

Shooting in Isolation – what you can learn and how you can benefit your photographic skills whilst limited to your home and garden

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With South Africa going into a national lock-down situation, photographers all over the country are forced into confinement at their places of residence, waiting out this Covid-19 pandemic taking control of our lives.

I read a light-hearted comment on Facebook very recently that all photographers will now become expert portrait and pet photographers. This is a hard hitting, reality awakening statement. It is however not only portraits and pets, but now also your extreme creativity can be tested – walking around in your home or apartment and seeking those other subjects.

Those living on a larger property certainly have it easier; their gardens are more readily accessible. But for those living in apartments and smaller townhouses this is not the case, those have only their smaller dwelling and maybe a 3x4 m mini garden to explore. We'll explore this garden option first, and it can be done without leaving your porch, balcony or bedroom.

One thing you will learn is patience. And you will need it, because the subjects are that much less than going out to a reserve or sanctuary.

Now is also the time to start experimenting with camera settings, using fill flash, really looking at the effects of digital noise from high ISO settings.



Red-headed Finch, taken from my porch, Canon EOS 1D MkIV, Sigma EX 120-300 f2.8 with 1.4x TC.

If you are a keen bird photographer, you should have by now set up some strategically placed natural perches around your garden. This will help to create the natural look we all want.

Tip – check the background, your neighbour’s garage door usually spoils the image, so place them such that you have a nice natural looking background from your shooting position.

Birds visit gardens, offering a choice of subjects, try capturing them in different poses, even if it is the more common species like laughing doves, sparrows etc. In my area we readily find three different species of sparrow, two of which the male and female differ in plumage. Already five possible subjects right there. We have all the time in the world now, be patient, aim for close-ups, funny poses, interactions etc.

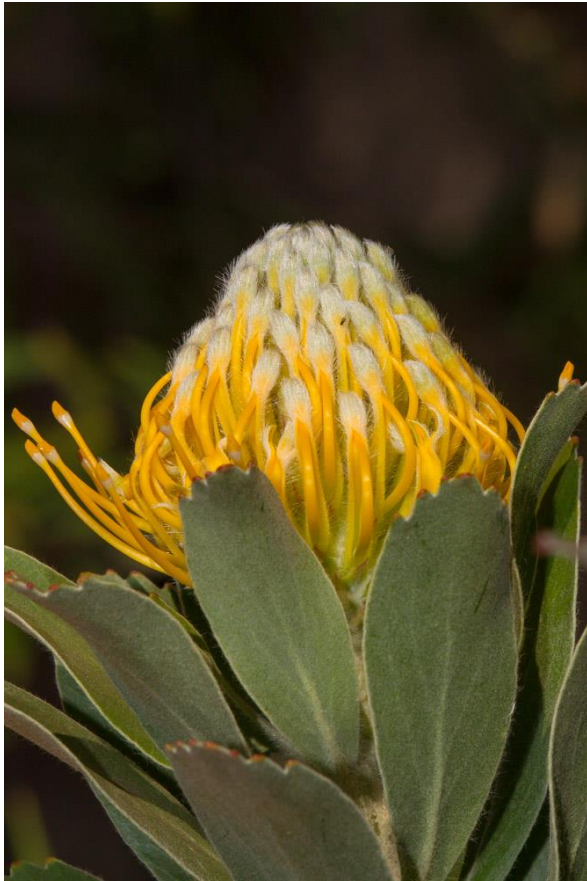


Grey-headed Sparrow, parent feeding chick. Canon EOS D30, Sigma EX 120-300 f2.8 with 1.4x TC

The image of the Grey-headed Sparrow was taken from my bedroom window, many years ago, after waiting 30 minutes for the right moment when both the parent and the chick will be out in the open and not obscured by leaves. It was raining at the time, and I started outdoors waiting under the overhang of the roof, but heavier rain forced me inside, and not wanting to lose the moment, captured it through my bedroom window in the end. Rain tends to “isolate” us indoors, doesn’t mean you have to pack the camera away. Same applies to this lockdown isolation.

Macro photography is also an option; there are always insects, flowers, leaves etc which can be used as photographic subjects. If you don’t have a true macro lens, you can play around with close-up photography of larger insects, flowers, etc and then if possible do same with your true macro lens to create completely different images.

The images of the proteas were captured in my garden using my 180mm macro lens. First standing back to frame the full protea flower and then capturing it from above in a 1:1 macro shot. The lens was mounted on my Canon EOS 1D MkIV, and settings used for the full flower were 1/250, f13, ISO 200 and flash. For the semi-macro, close-up version the settings were 1/1250, f9, ISO 400 and flash. Note the difference in depth of field from f13 at a longer distance to subject (about 1.2m), and f9 much closer to subject at about 60cm.



You can also do the full macro shots on those tiny insects in your garden, and to make it more challenging try to capture them in flight. Admittedly it does take some practice, and a whole lot of luck, but keep at it and you might be surprised with the results. The Dronefly pictured was captured after many attempts, around 30, before I managed a shot I liked.



Dronefly on the wing. Canon EOS 1D MkIV, 180mm Macro with 25mm Extension tube, flash used
Going full macro shows you a whole new world, and a very challenging one to master. The crab spider will easily fit on a 10c coin, and minimum focus distance is required to make the most of this tiny subject.



Canon EOS 1D MkIV, 180mm macro, 1/250, f16, ISO 400, flash.

Getting nice images in your garden is relatively easy. Making them that little bit more special is more challenging, and you'll get to learn a lot more about your own creativity and capability as well as the capabilities of your equipment.

In the next article I'll keep it indoors, you'll be surprised what can be done.