the cliffs there were smaller grey ternlets and the amazing red tailed tropic birds. The shearwaters, commonly known as mutton birds, create an amazing sight as they gather off shore at sunset before returning to their burrows. They are very ungainly on land and the they can be heard chattering throughout the night.



Sooty terns and chicks on the beach.

We are all now experts on the kentia palms and which type grows on the volcanic soils or the calcaerius soils closer to the sea. *Howea forsteriana* and its close relative, *Howea belmoreana,* demonstrating sympatric speciation, challenging Charles Darwin's classic theory that species must be geographically isolated to diverge. Of the 110 plant species almost 50% are endemic. A night walk through lowland forest identified a range of insects, geckos and frogs that were very effectively camouflaged in the palms.

With the most southernmost coral reef, Lord Howe Island has been protected from the worst of the coral bleaching, with only a couple of major bleaching events in the last 2 decades. The lower temperatures have allowed the algae to regenerate and the colours to return. Marine life is abundant and at Ned's beach (an ideal snorkelling area) the fish are incredibly tame. The western side of the island has a fringing reef forming a protected lagoon, and the drop off at Erscott's Hole provides an amazing experience swimming with schools of of fish of all shapes, sizes and colours and even the occasional Galapagos shark.

In addition to all this field experience Ian gave 3 x 1 hour presentations across topics including birds, plants and island history. The Lord Howe Island Museum is outstanding and time was spent exploring the exhibits and for a few of us an opportunity to see some of the historical publications and maps.

The Waterhouse Club was ably represented by David Cox climbing Mt. Gower, a challenging day walk that can only be done with a local guide. The rest of the group were happy to provide encouragement.

In summary we spent the week in a magical place, with an amazing teacher who was able to share his 50 years of island knowledge, with a great group of people. Thank you to all of the expeditioners for making it such a great trip, providing the friendship and fellowship that is associated with the Waterhouse Club.

Donation to LHI Museum

Prior to the expedition, Gill established that Ian Hutton, as our resident scientist, preferred a donation be made to the LHI Museum in lieu of a thank-you gift. We made a donation of $2,000 to the LHI Museum. A number of expeditioners also placed a donation in a donation box at the entrance to the museum.

During Ian's talk on the museum's collection of rare books and manuscripts, he described how he has been recording his lectures and other presentations, and saving them on computer disks. He has a computer support person in Sydney helping him with this technology, and together they are working on using AI to enable an interactive knowledge base whereby LHI questions are answered by the relevant answers in Ian's recorded voice. Ian told us that the donation would go towards this project.



Ian Hutton with LHI Museum rare books collection.