



Most nature photographers dream of flying to the world's exotic places in search of great nature photos, when in reality they need go no further than their own backyard.

Now anyone who knows my circumstances may say "That's all very well, but your backyard is the entire continent of Australia". That's true, and I admit that it doesn't do any harm to go far afield, but it's not necessary for the production of good photographs. The average Australian backyard has millions of creatures, flowers, and abstractions, all just waiting to be captured on silicon.

I've been saying this for years; recently however I felt the need to test the point. Could I really make good photos within the restricted environment of a suburban house block?

To do this I had to find a backyard. Fortunately I was staying with my father at the time, so his yard was the obvious choice. For three weeks I only photographed around his house and in the immediate vicinity. Once or twice a day I would venture from the safety of the lounge room into the wilds of his veggie patch, or paw paw tree forest, hunting some of the world's fiercest creatures.

I returned only when I had a full memory card, it got too hot, or lunch was ready. Not once did I fail to capture several good photos; the diversity of plant, animal and insect life, and my willingness to look, saw to that.

In fact I was taking so many photos that I had to take some days off to catch up with the cataloguing. It seemed that everywhere I looked I saw something worth photographing. Which brings me to my tips for good backyard photography. To take a good photo you have to see it first, and to see it you have to look.

Look up

Most of us walk around looking at our normal five-foot-something level. Try looking up into the branches. Don't have any branches?, what about the house eaves, I'd almost lay money on there being a spider in residence, or a mud wasp nest clinging to the Hardiplank.

If your mobility allows, and you have appropriate trees, get up into them. You would be amazed at the number of critters hiding for the day in a dark nook.

Look down

What's under your feet? Maybe a single dandelion seed has landed on a bright green leaf. The radiant patterns formed by some weeds look great as well, take a few shots, *then* pull them out if you're into weeding. Once pulled out, maybe the large tap root will look good when backlit.

Stand and look at the grass for a moment, does anything move? If so it's probably your next subject.

Look under

Now it's time to get dirty. Lie on the ground and look up at the underside of some leaves. How do the veins look when backlit by the sun? What insects are hiding from the birds? With your camera on the ground, photograph a daisy with the blue sky and an out-of-focus tree in the background. Is this how a mouse sees the world?

Look closely

Look *very* closely, and take your time. Decide to spend ten minutes examining a small shrub. Look at every leaf. It's likely that you will still be there an hour later, photographing the patterns and bugs you find.

Just look

Are you getting the idea? Photography is mostly a process of seeing 'things', a leaf is not just a leaf, it's an interesting shape, and it's a shape that changes texture and form depending on where you view it from, and how the light strikes it.

Get the neighbours involved

There are two reasons to get your neighbours involved with what you're doing. Firstly they are less likely to call the police when they see you acting "suspiciously" in the bushes on the nature strip.

Secondly they can make good 'spotters'. Once they see how interested you are it's quite likely they will phone you with news of a lizard that's basking around their pool, or tell you when their rare plant that flowers only one day a year is blooming.

Naturally it's good manners to slip a few prints or jpegs their way.

OK, technically shooting at the neighbour's is not in your backyard, but it's close enough.

What equipment do I need?

The good news is that almost any modern digital camera is capable of producing fine close up photos. Naturally, with close subjects, you must be able to see directly through the lens, or parallax problems will be an issue. For this reason your camera must at least have a real-time view of the scene on the LCD screen.

A flip-out screen or right-angle finder is also extremely useful for low- and awkward-angle shots; just lowering your camera to the ground will provide a perspective that will add interest to your photos.

Focus is very critical, I use a DSLR with a proper optical viewfinder and I'm not entirely convinced that mirrorless cameras are up to scratch in this regard. That said, I have seen some fantastic results lately from such cameras so maybe it's just my personal bias.

Another issue is shutter lag. It's very important when photographing wildlife that the shutter fires *immediately* when you press the button. Half a second later is just not on. This is also important for so-called 'static' subjects as even a flower can sway alarmingly in the breeze, and you will often have to anticipate when it will swing into focus.

I never have been, and never will be, a fan of using a tripod for macro work. They get caught on the foliage and spook the insects, take too long to set up, and generally just kill any spontaneity and chance to chase opportunities created when the subject changes position. For some subjects they are OK, but for wildlife I would leave the tripod in the car.

But if you don't use a tripod your chances of getting sharp photos are slim because the nature of the subject usually calls for longish exposures due to the low light.

This is why I always use a flash, preferably off-camera or both off- and on-camera combined.

I find that using only an on-camera flash gives a somewhat flat light that is the same for all photos.

However with an off-camera flash you can...

- Simulate bright overcast light one minute, and moonlight the next, by simply moving the flash.

- Fire it right through a leaf or petal to illuminate the inside of a flower or highlight the veins in a leaf.
- Make multiple flashes during a long exposure (flash painting).

I used my off-camera flash — and no other light source — with *every* photo I made during this three-week period.

Extension tubes and dioptre 'filters' are cheap and they will allow you to get very close to a subject. Most modern zooms have a macro feature, often they aren't great but it's a good start. You can also buy reversing rings that can be used to reverse most lenses to allow them to focus really close.

Eventually however, if you get the bug (sorry), you should buy a proper macro lens and dedicated macro flash. They aren't cheap but are definitely worth it.



Now your mileage may vary according to the type of yard you have, you may not even have a backyard, but there's bound to be a park just down the road. What I'm really trying to demonstrate here is that good photos can be found anywhere if you take the time to look.

We all dream of making that classic lion-pulls-down-wildebeest shot, and I can certainly recommend spending some time in a place like Africa. But let's face it, most of us can't afford a trip like that, certainly not for long enough to gain the experience necessary to produce great photos there. If we do such a trip at all it's a one-off, what will you do for the rest of your life?

Almost every nature photography book you read, and every interview with a well-known nature photographer, will emphasize the importance of photographing what you know and have access to.

They have a point.

If you only want to photograph lions, and you live in Sydney's western suburbs, you're going to be a very sad and frustrated nature photographer. Broaden your interests to bugs, flowers and abstract patterns, and you will have a lifetime of enjoyment ahead of you.

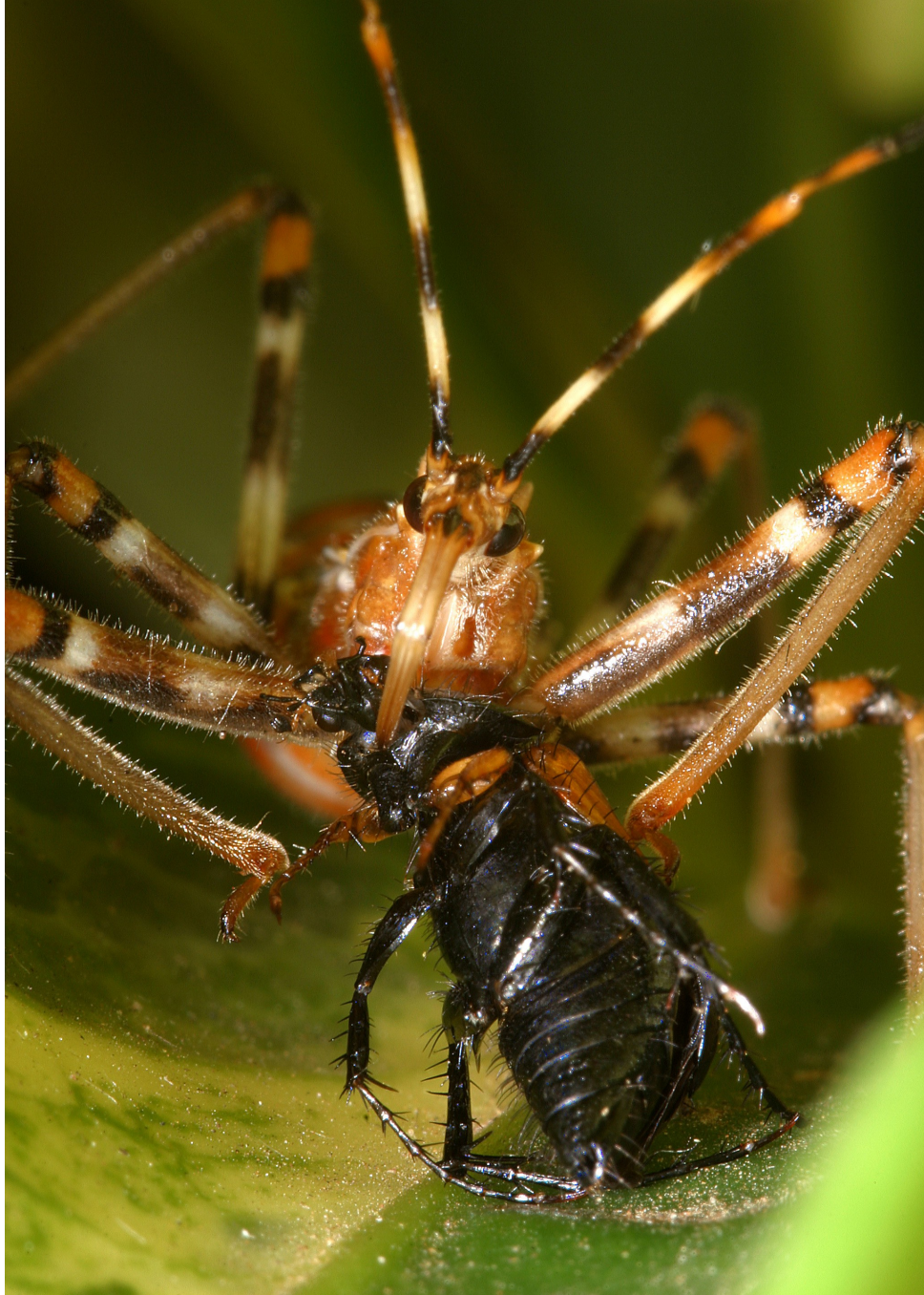


Image #25135 : Assassin bug eats Scarab beetle.

Your back yard is just as vicious and full of drama as a Serengeti plane at migration time; it's just that everything is a bit smaller. After rain one day thousands of small beetles emerged from who-knows-where and swarmed over the flowers. Their only goal appeared to be the finding of a mate before they died, but the predators were waiting. This little beetle wandered too close to an assassin bug, and didn't have a chance.



Image #25589 : Green tree frog in bucket

A neighbour phoned to tell me that a large tree frog had appeared on their lawn. I rushed down, but the frog had vanished by the time I got there. However when I returned to our house I heard a splash in a bucket on the porch.

When I investigated I found a tree frog.

At first I thought he couldn't climb out, but eventually he made his way to the bucket's rim and sat there.



This area has a lot of bearded dragons, but what are the chances of seeing one actually digging a nest hole and laying eggs?

Once again one of my 'spotter' neighbours alerted me to a great photo opportunity. The lizard was aware of my presence and quite alert, but not alarmed. I photographed with a very long lens so I didn't have to approach too closely, then left it to finish the job in peace.



Images #25256 and #25269 : Bearded dragon laying eggs.





There's nothing wrong with photographing a flower in a way that's immediately recognisable to the viewer, but getting in really close can give you an abstract that keeps them guessing for a while.

Note that for the image below I fired the flash right through the flesh of the flower from the outside.

Images #25052 and #25498 : Philodendron flower detail.

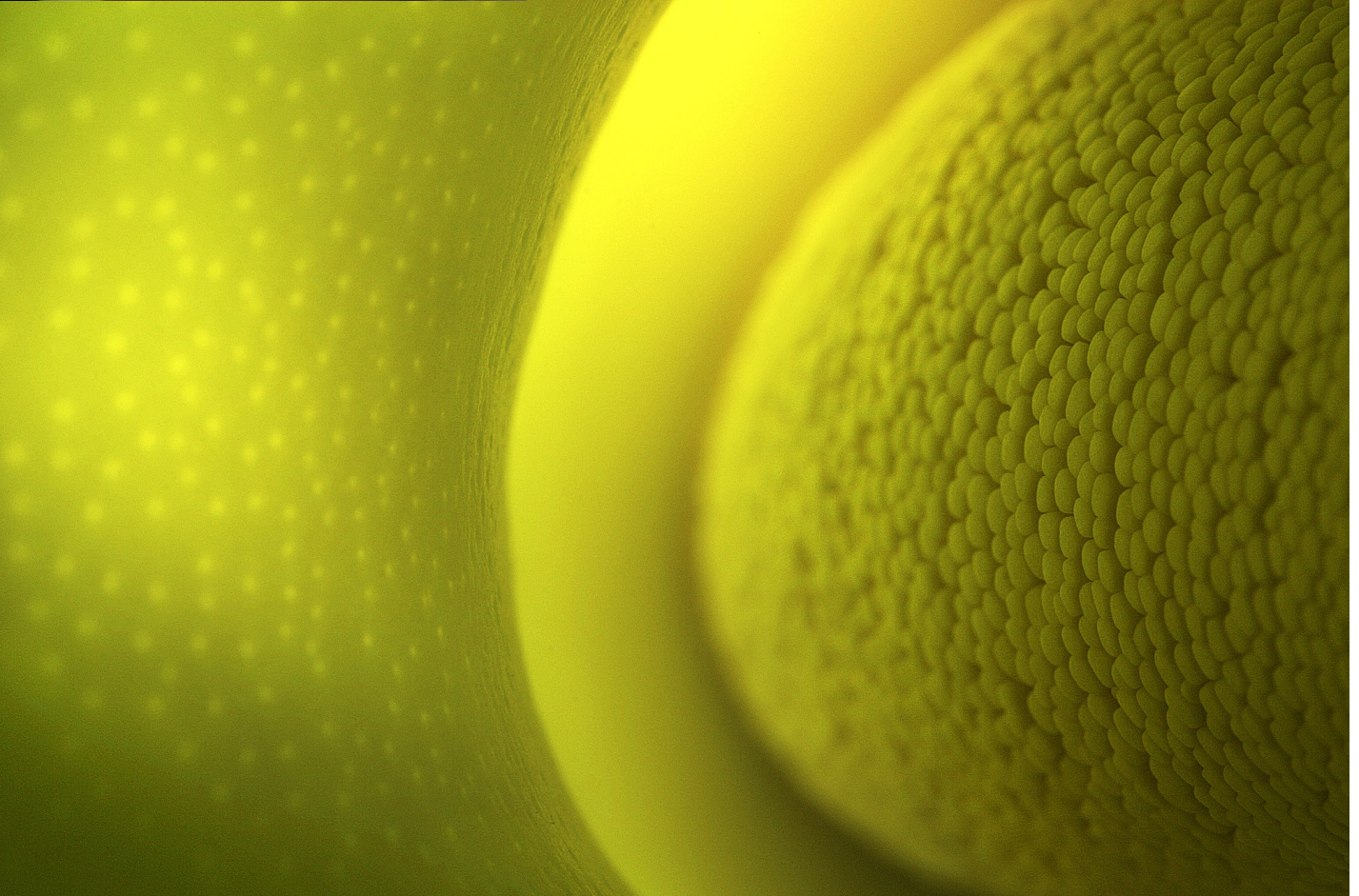




Image #25183 : Hornet on nest.

There were two hornets attending a nest under the eaves. They appeared to be taking it in turns to protect the eggs and forage for food. I photographed them on and off for a couple of days, then they just disappeared, leaving the nest's occupants to fend for themselves.

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By holding a remote flash underneath a leaf and pointing it back towards the lens you can get interesting shapes in the foliage and fully or semi silhouette the subject.



Image #25718 : Shield bug on leaf.



Image #25526 : Cane toad under a lamp post.

I wanted to illustrate how the cane toads are integrated into the suburban landscape in this area, and spent many a night waiting for a toad to sit in just the right spot, under a lamp post.

This photo was made with a several flash firings from various locations during multi-second exposure, there aren't many animals that will sit perfectly still for that long. In fact, as far as I can tell, the toad didn't move a muscle for the entire ten minutes I was fooling around, walking back and forth firing the flash, shining a torch on his face so I could focus, and generally being a klutzy human.



Image #25111 : Long legged fly.

These images were taken seconds apart, but the flexibility of a handheld remote flash allowed me to get two totally different lighting effects.



Image #25117 : Long legged fly.