

ANIMAL PHOTOGRAPHY

CHELLIE HYRE, DVM

SHENANDOAH PHOTOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

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ANIMAL PHOTOGRAPHY - GENERAL

#1 – WHERE DO I GO TO FIND THE ANIMALS?: public lands - national parks/seashores, state parks, national forests, other recreation areas; pets; backyard; local – neighborhood, farms, public parks; fairs, festivals, dog or horse shows; zoos, aquariums, wildlife conservation centers. There are also lots of photography workshops/tours specifically for animal photography.

#2 – EQUIPMENT AND CAMERA SETTINGS: I like to use fast shutter speeds, wide- to mid-aperture, and as low ISO as I can. If I have to sacrifice, it's usually ISO because I can reduce noise later. The "best" camera and lens depends on what you want to do – birds in flight or "free range" wildlife will be different than pet portraiture.

When deciding what you need, learn what your current equipment can and cannot do and then upgrade based on what you need and will use (and carry!). One good idea is to borrow or rent equipment for short term use or to try before buying (I use borrowlenses.com).

Recommendations for animal photography gear – a camera with fast, continuous tracking autofocus that will allow you to choose aperture and shutter speed (i.e., dSLR or mirrorless camera); zoom lenses - 28-70 mm for pets, farm/fair, etc., 70-200 mm for zoo/wildlife. Also "nice to have": camera with fast frame rate (FPS) and articulating screen (makes it easier to shoot low perspective), and a longer zoom lens (300 or 400 mm).

#3 – WHAT IS THE PURPOSE: Are you making a photojournalistic image (telling a story, documentation, archival) or a portrait (artistic, lots of opportunity for vision/creativity)? Portraits can be "traditional" where the animal is the focal point, or "environmental", where both the animal and the surroundings are the "story".

#4 – ELEMENTS OF DESIGN: 1) composition - focal point, perspective/point of view, room for subject to look/move, SIMPLIFY and de-clutter; "visual journey" - color, leading lines, repetition, pattern, framing; 2) motion – freeze action (fast shutter speed) vs. motion blur (panning with slow shutter speed); 3) lighting – animals tend to be more active early morning, late evening, cooler temps, and overcast/rainy days. Golden hour is nice for soft, warm light. 4) Don't be afraid to break the rules!

#5 ANIMAL BEHAVIOR CUES: When animals are showing 1) stress – excessive panting, licking, yawning, or shedding; purring?, stomping, tail swishing, ears back/down, feathers fluffed; or 2) submission/fear - tail tucked, crouching/making itself small, rolling over, avoiding eye contact, best to stop photographing them. Usually want animals 1) alert, aware, interested – head up, ears up/forward, eyes open and watching, or 2) comfortable – grazing, sleeping, relaxed. Also consider animal's natural behaviors – baby/momma, mating season, hunting food, migration, fight or flight – these can make them unpredictable, give them plenty of space.

#6 - AVOID STUPIDITY: Respect the animal, the environment, traffic, and personal property - no trespassing! Always SAFETY FIRST!!! for the animal, owner/handler, photographer, and other people in the area.

PET PHOTOGRAPHY

- SAFETY FIRST – leashes on, fenced areas, hydration
- learn breeds/breed type - do not stereotype, every animal is different
- be prepared to get dirty, furry, and slobbery
- watch body language and behavior – too high energy vs. stressed vs. bored.
- nervous owner/photographer = nervous pet
- may need time to settle/calm before session or get them used to camera look/noise
- my typical settings – RAW, shallow aperture (1.8 to 4.0), high shutter speed (at least 1/250 sec), continuous AF/AI servo (focus tracking), single focus point selected
- focus on the eyes – connect with viewer, look for catch lights
- no direct flash – avoid glowing eyes!

- good light – golden hour, overcast or shade, full sun w/flash or diffuser (watch shadows/contrast), window light, studio
- perspective – in general, want to be eye level with the pet, but also experiment with high or low point of view and also “blind” shooting where you are not looking through the viewfinder (takes some practice!)
- posing – watch for “amputated” parts, all legs/tail accounted for, be careful with crotch shots, no background distractions, leash positioning so it can be removed in post-processing
- capture 1) personality – action/play, tricks, favorite chair/bed/toy, sleeping, head tilt/goofy faces; 2) details – close-ups of markings, tail, paws, ears, eyes, tags/bling; 3) family; 4) “dogscapes” - find a great scene and put a dog in it

HOW DO I GET THEM TO DO WHAT I WANT?: PATIENCE is key - don't force the shot; wait for the moment. Can use treats, toys, noises (squeakers, funny noises, animal calls) to get their attention - be careful with using a dog's name unless you want them in your lap! Feather-on-a-stick is great for cats. Give them breaks and keep it fun for the animal, owner, and photographer.

WHAT'S IN MY BAG (PET SESSION): 1) Canon 5D mkiii (main) and Canon 7D (backup) and empty memory cards 2) lenses – 50 mm f/1.4 (indoors) or 85 mm f/1.8 (outdoors), plus a 28-105 mm f/4 lens, occasionally will also take 70-200 mm f/4 lens. UV filters and lens hoods are good nose blockers. 3) Canon 430EX speedlite with diffuser 4) reflector 5) batteries for cameras and flash 6) lens wipes 7) treats/treat pouch. 8) squeakers, duck calls 9) tennis ball 10) show leads 11) knee pads 12) poop bags 13) bottled water. For rescue, may also take backdrops and props (chair, box, wagon), and bandanas or other fun accessories.

RESCUE/SHELTER PHOTOGRAPHY: The goal is to get the animal adopted. You want to grab the viewer's attention so they connect with the animal. Show the animal well (no pity party, not caged, not “broken” etc.). Want to at least get a photo showing body type and a head shot showing expression or personality. Use good lighting and a simple background.

RESOURCES

BASICS: 1) Bryan Peterson books (Understanding Exposure, Understanding Shutter Speed, Learning to See Creatively, all from amazon.com) and online courses (\$) at BPSOP.com. 2) Digital Photography School – lots of free resources (digital-photography-school.com). 3) Betterphoto – some free resources and online (\$) courses (betterphoto.com). 4) Creative Live – free to watch live, lots of courses available for purchase, including some great ones on pet photography! (creativelive.com). 5) Kelby One – paid membership gets you a ton of online resources, monthly magazine, and product discounts (kelbyone.com). 6) google and you tube – lots of free resources, but can be overwhelming to find what you need.

WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY: My favorites for inspiration: Moose Peterson (moosepeterson.com), Art Wolfe (artwolfe.com), Thomas Mangelsen (mangelsen.com), and Jim Brandenburg (jimbrandenburg.com)

PET PHOTOGRAPHY: 1) “Fetching Photos” and “Dog Shots” – good basic guides by Charlotte Reeves (learnpetphotography.com.au), 2) “Beautiful Beasties: A Creative Guide to Modern Pet Photography” by Jamie Pflughoeft – advanced, includes business info (amazon.com), also check her website (cowbelly.com). 3) Lots of pet photographers to visit for inspiration; my favorites – Illona Haus (scruffydogphotography.com), Margaret Bryant (bryantdogphotography.com), Barbara Breitsameter (poppybluephoto.com), and Carli Davidson (carlidavidson.com).

RESCUE/SHELTER PHOTOGRAPHY: 1) Teresa Berg (focusonrescue.com); 2) Seth Casteel/One Picture Saves a Life (onepicturesaves.com). 3) HeartsSpeak – an organization of artists helping animals (heartsspeak.org).

SHUTTERDOG PET PHOTOGRAPHY – visit the website at shutterdogpetphotography.com. Also on Facebook (Like me!) at facebook.com/shutterdog.pet.photography.