

■ PHOTOGRAPHY CORNER

It's a wild thing

By Darren Crush



This month Darren Crush offers up a few tips on how to photograph animal portraits.

Photographing portraits of animals, whether pets or wild, can be quite a challenge – as the old adage goes

'don't work with children or animals' – but it doesn't need to be hard, and by following a few simple tips it won't be long before you're creating some great memories.

One of the first things you can do is get down on their level. Having eye contact with your subject will give your pictures a more realistic impression of how they lead their lives, and the main focus of your shots should be the subject's eyes. As when taking portrait shots of a person, guiding the viewer to the eyes will add balance to your photograph and draw their attention in. In natural terms, the eyes are the most prominent feature of the human, or animal, face.

To give an idea of technique, we'll use photographing a dog as our subject matter. So you've got down to their level, but what next? Now you have to decide on how you want your subject. You will need your dog to be still, preferably sitting down. This is where problems can arise, and getting them to do what you want could take some time. But however well, or not well, behaved your subject is it's always a good idea to have some treats at hand to get their attention. From personal experience I've always found that cats will tend to stay as you want them, not because they are well behaved, just that they can't be bothered moving. With a dog you will need more effort. By having the treats available you can reward them when they are doing what you want them to do, and at first that will be to stay still and look in your general direction. At what angle you would like them is entirely your choice, however the majority of the time it can look better if they are at a slight angle, even looking a little away from your direction. This is where it helps to have someone with you. By standing a person behind you, they can assist by attracting the dog's attention. Like you, they will need to be low down so that the subject is not looking up at them. Once the dog is sitting as you

would like you'll need to take the shot.

As discussed previously, the eyes are the focus of attention but you still want to get an element of the rest of the animal's

face. This is where choosing Aperture Priority on your camera will help. Don't worry if you are using a compact, it's just that with the shutter lag (the slight time delay that occurs between pressing the shutter release and the picture being taken) experienced on compacts, it may take you a few goes before you get the picture you want.

By selecting Aperture Priority you are letting the camera choose the shutter speed for you, and you'll want it to be fast enough to allow the image to be sharp. A setting of f/5.6 is a good aperture to start with and this will provide you with the details you want whilst still emphasising the important focal point, the eyes. This setting will also give you a shallow depth of field, which is exactly what you are after. Unlike landscape photography where you want everything to be in focus, when taking portraits of animals, as with the flower photography discussed in last month's issue, you want the background to be out of focus so that the viewer concentrates on the subject and not what's behind it. The technique here, therefore, is to ensure that your background is uniform and not cluttered with any distractions. A garden lawn or an attractive wall will work fine. In the same vein, do not choose a background where the colour of your dog will be lost. Even if the background is woodland and is blurred, if you are photographing a black dog you may lose it in this backdrop.

Now all that's left to do is press the shutter. Happy photographing!

Next month Darren will be offering advice on how to photograph moving animals – adding a bit of blur to really make your photographs leap out.

www.crush-associates.com

