


Pet Photography

From Snapshots to Great Shots

A photograph of a brown and white Boxer dog sitting in front of a weathered wooden fence. The dog is looking upwards and to the left. Two white rectangular boxes are overlaid on the image. One box is on the dog's face, and the other is on its chest. Lines connect these boxes to text annotations. The box on the face is connected to the text 'Learn the best ways to compose your pictures!'. The box on the chest is connected to the text 'Get great detail in your subjects!'.

Learn the best ways
to compose your
pictures!

Get great detail
in your subjects!

Alan Hess

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Press

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www.peachpit.com

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Dedication

To Nadra: Thank you for all your love and support.

And to Odessa and Hobbes: The reasons I started
photographing pets in the first place.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank all the pets who patiently modeled for me for this book. Many of the animals in these pages were photographed while looking for their forever homes. I truly hope they'll all find good homes soon.

Thanks to all the pet owners who allowed their pets to be photographed for this project: Luna, Celeste, Audrey, Tony, the Torwicks, Kerry, Carl, Lori, Bill, Lisa, Trevor, Melissa, Scott, Salem, John, Candice, Gigi, Rochelle, Christie, Judith, Sherri, Richard, Paige, Olivia, Kira, Donna, Sheldon, Ashley, Fenella, Kathy, Matt, and Cameron—without you this book would not have been possible.

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Alan Hess
San Diego, CA
July, 2014

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Introduction

Pets are tons of fun to photograph, and their distinct personalities are revealed in every image. But capturing a great shot of your pet can be a challenge. I wrote this book to help you meet that challenge and succeed in turning your snapshots into great shots.

Why I Photograph Pets

Back in 2005, my wife and I rescued a 2-year-old boxer from the San Diego Humane Society and our lives were changed forever. We had been married for a few years, had a house with a yard, and wanted to get a dog. So we started looking for a dog we could give a forever home to. We were looking for a dog, but we ended up with so much more.

Odessa became our constant companion and a part of our family. She also became a willing model for every harebrained photo idea I had. In fact, she got so used to having her photo taken that when she sees me pull out a camera and light, she just walks over in front of me, sits down, and does her best dog pose. Photographing her became not only a way to document her life with us, but also a way for me to recharge my creative batteries. Since then we've adopted another dog, Hobbes, whose photo graces the cover of this book. We worked with a rescue organization to give Hobbes his forever home, and we continue to work with the organization to try to match the animals in need of a home with people who want them.

Who Should Read This Book

I wrote this book for photographers who want to take better photos of their pets or other people's pets. I especially wanted to make sure that novices with their first DSLR would be able to create great photos, along with those who already know about shutter speed, aperture, and ISO. If you've been taking photos for a long time, you might not need all the information in Chapter 2, "Photography Basics," where I cover the basics of light and digital photography. However, the chapter contains some great photos of cool pets, so at least browse through the chapter to see all the images of the dogs, cats, and horses.

Even though dogs and cats are the most popular pets, I tried to avoid writing a book that was just for dog people or cat people. Throughout the book, I cover a wide range of subjects, including horses, birds, rabbits, reptiles, and even rodents. Although I don't own a horse or a snake, you might; therefore, tips and techniques to photograph them are also covered, along with as many photos of different subjects as I could access while putting this book together.

What This Book Covers

Not every photograph of your pet will be a fantastic masterpiece. At times you'll just want to capture a moment in their lives. The tools in this book will help you take better photos or at least give you ideas to consider to improve your photos:

- Chapter 1, "Ten Tips for Pet Photography," gets you started right out the gate. These top-ten tips can really make a difference in your pet images, from keeping the focus on the eyes to getting down to eye level with your subject.
- Chapter 2, "Photography Basics," covers light, exposure, and composition. The light section discusses the different qualities of light, measuring light, and the color of light. The exposure section explains shutter speed, aperture, and ISO, and the composition section describes the rule of thirds, space to move, and leading lines.
- Chapter 3, "The Gear," covers the equipment needed to successfully photograph pets, from the cameras and lenses to flashes and light modifiers.
- Chapter 4, "Working with Animals," discusses what to do and what not to do when you're photographing dogs, cats, horses, reptiles, and birds.
- Chapter 5, "Action Photos," is about capturing the action, both outdoors and inside. Shutter speeds for freezing the action and the best drive mode are covered, along with using a flash and pushing the ISO for those tough indoor shots.
- Chapter 6, "Pet Portraits," explains that taking pet portraits is more than just taking a snapshot of your pet. This chapter covers locations, backgrounds, lighting, and tricks to get your pet to pose.
- Chapter 7, "All Creatures Great and Small," deals with the wide variety of animals that are kept as pets, including dogs, cats, horses, birds, fish, rabbits, reptiles and amphibians, and rodents. Useful tips are provided to help you photograph these diverse companion animals.
- Chapter 8, "Working with Challenging Subjects," the final chapter, looks at some of the more challenging aspects of pet photography, including photographing the young and old, photographing multiple pets in the same image, and photographing pets along with their owners.
- The Appendix, "Working with Rescue Organizations," describes how working with an animal rescue can be a very rewarding endeavor. It also covers what you can offer these organizations and what you can get out of your time spent working with animals.

The Assignments

Assignments are listed at the end of each chapter. But don't worry; there is no grade or deadline; however, that doesn't mean you should ignore them. The best way to learn new techniques and improve your photography is to put the information you just read into practice. That's exactly what the assignments help you do. Each gives you suggestions on how to practice some of the approaches covered in the chapter. Rehearsing new techniques before putting them into practice during an actual photo shoot will give you confidence and reduce the pressure and stress for both you and your subject, allowing you to get it right when it counts.



Nikon D4 • ISO 400 •
1/2000 sec. • f/3.5 •
70-200mm lens

4

Working with Animals

The do's and don'ts when photographing pets

Photographing your pets can be a great bonding experience, especially if you keep it fun and low stress. No matter how well behaved or trained your pet is, keep in mind that your pet doesn't really understand what's going on during a photo shoot. My older dog is so used to seeing me set up different lights and backdrops that she will go and sit in front of them without anyone asking. She doesn't really know why she is doing it but has been conditioned that when she sits there, good things happen. For her that means she gets treats.

Poring Over the Picture

I kept the focus point on the cat's eye, making sure it was in focus.



During this shoot, I let the cat determine where it wanted to be photographed and then used my 70–200mm lens at 200mm to get in tight without encroaching on the cat's space. This allowed the cat to feel comfortable in its environment and not feel threatened by me. Once the cat relaxed and encircled the crystal ball, I started to take photos.

● — Photographing the cat from a distance so as not to scare him, I used a longer lens, which compressed the scene and shows little of the background.

● — To create a more interesting photo, I waited until the cat was looking at the crystal ball.


Nikon D4 • ISO 3200 •
1/60 sec. • f/2.8 •
70–200mm lens

Poring Over the Picture

The doorframe made a great natural frame around the horse while he stayed inside and checked me out.

Using an aperture of f/5.6 ensured that the entire head of the horse and the side of the stable were in acceptable focus.

Nikon D700 • ISO 800 •
1/1000 sec. • f/5.6 •
24–70mm lens

A photograph of a stable door and a horse's head. The stable door is made of light-colored wood siding with horizontal planks. A dark metal fence post is visible on the left side of the door. A horse's head is partially visible on the far left edge of the frame. Two horizontal metal bars run across the middle of the image. A line with a dot at the end points from the text to the fence post.

The fence and the wood siding of the stable created distinct leading lines into the image.

When photographing this beautiful horse, I let it get used to me first before taking it out to the corral. I took quite a few photos just so he could get used to the noise the camera made and not have it startle him later.

Safety First

Photographers don't always make safety a priority, and many times they are tempted to do things that nonphotographers shake their head at. If you are like me, you can get so caught up in getting a shot that your safety can take a back seat. For example, I've inadvertently stepped off a curb and into the road while photographing a subject on the sidewalk without looking at where I was going. Fortunately, no accidents occurred, so no real harm was done.

All this changes when you're working with animals because not only are you responsible for your own safety, but you are responsible for the animal's safety as well. As a pet photographer, you need to keep your subject safe, and you need to keep yourself safe from your subject. Some animals can act out when they feel stressed or threatened, and that can result in them turning on you.

You can take a few good measures to minimize the stress and increase the safety level of the photo shoot:

- **Pick a familiar spot.** As with most people, I am more comfortable in my own living room than I am when I'm in someone else's house. It's a pretty natural feeling to be more comfortable in familiar surroundings, and this is very true when it comes to animals. Photographing my pets at my home and in locations they are comfortable in is much easier than photographing them anywhere else. This is even more important when I'm photographing someone's else's pets that don't know me. Having them pose in an area where they usually hang out makes it much easier to get a great photo because they are content and calm. It's the best location to start any pet photo shoot. My dog Odessa loves to lie out in the sun on the back deck, so it's easy to capture this scene because she is very relaxed, as you can see in **Figure 4.1**.

Figure 4.1

Odessa loves to sun herself on the back deck, making it easy to get photographs of her. This is one relaxed dog.

Nikon D2X • ISO 100 •
1/80 sec. • f/4.5 •
50mm lens



- **Use a long lens.** Using a longer focal length can help you fill the frame with your subject and still stay a safe distance away. My favorite lens is the 70–200mm f/2.8, which you can purchase from Nikon or Canon, and every third-party lens manufacturer makes a version. This lens allows you to get in close and still have a very shallow depth of field with a wide aperture of f/2.8 through the full focal-length range. On the negative side, the lens is expensive and heavy, especially if you are holding the camera up to your eye for an extended period of time while waiting to take a photo.
- **Stay calm.** Animals can pick up on your mood very quickly. They can read the nonverbal cues in your body language and will sense how you feel. If you are anxious or upset, they'll know it and react. Although I'm not a dog trainer, I have worked with a few, and the one necessity that they've all discussed is that you need to be calm when you're dealing with dogs and other animals. It can be tougher than you think to remain composed, especially when your model doesn't seem to understand what you want or keeps trying to chew on your camera lens. When you feel as though you're getting frustrated, just stop and take a breath. Remember that letting the animal have fun is the most important aspect of a shoot.
- **Keep your eyes open.** Photographers tend to get tunnel vision and only pay attention to the subject that's in the image they're taking. When you're photographing more than one pet simultaneously, you need to keep an eye out for all of them. For example, recently I was photographing a pair of horses and was so fixated on one that I didn't notice the second one sneaking up on me. And yes, horses can sneak up on you. By the time I noticed the second horse, he was pushing me over with his head, which was not the best way to interact with an animal that outweighs you many times over (**Figure 4.2**).



Figure 4.2 Imagine my surprise as I looked up to find this horse much closer than I expected. I was so busy paying attention to the other horse that I lost track of where this horse was.

Nikon D700 • ISO 200 • 1/4000 sec. • f/4.0 • 70–200mm lens

- **Watch your gear.** Be aware of where you put your camera bag and any other equipment you might have with you. You want to keep your gear close to you so you can change lenses if needed or conveniently grab a reflector or diffuser to use. Keep in mind that when you open a diffuser or reflector, it could spook your subject, so work slowly. You might even find a lizard hanging out on one of your lenses (**Figure 4.3**).
- **Talk to the owner and the pet.** The best source of information about the pet that you are photographing will come from the owner. Talk to them about what the pet likes and doesn't like, or if the pet has a favorite spot or favorite toy. The more information you have, the easier it will be to get and keep the pet relaxed and calm. For example, one of my dogs loves people and has no problem with anyone coming up and scratching her head; the other is a bit timid and needs more time to warm up to strangers. Talking to the pets you're working with in a calm, low tone helps to assure them you are not a threat and that all is well.

Figure 4.3

You never want to leave your gear unattended because it might attract one of your subjects. Full disclosure: The lizard was placed carefully on the lens and enjoyed hanging out from that vantage point.

Nikon D3200 •
ISO 800 • 1/60 sec. •
f/11 • 105mm lens



Signs of Stress

Animals can get stressed, and when they do, the results can be unpredictable. Therefore, the best strategy is to talk to the animal's owner before the shoot to find out what might cause their pet to become tense or nervous.

In the worst case, a stressed animal can act out aggressively, and someone can get hurt. The following sections provide signs of stress exhibited by some animals that you can look out for when you're photographing your pet or someone else's pet.

Dogs

Dogs yawn and lick their lips even they are not stressed, but you need to pay attention to all their behaviors as a whole. Take into account the dog's ears, the tail, and the body position overall to give you a complete picture of how the dog is feeling. Don't just rely on the old "wagging tail equates to a happy dog" theory. Here are some signs of stress to watch for when you're photographing dogs:

- **Nose and lip licking.** Excessive licking of the nose or lips can be a sign of a dog under stress. The licking is usually combined with some of the other stress indicators. You can see an example of the lip licking in **Figure 4.4**.



Figure 4.4

This dog was in the middle of a training session, which was putting the dog under some stress. You can clearly see the lip licking.

Nikon D4 • ISO 200 •
1/2000 sec. • f/4.0 •
70–200mm lens

- **Ears pinned.** A dog's ears can tell you a lot about how it's feeling. When the dog's ears are in a neutral position, not forward or pinned back, the dog is relaxed. When the ears are pinned back tightly against the dog's head, it usually means that something is making them upset, or they could be happy. Look at the rest of the dog for confirmation. If the rest of the body is tense and rigid, chances are they are upset or stressed; if the body is loose, this usually means they are just happy. The ears going forward typically means that something has their attention, and they are not sure how to deal with it yet.
- **Panting.** Dogs pant for lots of reasons. One main reason is that it is a way for dogs to cool down because they don't sweat through their skin like humans. Panting can also mean that the dog is not feeling well or is stressed out. It is especially important to pay attention and determine if the dog is panting heavily for no discernible reason.
- **Avoidance.** If the dog is actively trying to avoid you by looking away or turning their back on you (**Figure 4.5**), it is a sure sign that they are uncomfortable with the current situation. If the dog starts to show signs of avoidance, just stop what you're doing and give the dog a chance to relax.

Figure 4.5

When a dog turns their back on you, it is an obvious sign that they are trying to avoid whatever it is that is stressing them out; in this case, it was me.

Nikon D4 • ISO 200 •
1/2000 sec. • f/4.0 •
70–200mm lens



- **Tail actions.** A dog's tail can tell you volumes about its mood. When the tail is held low or tacked between their back legs, it signals that they are uncomfortable. When you see a dog wagging its tail because it's happy, usually the whole back end of the dog is moving. When you see the tail held high and stiff, and not moving, these signs indicate that the dog is tense; it is best to give the dog some space.
- **Yawning.** When a dog yawns (**Figure 4.6**), it doesn't mean that the dog is tired and needs a nap; instead, it indicates that the dog feels anxious or even threatened. A yawn is a way for the dog to try to relieve its anxiety. If your subject is yawning, try yawning back; it can have a calming effect.
- **Shedding.** Dogs shed as a way to get rid of old or damaged hair, but excessive shedding can be a sign of stress. If you don't know the dog or how much it normally sheds, this stress indicator can be very difficult to identify. If you see a lot of hair being shed when you're working with a dog, talk to the owner and keep an eye out for the other stress indicators.
- **Whining.** Dogs whine for several reasons, from trying to get your attention to when they're excited about something. But they can also whine when they're feeling stressed in their current situation. Along with the body language, pay attention to the dog's verbal cues as well.
- **Raised hackles.** You can tell quite a bit by the state of the dog's back hair, especially between the shoulder blades and down its spine. When a dog raises its hackles, the hair stands up in these spots, which means the dog is concerned or excited about something. This is a very easy sign to spot when you're walking your dog and looking down at their back. When the hair rises, it is usually combined with the tail being up and stiff, and a tensing of the whole body. It could just mean they are excited, but it is more likely that they are nervous, stressed, or basically unsure of something in their environment.



Figure 4.6 Yawning is not a sign of the dog being tired but a way to try to reduce stress.

Nikon 700 • ISO 400 • 1/160 sec. • f/4 • 70–200mm lens

Cats

Cats are not as easy to read as dogs, but some signs will reveal that the cat is not happy in the present situation. Many times these signs can be subtle and not that easy to see, especially if the cat is not yours. Talk to the owner and find out what the normal behavior is for the cat and where the cat usually hangs out. Photographing the cat in the areas where it is most comfortable can make the whole process less stressful for the cat and for you. Here are some signs of stress to watch for when you're photographing cats:

- **Ignoring food or treats.** Often, I use treats to get a cat to relax or pose in the right spot. If the cat is very stressed, it will ignore the treat and instead just bolt for a hiding place or for higher ground. This is a definite sign to stop and back off until the cat feels safe again.
- **Hiding.** When cats are stressed, they tend to hide. This usually means they go to a place where they feel protected, like under a bed or a chair. They can look out to see the world, but nothing can get to them. If you just wait them out, you can get some great photos as they come out of their hiding place. However, this might take patience on your part, depending on the cat and how stressed it is. The cat in **Figure 4.7** was hiding from me when I first started photographing but slowly came out from between the couch and the chair.
- **Aggression.** A stressed-out cat might just turn and swipe at you with their claws. It is a natural reaction to something that stresses them out and is one of the reasons I like to use a longer focal length when photographing pets, especially those I'm unfamiliar with.



Figure 4.7 This cat was not happy with me, and although he didn't run away, he did hide between the couch and the chair, keeping a very careful eye on me across the room. It took a while for him to get used to my presence and the sound of the shutter.

Nikon D4 • ISO 6400 • 1/100 sec. • f/2.8 • 70–200mm lens

- **Body language.** A cat's body language signs are good indicators of when it is best to back off and let the cat relax. The cat will crouch low to the ground with eyes fully open, head held low, ears back, and possibly be hissing or growling. In this mode, the cat is just as likely to lash out as it is to run away, so don't take any chances; just back away and ignore the animal. A relaxed cat will sit up and pay attention, and not have an aggressive stance (**Figure 4.8**).



Figure 4.8

This relaxed cat was so used to people that it didn't even mind dressing up for the photos wearing a stylish orange witch hat.

Nikon D4 • ISO 1600 • 1/200 sec. •
f/4.0 • 70–200mm lens

Horses

Horses have a very different way of seeing the world than do humans. The placement of their eyes on either side of their head means that they can see a wide area on either side of them with each eye. This is called *monocular vision*, and each eye works separately to keep track of their surroundings on that side of the horse. Because of the placement of a horse's eyes, when the eyes work together, which is called *binocular vision*, the area it sees is down the nose and directly in front. This creates a blind spot at the forehead and poor vision. So you need to be careful when you're approaching a horse and come toward the animal from an angle, not straight on.

Once again, the best strategy when you're photographing a horse is to talk to the owner first, because they know the horse and its behaviors better than anyone. However, a few signs can tell you how a horse is feeling:

- **Whinnying.** Horses whinny as a form of communication that can mean they are not happy, but it can also have other meanings as well, so use the verbalization as part of the whole picture.
- **Eyes.** A horse's eyes can tell you if the horse is relaxed or scared. If the eyes are slightly closed, the horse is relaxed and calm, but if you can see a lot of white, chances are the horse is stressed or scared.
- **Ears.** The position of the horse's ears can help you determine the horse's mood. If the ears are pinned back against the horse's head, the horse is angry or upset. If the ears are upright, all is well, as shown in **Figure 4.9**.
- **Head up high.** Check how the horse is holding up its head. If the head is held high in the air, there's an issue and the horse has some anxiety. When they lower their head, it is a way to reduce their anxiety and they could be trying to relax.
- **Sidestepping or stamping.** If a horse is stamping on the ground, it indicates that it is not happy. When the horse starts to sidestep away from you, it shows that it wants to get away from the situation it's in. When horses are spooked, they have a tendency to move backwards or sideways quickly. You can avoid this behavior by being calm and allowing the horse to see you and the camera before you start taking photos.

If you do start to see any of these stress indicators and believe that the horse is starting to stress out, having the owner around with a reassuring touch or a treat can really help defuse the situation (**Figure 4.10**). I always want the owner to be close by to help with the horse and to act as a second set of eyes, making sure the horse is comfortable and all is going well.



Figure 4.9 A relaxed horse shows its calmness when the ears are up and out to the side, breathing is easy, the head is held in a neutral position, and no whites of the eyes are visible.

Nikon D4 • ISO 400 • 1/500 sec. • f/5.6 • 70–200mm lens



Figure 4.10 Having the horse's owner at the shoot makes it easier to keep the horse stress-free. A simple touch or treat can do wonders.

Nikon D4 • ISO 500 • 1/320 sec. • f/5.6 • 24–70mm lens

Reptiles

Working with reptiles can be quite a challenge. They can get stressed easily, and because they can't verbalize what they like and dislike, you need to learn how to read the danger signs.

When you're photographing snakes, watch out for when the snake wraps its body tightly around your hand or arm. The snake may also draw back its head and rise up in the classic S curve as it prepares to strike. An upset snake might also strike out and bite without warning. These acts are not done to intentionally hurt you but are just instinctive behaviors that reptiles exhibit when they feel threatened.

Lizards will dig their claws into you and try to crawl away from whatever it is that is upsetting them. Sometimes they whip their tails around and try to puff up so they appear bigger and more threatening to whatever they perceive to be the threat. They also might gape as a warning or as another way to appear more dangerous.

Turtles or tortoises have the perfect way to show their dislike of their surroundings; they just retreat into their shell. This makes it very difficult to photograph them when they are stressed.

When a reptile is happy and comfortable being handled, it will rest comfortably on your hand or arm (**Figure 4.11**), looking around and flicking its tongue. It will move smoothly and not thrash around trying to get away.

With reptiles, you must rely on the pet owner to give you feedback on their behavior. But in general, you need to move calmly and avoid making big, sudden movements.

Figure 4.11
A nonaggressive,
happy lizard just
hanging out on his
owner's hand.

Nikon D4 • ISO 800 •
1/250 sec. • f/11 •
105mm lens



Birds

The signs of stress in birds can include feather picking, ruffled feathers, pacing, and even some biting. All of these behaviors make a stressed bird very difficult to photograph. Birds are very sensitive to changes in their environment and can stress over even minor changes, including the introduction of a new person with a large camera that produces shutter noise. You need to take it slow: Start off with a longer lens at a greater distance,

and don't make any sudden moves around birds. It's always a good idea to discuss the best way to approach the bird with the owner. A happy bird will sit comfortably on a perch, as shown in **Figure 4.12**.

Birds can be very cute, but keep in mind that they can have sharp beaks and claws, so pay attention to their movements, especially when you're working in close.

Pre-Shoot Planning

Preparing for a pet photo shoot is a combination of planning what you want to capture and being flexible enough to change your plans on the fly. Much of my planning depends on whether I am photographing my pets or photographing other people's pets. When I decide to get some new photos of my pets, I don't have to worry about making sure I have all the right equipment or a spare battery, because I'm home and can just go grab the accessories I need. But if I'm photographing someone else's pets or taking mine to a different location, I plan out what I'm going to do and what I need to have with me.

The first part of the preparation when I'm photographing someone else's pet is to talk to the pet owner and see what they want from the photos. Are they looking for an action shot of the dog or horse, or do they want a portrait of their pet sitting in their favorite spot? The more information you have before the shoot, the better.

I then make sure that I have freshly charged batteries for my cameras. This means that the battery in the camera is fully charged, and I have a spare battery in my camera bag that is also fully charged. Chances are I will never need the extra battery in the camera bag, but why gamble?

When I ready my camera, I make sure that in addition to a freshly charged battery, the camera has a formatted memory card. I always start any shoot with an empty memory



Figure 4.12 Harley is a happy macaw as she sits comfortably on her owner's arm. But when she gets upset, she pushes up against him.

Nikon D4 • ISO 400 • 1/1250 sec. • f/2.8 • 70–200mm lens

card so I have plenty of storage space to capture images. I also carry extra memory cards with me because you never know how many photos you will take during any given shoot.

It's important to have a system when it comes to managing your memory cards. After a shoot, I download the images from the memory cards to the computer and to a backup drive so the images are stored in two places. Then I format the cards in the camera they are used in. For example, I format the XQD cards in the Nikon D4 and the SD cards in the Nikon D3200. The CompactFlash cards are formatted in either the Nikon D4 or the Nikon D700. Then I place the cards face forward in the card wallet. The used cards are placed with the back of the card facing forward so when I open the card wallet, I can tell immediately which cards are ready to go and which are already used. This technique also helps when I'm sitting at the computer and downloading the images; I instantly know which cards have images on them and which are empty.

With the batteries and memory cards prepared, I pack the lenses and cameras I plan on using. My favorite lens to use is the 70–200mm f/2.8 because it allows me to fill the frame with the pet but still stay a respectful distance away. The other lens that I use often is the 24–70mm f/2.8, which gives me a wider view of the scene. Next, I add a small towel to the bag and other camera cleaning supplies that might come in handy if the camera or lens gets drool, dust, or grime on it during the shoot.

Finally, I pack the specialty items that I need or might need for this specific shoot. If I'm working indoors on a more portrait-type shoot, I add some flashes, radio triggers, and a reflector. For an outdoor shoot, I'll add the reflector and diffuser. For shoots where I'll need to get close to a small subject, like a lizard or a snake, I add a macro lens. Which equipment you decide to take with you is just a matter of building the gear for the type of shoot you are planning.

For example, when I went on location to photograph some dogs going through a training session, I knew I wouldn't need a flash or any gear that might distract the dogs. All I took was a camera body, the 70–200mm lens, the 24-70mm lens, batteries, and memory cards. When photographing my friend's cats, I packed up everything because I didn't know if the cats would be more comfortable inside where I might need a flash or outside where I might need the diffuser.

But always keep in mind that pets have a mind of their own, and many times the best ideas or plans will be wrecked in seconds when you realize that the pet has a very different idea of how to pose. You need to roll with the changes, keep your calm, and work with what you have; don't try to force any animal to do something they don't want to do.

Chapter 4 Assignments

Discuss the Shoot

Communication makes any shoot work best, and photographing pets is no different. When you're photographing someone else's pets, create a worksheet for the shoot, and then fill it out when discussing with the owner what they want from the shoot. Include the number of animals, the type of pets, the pets' names, if the owner wants shots indoors or out, the time of the shoot, and any special details you need to know about the pet. This will help you keep the details straight and plan for the shoot. For example, if you plan on an evening shoot, you need to discuss if the owner should feed the pet before or after the shoot. Which is best will depend on how food motivates the pet or how grumpy it gets when it's not fed on time. You may need to adjust the shoot accordingly.

Watch Your Subjects Carefully

Before you lift the camera to your eye, watch the pet for a few minutes (sometimes longer) to try to get an idea of how they will react to the camera and the shutter noise, and which direction they might move if they decide to run away. This will allow you to be ready when the pet calms down. Also, pay attention to your surroundings with your other eye, especially if another animal is around. Look for signs of stress during the shoot, and check with the owners constantly to see if they are noticing any stress in their pet.

Create a Pre-Shoot Checklist

When you're getting ready for a shoot, make a checklist on a notecard of all the equipment and accessories you might need. This checklist will then help you pack the right gear for the job. In fact, it's best to make this list when you talk to the owners about what they want from the shoot. For example, if they are looking for a portrait-type photo of their indoor cat, be sure to add flashes, radio triggers, and a softbox to the list. When the shoot is finally scheduled, the list will indicate what you need to bring. Making a list can work for when you take photos of your own pets as well. Knowing the gear needed for a certain type of shot will keep you organized as you set it up.

Share your results with the book's Flickr group!

Join the group here: [flickr/groups/petphotographyfromsnapshotstogreatshots](https://www.flickr.com/groups/petphotographyfromsnapshotstogreatshots)

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