



Article

Backyard of discovery

by **John MILBANK**

Category: Places

My passion in wildlife photography is Africa, more than 10,000 kilometers from my home in Australia. So where does that leave me in the long months, sometimes years, between those horrendously expensive safaris across the Indian Ocean? Initially, in self inflicted limbo.

I first went to Africa in 1996, and was so captivated that going back became an obsession that all but excluded the commonsense thought that if I wanted to take better photographs, I needed to learn and practice at home. Instead, I gave more emphasis to buying fancier equipment. And we all know more bells and whistles don't make the photographer; the really good ones can make a masterpiece with a Box Brownie.

Sporadically, I practiced on birds in the garden and animals at the zoo, usually when I had a new piece of gear to try out. But until fairly recently, I remained largely oblivious of the wildlife of my home patch, even when I spent five months walking more than 1,000 kilometers along the local creek to prepare myself for a walking safari in Zimbabwe. I took my camera with me on perhaps two occasions during those daily walks!

I know many photographers are well aware of the delights of their own locality; indeed, some have little or no chance to try elsewhere. But I wonder how many of those who are able to range far and wide have failed to explore their own 'backyard'?

Take mine, for example. The local creek reserve, only 200 meters or so from my home, is a wonderful ribbon of habitat and food sources for many kinds of birds, running many kilometers through the northern suburbs of Adelaide.



Little pied cormorant (100-400 IS zoom, fill flash, monopod, Velvia).

use of blinds, until his subject comes to him.

Many fine photographers hardly ever use anything less than a strong tripod for camera support, even with lenses light enough to be hand-held. Their reasons cannot be disputed. I have a very sturdy tripod for my heaviest lens, but I am extremely fond of using my Canon 100-400 IS zoom lens with a monopod.



Female spotted pardalote (taken with 100-400 IS zoom & fill flash on monopod, on Sensia 100 film).

In my area alone, I've seen kookaburras, white-faced heron, sacred ibis, Australian wood duck, Pacific black duck, little pied cormorants, honeyeaters, parrots and cockatoos, golden whistlers and even a couple of owls high up in a tree in broad daylight. There are also species that don't turn heads because they're 'run of the mill' in urban areas, and I'm sure there are others, more elusive and less common, that I have yet to see.

Lately, I've been photographing magnificent sulphur-crested cockatoos as they feed on the cones of pine trees and explore potential nest hollows in dead river red gums along the creek. So far, the truly satisfying shot has failed to emerge, as my quarry prefers the heights, posing such problems as distance and bright backlighting from the sky. But I'm working on the latter, having decided a flash extender should help fill flash to reach the subject.

My longest lens is 400 mm. with a 1.4x teleconverter, and is likely to remain so because my passion remains African mammals. Though I love them, Australian birds and other animals are a means to an end—practice for Africa.

And I am reassured about lens size by an Australian wildlife photographer called Nicholas Birks, who shuns long lenses and has made many fine and memorable photos with standard and wide-angle lenses. His strategy, of course, includes much patience and the

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It enables me to ramble and scramble leisurely yet quickly if I need to. I love mobility. It stood me in good stead on a recent excursion to a newly discovered location in the Adelaide Hills only a few kilometers from home. I had been there before with my heavy 400 mm. lens and tripod, but had found myself almost anchored to a fairly steep hillside by the weight.



Pacific black duck & brood (100-400 IS zoom, monopod, Sensia 100).

On the second trip, I had the lighter zoom-monopod combination on the same hillside, and was able to move quietly towards a small bird I had seen in some foliage from a distance. Much to my surprise, the bird, a male spotted pardalote, allowed me to get to minimum focusing distance, 1.8 meters. Its mate was just as fearless, and the three of us entertained each other for the next half an hour.

These tiny creatures were still small in the frame, but this success in part of my 'backyard' inspired me to pursue more small birds, ones that are just as delightful but nowhere near as obliging. Their names are as enticing as they sound—superb fairy (or blue) wren, beautiful firetail, and so on.

So far, I haven't got close enough. I've hidden myself by the side of a fire-track to await the wrens as they emerge from the scrub to feed on insects on the cleared ground. Closer and closer they hop, until they spot my camera gear poking above the verge of the track, quickly fly past my ambush, and resume hopping after insects on the other side. Frustration!



Then, I've seen a small colony of firetails in a thick bush, and crouch quietly beside it in the hope that eventually, curiosity will lead one to investigate this stationary object. Not a chance. If they don't fly off altogether, the colony moves to the other side of the bush until I leave.

The answer, of course, is a blind, so now I have a portable one which will soon accompany me on the trail of superb fairy wrens and beautiful firetails.

The home patch can have disadvantages—usually people. One Monday, thinking it would be quiet after a weekend, I visited a popular conservation park in a steep gorge in the Adelaide Hills. I had been told that the superb fairy wrens there were habituated to people and easy to photograph.

That may well be so. But the one that I had nearly focused on flew off when a jogger thundered across the timber footbridge that I was standing on. Then the gorge echoed to the shouts and military cadence of a company of army cadets being drilled along the walking trails by a couple of corporals. There were groups of noisy children, tourists and others, very few of whom seemed to appreciate or care that they'd see more if they were quiet.

On balance, though, I am thoroughly enjoying the discoveries of my own backyard. The irony is that I have Africa to thank for it.

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