

# Focus on Sunbirds

The art of sunbird photography

by Peter Steyn



LEFT: An orange-breasted sunbird feeding on *Erica bauera* with the elusive violet on its throat revealed by the use of fill-in flash.

RIGHT: A female malachite sunbird attracted to *Chasmanthe*.

There are twenty-one species of sunbirds in southern Africa and they occur in a wide variety of habitats. My favourite is the orange-breasted sunbird *Nectarinia violacea* which I first photographed at Kirstenbosch as a schoolboy in 1952. I still have this nostalgic black and white picture of a female at her nest feeding chicks, but since then I have lost track of the number of times I have photographed this species which I consider – with my bias freely admitted – the most beautiful of all our sunbirds.

The specific scientific name of this exquisite sunbird refers to a small band of violet on the upper breast which is very difficult to portray in a photograph. Like hummingbirds, to which sunbirds are *not* in any way related, the colours are the result of the refraction of light on the iridescent feathers and are constantly changing – in deep shade the glossy green on the head of an orange-breasted sunbird appears almost black.

How then does the photographer capture the range of variable iridescent colours on a sunbird? The answer is to supplement sunlight by the use of flash, sometimes

even using two flash heads attached to a powerful pack that can give multiple exposures in quick succession. However, even a small flash attached to a camera will enhance any sunbird picture. As a rule the power output of the flash is balanced to the normal daylight exposure selected, a technique known as fill-in flash. The orange-breasted sunbird illustrated here used this method to capture not only the green on the head but also the elusive violet on the throat. All the sunbird pictures accompanying this article used flash to ensure that the iridescent plumage was correctly portrayed.

Photographing sunbirds in flight requires a lot of preparation and powerful electronic flash equipment to freeze the extremely rapid wingbeats. The lesser double-collared sunbird *Nectarinia chalybea* depicted here was taken after many months and numerous failures. In order to achieve a very high speed the flash heads needed to be placed close to the erica which was arranged in such a way that the sunbird was unable to alight to probe the flowers.

Early attempts failed as there was too much ambient light with the result that the wings were blurred because the daylight was also recording an exposure, an effect known as ghosting. The problem was eventually solved by photographing in very dull light once the sun was below the horizon so that only

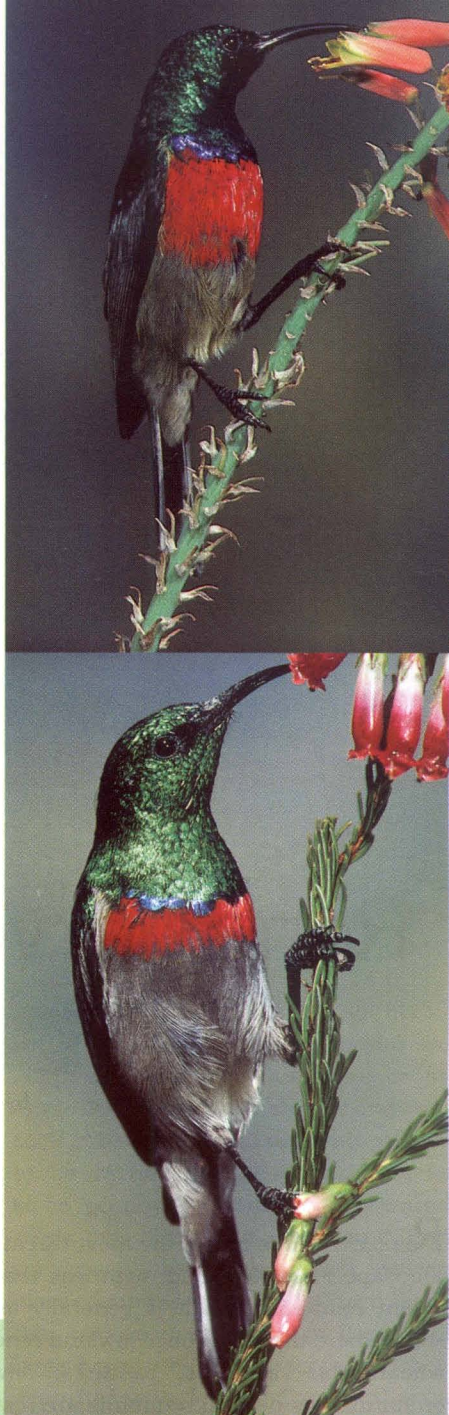
the high speed flash was effective.

Another useful tip for sunbird photographers is to use a telephoto lens, and a focal length of 400 mm is ideal. The reason for this choice is that from a normal working distance of about two metres any distracting background is thrown out of focus and the sunbird itself is etched in sharp contrast.

Finally, how does one ensure that the sunbird will perch where one wants it to? The solution is to condition the birds to visit an erica or similar plant with long tubular flowers that have been filled with glucose water. A hypodermic syringe with a blunted needle (so as not to pierce the flowers) is used to inject the solution and the viscosity of the fluid ensures that it remains in place.

My fellow photographer Nico Myburgh is an expert on attracting sunbirds and some have become virtual glucose addicts. In one remarkable instance an orange-breasted sunbird was so enthusiastic that it alighted on Nico's finger and tried to drink from the syringe before he could inject the flower!

Although sunbirds are usually tame it is not always easy to photograph them to best advantage and it is hoped that these few guidelines, based on many years of experience, will enable potential sunbird photographers to depict these colourful pollinating jewels in a new light.



ABOVE RIGHT: A greater double-collared sunbird feeding on *Aloe ciliaris* at Nature's Valley.

RIGHT: This lesser double-collared sunbird returned repeatedly to this cluster of *Erica regia* because the flowers were filled with a glucose solution.

RIGHT: A lesser double-collared sunbird hovers beneath *Erica versicolor* flowers arranged in such a way that it could not alight to feed.

