I’ve met a bird travelling and I’m smitten. She has exquisite brown eyes, a goth-black pecker, voluptuous bust and a body that feels like heaven’s velvet. “Look how calm and content she is with you,” local guide Kenny says, sensing the chemistry between us. I almost don’t hear him. We’re sharing a moment, locked in a delicate embrace that elicits the kind of first-date goosebumps you get when two souls connect. It doesn’t matter that it’s raining buckets. Thick pellets whip my face, others detonate on my raincoat, finding chinks in my waterproof armour and seeping through to my skin. It’s a total whitewash but I’m completely oblivious.

I’m on Lord Howe Island and the bird that has won my affections is a providence petrel – a rare seabird that breeds nowhere else on Earth. I’m not a twitcher and you’d never catch me stalking out a hide in a camouflage vest and explorer hat – binos at the ready – but this experience has really moved me.

We’ve come to the base of Mount Lidgbird, one of the dramatic twin peaks symbolic of Lord Howe, to witness a rare and extraordinary weather event. A cyclonic-force low on the mainland has dumped 230 millimetres of rain in two days, transforming the volcanic rock faces that loom over the island into spectacular silvery cascades. Being here for this spectacle, on an island renowned for its mild climate, is akin to watching waterfalls tumbling off Uluru. But getting close to the action is going to involve getting wet. We stomped through mud, waded through shin-deep water and negotiated a knee-high crossing powerful enough to sweep the feeble-footed out to sea. The track burrows through tunnels of forest turned into gushing rivers, the overhead foliage blunting the force of the rain until we arrive at a grassy headland, hemmed in by the brooding Tasman Sea on one side and the basalt escarpment of Lidgbird on the other.

There’s an auditory deluge as the distant waterfalls compete with the thumping downpour on the hood of my raincoat. But there’s another sound too, the squawking of black-boomerang silhouettes circling overhead. It’s late afternoon and the curious petrels are coming home to roost. They respond to noise, and soon I’m cooing and howling like a banshee, calling the birds down. They literally drop out of the sky, one then another – gently carpet-bombing the ground until there are half a dozen clumsily flapping at our feet.

Our guides encourage me to pick one up. It’s not normally the done thing interacting with wildlife like this, but I really want to. I have to. I delicately slip my fingers under a bird’s ribcage and tuck it into the crook of my arm against my tummy. Its little webbed feet retreat under a plumage of fine brown-grey feathers in trustful submission. I stroke...
Its chest, a little heartbeat pulsing against my fingers, and study the white-scaled pattern around its face and the rain droplets, forming like tiny diamantes, on the crown of its head. The bird is so relaxed it’s almost in a trance-like state. That’s what happens when you inhabit a remote island largely isolated from human contact. Birds have no fear. Lord Howe is the Galapagos of Australia, renowned for its proliferation of wildlife and plants, including many rare and endemic species. Thrust out of the Tasman Sea by volcanic eruptions almost seven million years ago and sculpted by molten rock and erosion, the island – a speck 600 kilometres off the NSW coast of Port Macquarie – nurtures a unique biodiversity that earned it world heritage status in 1982.

The island’s topography is staggering – 1455 hectares of subtropical rainforest and volcanic rock, fringed by white-sand beaches, grottoes, a sapphire lagoon, the world’s southernmost coral reef and sheer basalt cliffs. Not bad considering 97.5 per cent of the island is below water; in another 200,000 years it will all be submerged. On high ground, the interior is a veritable greenhouse of pandanus, banyan trees, ferns and kentia palms (once the lifeblood of the island). This is a remarkable habitat where the animal kingdom is, well, king. With a permanent population of just 350 people and visitors capped at 400, Lord Howe sees to it that humans are dramatically outnumbered. There are more than 300 plant species, a third of those endemic, and 166 types of birds (but only one mammal – a bat). This is all bookended in the north by the Admiralty Islands and in the south by Mount Lidgbird and Mount Gower – imposing headlands peaks visible from almost anywhere on the island. Except when the weather is foul.

When I visit, the small Dash-8 aircraft that service the island are grounded for two days, cutting Lord Howe off from the world, and Gower (a tantalising 875-metre hike) retreats behind a veil of mist, then disappears altogether. The lagoon turns from translucent to opaque and the entire island hums to the patter of rain – a regenerative force that keeps the landscape green – and the guests watered. A couple of weeks before my arrival, two months had passed without rain and the polite suggestion to limit showers to five minutes became a fervent request. Now Pinetrees Lodge – the oldest and biggest guesthouse on the island, situated on a lowland flat – is running pumps to keep rooms dry.

“This is almost miserable,” co-owner Luke Hanson says with a grin. He’s wearing his “wet-weather uniform”, a Gortex jacket and bare feet, and is armed with a cloth. “You don’t think this is miserable?” I respond. “No, no, this in mid-winter, day four with a howling south-westa, that’s miserable.”

I could think of worse places to be stranded. Even in the wet Lord Howe is captivating – a true wilderness with a dramatic landscape reminiscent of Hawaii, and unbridled adventure opportunities. I’m ostensibly here for an organised walking and photography week, though I’m not sure my photos will do the island justice. When the rain eases we take a boat over the glassy lagoon to North Bay, a postcard cove that in summer teems with 100,000 pairs of sooty terns nesting in the sand. We climb to the top of Mount Eliza, the north-westernmost point on the island, and watch as cobalt ribbons of water smash into the cliffs and volcanic dykes below. Staring out over the island, the peaks of Gower and Lidgbird dominate the horizon, each topped with a beret of white cloud. Another hike takes us to neighbouring Kim’s Lookout and along a ridgeline to Malabar Hill, where we spy in the rock crevices red-tailed tropicbird chicks.
Lord Howe is a chameleon, and one morning I wake to blazing sunshine. I hire a bike (the primary mode of transport on the island) and ride through the sleepy blink-and-you’d-miss-it centre of town to Ned’s Beach, a horseshoe alcove on the north-east coast. There’s a rustic shelter with tubs of snorkelling gear and an honesty box, as well as an old-school gumball machine that dispenses fish food pellets. I put in $1 and crank out a handful to take to the beach. I’m instantly accosted by dozens of mullet that almost suck the ends off my fingertips. A big bluefish swims up and heaving with colourful fish. On the boat over coral gardens festooned with marine life – scrambling up over mossy rocks, lichen-covered branches and noodles of browned pandanus leaves that act as booby-traps hiding ankle-twisting cavities.

Soon we are off the path and freestyling – scrambling up over mossy rocks, lichen-covered branches, and noodles of browned pandanus leaves that act as booby-traps hidden in dusk, are soon sopping. When we get to the shoulder of Lidgbird. We retrace the path we took earlier in the week and my shoes, still damp, are soon soaking. When we get to the main road a rock overhang lined with palm trees. From here we edge across a narrow pass, the cliff sides falling away beside us into the ocean. (On the way back a rock will come crashing down near my head.)

Soon we are off the path and freestyling – scrambling up over mossy rocks, lichen-covered branches and noodles of browned pandanus leaves that act as booby-traps hiding ankle-twisting cavities. It’s raining and grassy headland where we encountered the petrels we keep going, bounding over boulders before disappearing into the forest. A 100-metre elevation climb using guide ropes takes us to a rock overhang lined with palm trees. From here we edge across a narrow pass, the cliff sides falling away beside us into the ocean. (On the way back a rock will come crashing down near my head.)

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