

Pet Photography

Taking photos of pets is one of the more challenging photography genres. You often don't have much control over the animal, or the situation, and you need to be able to respond quickly. Having someone else on hand to help out is definitely recommended.

Preparation is needed to have your camera set to the optimal settings, and that you know how to adjust settings on the fly as needed. You might find it helpful to practice on a stuffed toy at home first so that you are comfortable with your camera and its particular settings and layout.

Camera and Lens

Pet photos can be taken with any camera and lens depending on the effect you are after. You may find a zoom lens easier as you can get close-up shots of the animal, without having to stand too close. Zooming in can also help to blur the background.

To stand away from your pet and take candid shots, a focal length of 100 to 200mm is ideal. If you have a more cooperative pet that will tolerate you closer, then focal lengths from 50 to 100mm may be suitable. If you are close-up, don't go below 50mm focal length as you may end up with distorted facial features (e.g., a very big nose on a dog).



Camera settings

There are a number of factors you need to consider to ensure the best possible photos of your pets. You want their face (particularly their eyes) in sharp focus, set against a nice, uncluttered out of focus background.

You will need to set up your camera to ensure you achieve this result.

As you take your shots review them on the back of the camera and adjust your settings if necessary. This is particularly important if you are shooting in different locations or if the lighting changes.



Shooting mode

To give the most flexibility and control with your settings move your main dial to Manual mode.

Burst mode

To improve your chances of scoring a good shot set your camera to take a burst of images with each press of the shutter button. Choose the highest shot rate available – this will vary by camera model.



Focus mode

The most important thing to get in focus is your pet's eyes. Set your focus mode to Spot focus so you can place your focus point on your pet's closest eye. Some newer cameras have an Eye Detect setting which searches the

image and locks focus on the eyes automatically. Some even allow you to choose People or Animal mode. Check what is available for your camera model.

Shutter Speed

If your pet is moving around ideally you should set your shutter speed to 1/1000 sec, or if they are running or jumping 1/2000 sec would be safer. The aim is to freeze movement and avoid blurry images.

If your pet is sleeping or sitting quietly you can use a lower shutter speed value. I wouldn't suggest dropping below 1/500 though, as animals have a tendency to move unexpectedly.



Aperture

Aperture values are one factor that determines depth of field – that is, how much of your animal is in focus. This is also affected by how close you stand to your pet, and how close the pet is to the background.

I suggest starting with your aperture value as low as it will go on your camera. This will typically be a value of 2.8, 4 or 5.6.

Shooting up close to your pet with a low aperture value means that only some areas (e.g. nose and eyes) are in focus and the rest of the animal and the background is blurry. This can help to bring the viewer's attention to the animal's eyes.



Experiment with different aperture settings to ensure that the areas you want are in focus, and that your background is blurry.

If you are zoomed in taking a photo of a dog and you notice that the eyes are in focus, but the nose is blurry you may want to increase the aperture value to 5.6 or 8 to get more in focus. Alternatively, you can try stepping back slightly, or not zooming in as far.

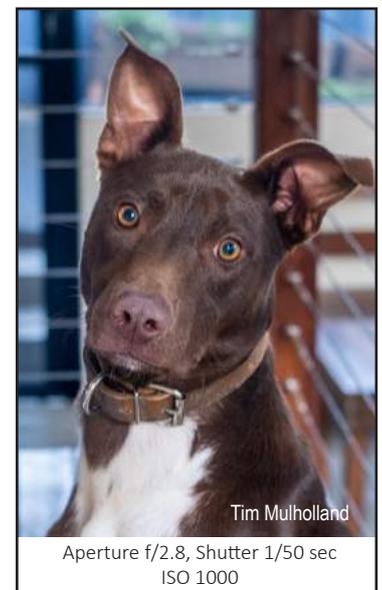
In the example on the left the aperture value was very low (f/1.8) which resulted in the eyes being in focus, with the nose out of focus.

ISO

Set your ISO to Auto. The camera will evaluate the lighting and set a value that ensures your image is correctly exposed. Review your images after you take them and check the ISO value does not get too high (e.g. 1600 or more).

High ISO values may result in noisy or grainy images, although this will vary across camera models. Digital noise can be corrected in Adobe Lightroom or Photoshop if you shoot in RAW, rather than JPEG.

To keep your ISO low you will need to let more light into your camera by lowering the shutter speed or using an aperture with a smaller value. In the example shown on the right it was a dark environment so it was necessary to use a low aperture and shutter speed value and to increase the ISO to 1000 to get enough light.

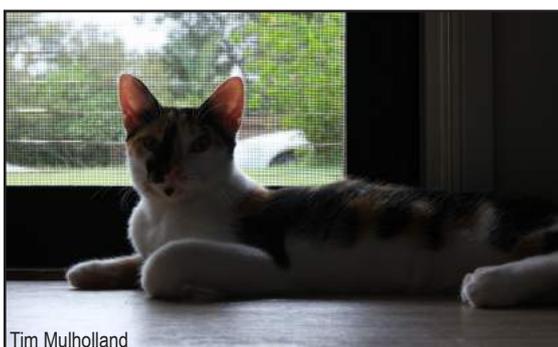


Lighting

When positioning your pet and yourself for a shot it is important to consider where the light is coming from. When the light is coming from behind the animal (backlit) it is often hard to get the correct light on them, as the camera tends to darken the overall image to avoid overexposing the background.

In the example below the background is correctly lit, but the cat is too dark.

Ideally you should try moving either the animal or yourself so that the light is falling on their face, either from the front or side.



Alternatively, you can use Exposure Compensation to tell the camera to add more light, so that the animal is brighter. This will mean however that the background will be very bright.

Check where you can change Exposure Compensation on your camera – on some cameras it is on a dial, and on others it will be a setting accessible on the back screen of the camera.

Tips for photographing animals

- If possible, position the animal so that the background behind them is uncluttered, not too bright and a fair distance away
- Choose a time of day when the lighting is soft and even, with no bright spots or harsh shadows – early morning or later in the afternoon tend to be much better than the middle of the day



- If shooting indoors, look for good window light, out of direct sunlight. It can be helpful to have a reflector (or a sheet of white board) on the opposite side to throw some extra light back onto the animal
- Plan your shoot for a time of the day when your pet is likely to be more cooperative. If you are going to use treats to get their attention pick a time when they are hungry (but not too grumpy!)
- Check your pet's appearance before the shoot and wipe their eyes or nose to remove any distracting goo. Brush any fur away from their eyes
- Have props, toys and treats ready to keep your pet's attention
- Enlist someone else to help with the shoot by standing behind you to wave toys to encourage your pet to look at the camera
- For action shots of a dog have your assistant throw a ball, toss a frisbee or run alongside

- For close-up shots get down to the pet's level by crouching down or lying on the floor
- Always check the background behind your pet - try to avoid busy distracting backgrounds
- Talk to your pet throughout the shoot, with lots of reassuring pats and encouragement
- Take lots of shots from different angles, heights and by moving in close and further away



- Take some images with your pet looking straight at the camera and other more candid shots showing their typical behaviour. For a dog this might show them playing with a toy, or for a cat it might show them sleeping in their favourite spot

- Consider ways that you might show your pet's personality and to tell a story about their favourite activities



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