

## Lord Howe Island and Mt. Gower Climb

by Troy Donovan

*"Lord Howe Island: The paradise of the Tasman"* was the title that I saw in the dusty old National Geographic from 1935 that I read as a 6-year-old boy in 1977. After many years of dreaming and procrastination and growing all the Lord Howe Island palms in my yard, the dream became a reality. Many months ago I had organized the three-night stay on Lord Howe with my cool-climate palm mentor Darold Petty from San Francisco.

Lord Howe Island has 320 residents and only allows 400 tourists on the Island at a time. The Island was designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1982.

*Howea forsteriana* is by far the most dominant palm species on the Island and grows from the beaches in dense stands that are sometimes nearly void of any other vegetation due to fallen frond mulch, growing in very sandy calcarenite soils, a form of limestone (or dolomite). *Howea* growing in this soil were perfectly green and lacked the characteristic potassium deficiency evident in some Mediterranean climates. Some older *Howea* were approximately 20 m tall.

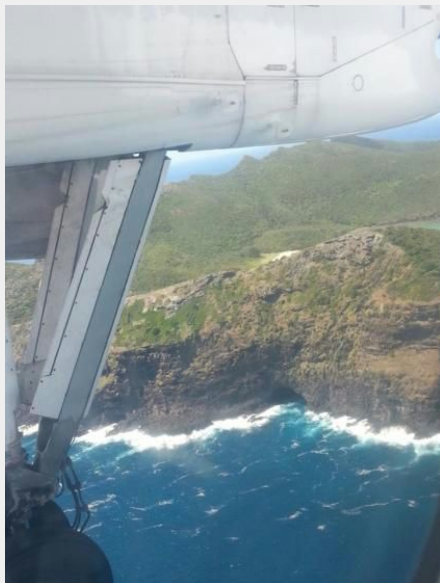


Darold Petty contemplates Mt. Gower on Lord Howe Island.

The Mount Gower Climb is rated as the most difficult but most enjoyable of all the hikes on Lord Howe Island, and most of the island's rare and endemic palms and plants can be viewed on the way up. At 875 m (2900 ft), it is the Mt. Everest of Lord Howe Island.

"The Man," Jack Shick, operator of Sea to Summit Expeditions, is a fifth-generation Islander and, like his father and grandfather, has expertly guided many visitors up the unforgiving slopes of Mt. Gower. To the uninitiated Jack would just seem like another everyday Aussie bloke, but put him on a mountain and he's like a combination of a Special Forces soldier's agility and fitness combined with the flora and fauna knowledge of Sir David Attenborough.

After arriving, we proceeded in single file through a *Kentia* forest that was adjacent to the coastline. It wasn't long before we were climbing up a steep slope that comprised of *Pandanus forsteri*, *Metrosideros* and of course *Howea forsteriana* and *belmoreana*. Strategically placed ropes made the climbing easier. Then it was on to the lower road, which is a tiny track worn into a steep cliff face with rope all the way along. Our guide Jack was very liberal in explaining the island's local flora and fauna. We then had a short break where Jack demonstrated how easy it was to climb the trunk of *Howea forsteriana* using a hessian strap to collect ripe seeds. Then the old "Is there anyone in the audience that wants to have a go?" was called



Lord Howe Island from the air;  
*Howea belmoreana* in habitat



out, and Darold volunteered immediately. To make a long story short, all the tall *Howeas* that are seeding in the San Francisco Bay area will be safe from seed collection for a very long time.

Along a bit further we had morning tea and a lot of water to replace all that sweat at Erskine Creek . The predominant palm in this area is *Howea belmoreana*, and many are quite tall with up to 6 m of clear trunk in some of the palms. The soil in this area had changed to basalt, and was a lot darker and not at all sandy like in the *Howea* forests further down.

After another thirty minutes of climbing, I saw my first ever *Hedyscepe canterburyana* in habitat, completely by accident: as my jelly-like legs scrambled for purchase on the steep track, I clutched the unsuspecting *Hedyscepe* trunk to stop myself falling down the track onto that fella behind me, the CEO of a major car company who wouldn't appreciate being bowled over by a crazed palm hobbyist! Anyways I gazed up at the huge white crown and finally saw a *Hedyscepe* that was taller than the one in Bob DeJong's old yard in San Clemente, California. The higher we climbed, the steeper it became, until finally we reached the 500 m mark called "the Saddle " where some spectacular views were to be had along with the crushed cereal bar that was in my front pocket. From the Saddle it was a last push to the top via the affectionately called "Get Up Place" where fixed ropes are anchored into a rock face. We had to hold onto the rope and place the tips of our boots into any foothold in the rock, then move around about 5 m, and then go up. It was at this stage I wanted to take a picture of Balls – [Ball's Pyramid](#) that is ! But as I reached into my shorts for the camera and hooked my free arm around the rope (there was no harness), I realized that falling 50 m to the next ledge and impaling myself on a *Hedyscepe* crownshaft (what a way to go) was not my idea of recreational therapy.



Flat-topped Mt. Gower in the distance, *Howea forsteriana* in foreground  
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*Hedyscepe canterburyana*



*Lepidorrhachis mooreana*

The "Get Up Place" is the transition area to the rewarding cloud forest of Mt. Gower's summit. There is a definite feeling of almost spiritual elation as one finally reaches the summit area after many hours of physical effort. Even the Black Currawong birds gave me their nod of approval as I passed through into their misty domain. I looked ahead as we entered the cloud forest and Darold Petty bolted toward an unsuspecting grove of *Lepidorrhachis mooreana* that were taller than the average basketball team! After our group of 12 moved forward a lady to my rear said, "Hey, where did the palm man go? He just disappeared into the mist." I replied, "the palm man has waited 30 years for this moment, so let him enjoy it."

The summit of Mt. Gower is shrouded by cloud 60% of the time, and comprised of stunted trees covered in moss, along with liverworts and epiphytes on almost every available surface. There are tree ferns, mainly *Cyathea howeana* and *robusta*, and of course *Lepidorrhachis mooreana* and *Hedyscepe canterburyana*, both palms being endemic to Mt Gower. Jack said that the summit area cloud forest is approximately 52 acres, and is perpetually cool and humid. It was 16°C (60°F) in late summer and can be between 12–15°C in winter (52–58°F). Sea level Lord Howe was concurrently 26°C (78.8°F). The cool frost-free conditions, and nights that are never warm, are a doppelganger for Darold's Sunset area in San Francisco and for my garden in coastal Tasmania, where both species are growing strongly. I was not prepared to see the huge number of tall *Lepidorrhachis* up here; some had 4 m of clear trunk with masses of globular marble-sized ripe seeds. Contrary to my belief, there were many examples of regeneration with *Lepidorrhachis* seedlings growing through the leaf litter on the forest floor, and many young adolescent palms growing adjacent to their grandparents.

Some of the *Lepidorrhachis* had closely spaced internodes and others had widely spaced internodes like stacked green beakers. With the horticultural part of my brain in overdrive, I examined the soil, a rich chocolate brown, wet humus that has evolved from hundreds of years of decaying leaf litter on the summit. A non-palm-crazed lady gave me a weird look as she saw me squatting on the forest floor playing in the mud! The brown scurf on the crownshafts of the *Lepidorrhachis* reminded me of *Chambeyronia lepidota* (that I have only seen in pictures) and was nothing like the old specimen I saw in Ventura, California nearly two years ago at the Pauleen Sullivan apartments. From this environment it was easy to see that *Lepidorrhachis mooreana* requires a cool 5–20°C (45–72°F) humid and constantly moist environment with protection from hot sun to thrive. And it is these exact environmental parameters that cause this palm to be a problem child for even the most experienced of growers.

*Hedyscepe canterburyana* was also found a little lower down, adjacent to the saddle area as well as on the summit. Many *Hedyscepe* appeared to be quite different; those with the crown fully-exposed to gale force winds and sun wore fronds that were a lot shorter and very recurved, with closely spaced trunk internodes. *Hedyscepe* in partial to full shade had beautiful elongated fronds and a few had very thick trunks and slightly bulging crown reminiscent of a skinny *Rhopalostylis*. Like its little mountain palm neighbor, cool humid conditions with sun protection for a more aesthetically pleasing specimen seem to be the key, even on Mt. Gower. *Hedyscepe canterburyana* and *Lepidorrhachis mooreana* were nowhere to be found in the lowlands of Lord Howe Island. The only *Hedyscepe canterburyana* that I found at sea level was on a short bushwalk through a nature reserve; it was trunking and looked quite healthy, and had obviously been planted at some stage. Jack said that the *Hedyscepe canterburyana* has never produced viable seed at sea level on the Island.

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We all congregated in an open area near the summit to eat our packed lunch and admire the amazing views of the island from this extreme vantage point .All the while the Lord Howe Island Black Currawongs were within a 2 m radius of us and seemed to have a vested interest in our food, with one landing within 10 cm of my boot! After 45 minutes we had to start our descent. I remember thinking this was going to be a very awkward three hours and the potential to roll an ankle would be only too easy, especially given the unbelievable distractions on the way down Mt. Gower. Finally we reached the shoreline as we emerged from the ancient *Howea forsteriana* forests only to be reminded of the 1 km of boulders that needed to be negotiated by tired aching legs until we reached our mini bus. Jack gave us an "I climbed Mt. Gower and Survived" certificate, and we were dropped off at our Lodge. Darold Petty and I had dinner at the Bowls Club where we once again ran into our guide, Jack Shick, and thanked him for making our palm adventure a reality. --The End



A Black Currawong in the cloud forest on Mt. Gower; below the author, Troy Donovan, toward the end of the hike



To view more exciting images and video from the Lord Howe Island tour  
and Mt. Gower hike, visit PalmTalk:

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GUNTHER: LORD HOWE ISLAND

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*Principes*, 37(3), 1993, pp. 161-164

## Lord Howe Island

BILL GUNTHER

Lord Howe Island lies 435 miles northeast of Sydney, Australia; it is part of the Territory of Australia. It is an oceanic volcanic island, about a half mile wide and 7 miles long, with mountain peaks rising to 5,000 feet. Discovered in 1788, it was not inhabited by man until 1834, and its total population now is just 300 persons.

To members of The International Palm Society, Lord Howe Island is famed for being the home of four palm species: *Howea forsteriana*, *Howea belmoreana*, *Hedyscepe canterburyana*, and *Lepidorrhachis mooreana*. All four species are endemic to Lord Howe Island, which means that in nature that small island is their one and only home. Additionally, and even more remarkably, the three palm genera on the island also are endemic there.

ney to Lord Howe Island is exorbitant even to gringos. However, we were determined to go—so we paid up. Then we telephoned the Government Office on Lord Howe Island and advised them that we were palm specialists from the U.S.A. who were visiting Lord Howe Island, specifically to view the palms, in order to write an article on those palms for *Principes*, the journal of The International Palm Society. The folks in the office had never before heard either of *Principes* or of The International Palm Society, but nonetheless they decided that if two Americans were sufficiently interested in palms to come to Lord Howe Island to view them, they should be treated as “Official Guests.” As such, we were met on arrival by a young and likeable government ranger with a government jeep.

Delve into the archives for another perspective on Lord Howe Island and an ascent of Mt. Gower from a 1993 issue of *Principes*. Log into [www.palms.org](http://www.palms.org) and follow the link to view Palms and *Principes* online. Find [Vol.37 No.3, July 1993](#) to read the complete article.