



No More Homeless Pets Forum
July 18-22, 2005

Hold That Pose! Animal Photography Tips

Picture-perfect photos connect animals with their new people, while also attracting donors and supporters. Best Friends photographer Clay Myers shares his tricks of the trade to help you snap shots like the pros!

Introduction from Clay Myers:

Why are some animal photographs so much better than others? How do you get dogs and cats to look at the camera? Please join me in this week's online forum to find out all this and more. I will give tips and insights on techniques I have used when photographing animals. I'll also answer questions about backgrounds, lighting, composition, camera gear, and computer-imaging software. I can also talk about how to make digital prints or web images look great. Taking good animal images is not only fun and personally rewarding, but it can actually help a dog or cat find a home!

Clay Myers Bio:

Clay Myers is the photo manager and lead photographer at Best Friends Animal Society. He has been a professional freelance nature photographer for 12 years. His work has appeared in various exhibits, books, calendars and magazines, in particular the Sierra Club calendars and Outdoor Photographer magazine. From 1995 to 1998, he volunteered his time and photographs to the New Jersey Endangered & Non-game Species Program.

Clay feels that he can contribute best to the No More Homeless Pets cause through the Best Friends Art project and the ads that he designs to promote spaying/neutering and adopting from animal shelters.

See some of Clay's latest work at <http://www.bestfriends.org/aboutus/staffdepartments/clay/index.html>

Nice kennel... where's the animal?

Question from Jeanne:

I do the website for Memphis Animal Services. It is necessary to do photos of the dogs in the cages in the stray/holding area. It is MOST difficult to get a decent picture of black or dark dogs when in the cages. Some of the pictures have to be done with the dog plastered against the pen wire. The fence

wire reflects so much of the flash (at least I think this is what is happening) that it is almost impossible to get a decent picture of the dog. Any help would be MUCH appreciated!

Response from Clay Myers:

This definitely sounds like a challenging situation. You might think about bringing in another light source. It doesn't have to be anything fancy or expensive, a drop light with a 100 bulb or higher would do. Check if there's a time of day when any given cage has more ambient outside light hitting it. Of course that's assuming the building has windows.

With or without more ambient light or light from a lamp, it would be helpful to reduce the power of the flash. This would cut down the blasting effect of the flash.

If you can't reduce the flash output on the flash/camera, a good trick is to place some tissue paper over the flash. Try this, and if you can step further back from the cage. You might also want to try no flash at all. I know this might lead to a few blurry pictures but you'll probably get some usable ones. Wait till the dog is still and gently press the shutter. Of course faster speed film or a higher ISO setting on your digital camera will help bring in low light.

The ISO is the speed of the film or the digital setting. It's on every film box, i.e.: ISO 100, 200, 400. And every digital camera allows you to change the ISO setting, some more than others.

If you can adjust the settings on your camera, try some different exposures, this is called bracketing and is something pros do all the time. Film and digital doesn't see light the same way our eyes do, so trying different exposures is the way to go. Take one photo of each animal at each exposure. If you're shooting digitally, you can easily check the exposure settings in the camera's software. With film, take notes.

Try all of these ideas and definitely reduce the flash output. I rarely use full flash indoors. I dial my flash down so the subject is nicely lit, especially in the eyes, but so it is not washed out.

I hope this helps, and keep up the good work!

How do you make them smile for the camera?

Question from Patricia & Diana:

I have the problem of the shelter pets not wanting to look at me for the photo. In fact, they often turn their tails to me, especially after the first flash.

And it seems if I pet them before the photo, they want to come to me and I can't get a good photo. How do you handle these problems?

Plus, we often have dogs that just will not open their mouths and give a dog grin! We have tried running them for awhile so they will pant and at least have their tongues hang out. but then they just look tired and not bright-eyed and eager.

Response from Clay Myers:

I know getting shelter pets to look at the camera can be challenging; heck the same goes for my own pets, for that matter! The first thing to do is keep it fun! Animals can sense when we're uptight and stressed. If there are any caregivers/staff available, especially ones that feed that particular animal, definitely have them help you. And that leads to the next, and perhaps most important thing: the best piece of photo equipment out there is another person, or two!

Someone sitting by, and petting a leashed dog can really help to calm them. And having someone behind you is helpful when trying to get the pet to look at the camera. If the pet is looking to the right, you're helper can gesture to the left and visa versa.

I use a variety of things to entice a pet to look at the camera. Food is probably number one. Even the sound of a bag or box of food opening up can give you that split second chance for a good shot. Of course it doesn't hurt to give him or her a little taste of what you have in your hand, or your assistance's hand. Try a squeaky toy and maybe a whistle. But don't over do it, if the pet seems bothered by a noise don't keep using it!

For dogs, and even cats, I use my patented pant and shoot technique. Yes that's right, pant like a dog! I find it works on about 85% of the dogs and about 40% of the cats I photograph. Of course you can't pant while pressing the shutter without getting blurry photos, so pant, then shoot.

Try a variety of noises to get the pet to look at the camera – meow at cats, woof at dogs, make airplane sounds, etc. Some dogs will not loosen up while being posed. In those cases, have someone walk the dog towards you, a lot of times they will look happier while moving. Cats react to PSSSST noises and the sound made by scratching walls and cages.

Don't get too close to an animal if they seem uneasy. Try a longer lens or crop the photo later. Sometimes a little distance between you and the subject can really make a difference.

Dogs usually look happy with their tongues hanging out, even though they might just be hot. To get that look, exercise them first, then tempt them with food and lovingly rub their bellies, heads and backsides. Show that you love them and they'll loosen up.

Don't be disappointed if every shot isn't great, it just doesn't work that way. Some of the animals you photograph have been through a lot and don't trust people. I have plenty of poignant photos of pets that are looking off to the side.

Shelter pet photography can indeed be tricky. Just remember to keep it fun and think out of the box with noises, toys and treats. Think like dogs and cats and your photos will improve!

Great photos of black animals

Question from Linda, Carole and Emma:

I hope you have some tips on photographing black dogs and cats so that their features show.

If they are in the sun, it seems to reflect off their coats and if they're in the shade, their features disappear. Also, the camera doesn't always focus well on them.

While we're discussing showing animals off, I absolutely drool over the appeal the animals you photograph have. I'd love to know what I might build or donate in the way of background or staging or something in order to enhance our photos. Any suggestions?

Response from Clay Myers:

Black and white pets can be a bit challenging to photograph. At the risk of getting too technical, I'll give you a brief explanation as to reason. Every camera, whether film or digital, is calibrated to a value of 18% gray. If you take a photo of a piece of white paper it will come out gray. The same is true for black; photograph a black piece of paper and it will also come out gray. Photograph a zebra and you'll get perfect black and white. This seemingly complicated photographic fact is just one example of how film/digital captures do not see light the way the human eye does.

That being said, the easiest way around this challenge is to not photograph a pet too close. Modern cameras do a great job of averaging the light of a given scene, that is, the sensor can read dark and light subjects and come up with a good exposure. Compose your black pet photos so the animal fills about one half of the viewfinder, and against a fairly bright background, i.e. a light colored wall, towel, blanket or concrete. This set up is close to photographing a zebra. Make sure the background is not too bright, for example, harsh backlighting from the sun.

The other way to get a proper exposure with black subjects is to use exposure compensation. That is a bit too involved for this discussion; there are many books and websites that explain this technique. And most importantly, do all of the above in the shade, on an overcast day or in a brightly lit room. Try avoiding photographing in really dark shade however; if it's too dark the black pet might appear murky.

I definitely would not recommend photographing black pets in a bright sunlight because it's just too hard to get a good exposure. And the same goes for flash; don't use full flash on black animals. Strong sunlight or flash usually causes an unwanted amount of contrast. It's good, however to use a **small** amount of flash on black pets. As I described yesterday, place some tissue paper over the flash or purchase a camera/flash that can be dialed down in power. If you have a shoe mounted flash that can't be reduced in power, buy an inexpensive diffuser attachment.

I've had problems auto focusing on black pets as well, especially when they are moving. Auto focus sensors need some amount of contrast to lock on to a subject. Try a bright collar or bandana around the pet's neck.

As far as backgrounds are concerned, the sky is the limit. You can purchase photo background cloths from many different sources. Do a Google search for them and shop around. Large towels or fleece blankets work great for cats. I like using wooden fences, green grass, trees and even our plentiful desert sand for backgrounds. It's good to show animals in settings other than a shelter environment or a staged situation. Take them to the park, on trails, in cars, on a sofa, anywhere that portrays a sense of the human/animals bond.

And lastly, thanks for you kind words about my photos. As with all photography, some pet photos are easy and some will bring you to your knees. Always keep it fun when photographing animals and take lots of pictures.

Santa Paws: who's that weirdo with the white beard?

Question from Danielle:

I'd love for Clay to address a 'fundraising' question for us... Many of our members on HumaneFundraising participate in Photos with Santa Claws and do other pet photography as a fundraiser. I'd love to hear how Clay recommends soothing an animal and getting a great photo when being held by a wacky looking human--Santa Claws! What types of tricks does he use to get the animal to look happy and natural in the photo, and not quizzical from hearing a squeaky toy being overused?

I've seen some Santas in the mall use a digital printing software on the spot as well. What does Clay recommend for a good yet economical software system?

Response from Clay Myers:

Ah yes, the good old Santa set up. First tip, as soon as the pet is posed, start shooting. Most cats and dogs aren't going to put up with this silliness for very long. It's good to take a dog for a nice walk before entering Santa's world. A tired dog should be more cooperative and maybe some exercise will cause his or her tongue to hangout, thereby giving you a happy face.

The natural look you mentioned can only occur if the pet is relaxed. Everyone involved should be happy and having fun. It would definitely help if Santa is an animal person, and make sure he doesn't ho-ho-ho too much. Try playing some soothing music and avoid loud background noises. If possible, have the pet's person stand behind the photographer; this will greatly enhance the chances of him or her looking at the camera. If the pet will not stay put, keep its person nearby and just out of the frame.

I think a Santa/pet shoot is a great way to raise funds. People love this stuff and will be happy with almost any photo you give them. I share in your desire to make animals look relaxed and natural but that's not always going to be possible. You have no control over the relationship a stranger has with his or her pets. That's why it's so important to keep your set happy. Crack jokes and keep it light! And always have lots of critter treats on hand.

There are a number of good software programs out there. Many share the same basic features necessary for adjusting images and making prints. I would recommend Adobe Photoshop Elements, Corel Paint Shop Pro.

All things digital

Questions from Angie, Barbara, Elena, and Marie:

We have a few volunteers, including myself, who attempt to take photos of the animals. Have you published a book on "how to take pictures of pets," or is there an outline of what we should do? Can you recommend a book that'll review file format, benefits vs. problems of each, when and why to use each--just the fine nuances of digital? We try, but sometimes the pictures just don't come out right. And can you recommend any short-term animal photo courses on the east coast (preferable south-east?) Not widely published, and hands-on with an expert would be great! Suggestions? Thanks!

...I have a Canon PowerShot S1 IS and generally like it but I have problems in taking animal pictures and having them in focus. I had similar issues with my Kodak as well. I try to take pictures in good light

without a flash to eliminate eye glow. I miss a lot of great shots because the animal moved slightly and blurred. Is there a camera that you'd recommend?

...I'm using a regular Sony cybershot P-8 3.2 mg pixels camera. Do you recommend SLR digital camera? If yes, any model?

Response from Clay Myers:

Unfortunately I haven't published a book on pet photography; I wish I had the time for such an endeavor. I really can't recommend any books about file formats. However I would strongly advise you to subscribe to one or all of the following magazines: Outdoor Photographer, PC Photo and Popular Photography. I think these periodicals might be more useful than a book because they are able to keep up with the latest techniques and technology.

As far as file formats are concerned, you only need two: Jpegs (jpg) and Tiffs (.tif). There is one more that I often use called RAW, but it is processed by the camera at the time of the capture and requires advanced software. Some older cameras take images in the Tiff format but many of the newer one's only offer Jpegs and RAW.

The drawback of shooting Tiffs is that they use up a lot of card space. Jpegs are the way to go, and I recommend that you use the highest setting, usually called fine or super fine. You can always reduce a file in size, say for web or emailing purposes, but scaling up the file size can lead to unsatisfactory results.

The way I work my Jpegs images is to keep the originals in a named folder. Make sure you don't open an image, reduce its size, and save it in the same folder with the same file name. You'll overwrite the original image and lose its full size. Don't worry overmuch about this, as the computer will, as a safety precaution, ask you if you're sure you want to overwrite and you can decline. However, you can safely save your new file in the same folder if you give it a different name.

If I open up an image, correct the color and tonal adjustments and I like the results, I'll save it as a Tiff file. There is no image quality loss with Tiffs; you can open them up time and time again with no degradation. Most software programs offer you the option of using Lempel Ziv Welch (LZW) compression when saving a Tiff, that's a good option because it uses less hard disk space. When saving Jpegs, choose a level of 10 to 12. These sizes use less compression and offer good image quality. Another good idea is to make a copy of your original Jpeg and open that instead of the original – just one more way of maintaining long lasting image quality. When emailing images to people, especially with modems, size an image to around 4x6 inches at 72 dpi and at a level 10 Jpeg. If someone wants a larger file size, go back to your original Jpeg or Tiff and resize the image.

I can't offer any advice about animal photo workshops. There are probably some good ones out there. The magazines I mentioned advertise many workshops that might be useful. You might greatly benefit from a pet photography course but keep in mind that you can only learn so much from other people. Experiment with different techniques, lighting situations and poses. That's the great thing about digital; you see what you're getting at the time of the exposure and it doesn't cost anything! Don't be discouraged if every photo doesn't come out right. The old adage about photographers is you can tell how good they are by the size of their trashcans. Or in today's digital age, their recycle bins. The point is, not every shot is going to be great; even the pros throw out a lot of images.

About the eye glow, that normally only occurs in dark rooms, or at night, when the animal's pupils are large. Electronic flash is a great tool and almost always adds impact to your image. If you're shooting outside, preferably in the shade or on an overcast day, use your flash. You might want to read my forum from a couple of days ago about reducing the power output of the flash.

There are a lot of good, digital point and shoot cameras available and they take quality images but action shots are not their strength. Their auto focus sensors are not great for moving subjects and they all suffer from shutter lag (a delay between when you push the button and when the shot is captured). There's nothing more disappointing than missing a good expression or activity while waiting for the camera to work. The thing about photography equipment, as with most things in life, is that there is always compromise. Point and shoots cost less money and are easy to carry around but they are not action cameras and they suffer from digital noise at higher ISO settings. Digital Single-Lens-Reflex (SLR)'s cost more and are heavier, but they afford you the capability of changing lenses and are more suited for action shots.

I use Canon digital gear and love it. Nikon is also good, as is, Olympus, Minolta and Pentax. Most of my experience is with Canon and Nikon digital cameras so I feel more comfortable recommending either of these two brands. In the Canon line, and depending on your budget, check out the Digital Rebel XT or the 20D. The Nikon D70 is rated very high and they just came out with the D50. If you can afford the 20D, go for it. It will probably be the digital camera of the year. I purchase almost all of camera gear from www.bhphoto.com. They have great prices and will not rip you off. Beware of some of the fast talking salespeople at the discount places. Here are a few websites for camera reviews: www.luminous-landscape.com and www.dpreview.com, or just do a Google search for a given camera model.

Of cameras and classes

Questions from Allison, Elena, Barbara, Danielle, Angie, Pat & Ian:

What great pix you create! Have you any solution to the damnable digital lag between shooting and actual shot? Drives me to distraction! Plus it necessitates more re-takes. Since time is of the essence in photographing/editing/describing and getting these animals up on www.petfinder.com

<<http://www.petfinder.com>> , I feel only a digital camera will fill that need. Am I using the flash too much?

...I have had great success taking pictures with my auto focus camera, but I have been trying to move into the modern age and use my digital. It is also cheaper since I can discard the shots that don't come out. Every time I catch them in a great pose or with a terrific expression, by the time the shutter releases they have moved and the photo is blurry or I get a "tail-shot". Is it the pixel count that matters or can I set the shutter so it releases faster? I also don't use the flash to reduce the chance of redeye. Could this be slowing down the shutter? Call me old school, I have good knowledge of manual cameras, but am a complete novice in digital camera types.

...I am a photography hobbyist and have been devoted to B/W -- using a 30+ yr old fully manual Minolta, and finally 'cheated' by going digital. I'm shooting with the new Canon Digital Rebel XT (350D) with a Tamron 28-300 lens (couldn't afford to go Canon). Using a 1 GB CF, I usually shoot at High Quality. Since I'm still learning how to work with a computerized camera, have been lazily using the preset formats.

I've had some great results -- when viewing the images as downloaded from the camera at high quality, but often have difficulty uploading them due to the large file size. The questions/problems: I need, desperately, to learn about digital. I'm pretty tech-y...but need a jumping off point. I'll be editing using Elements 3.0 -- but for now, have been using IrfanView (a freebie obtained from Petfinder used simply for cropping and resizing to allow upload). Any suggestions would be appreciated.

Meanwhile, thank you for this opportunity--and for everything all of you at Best Friends do--both directly impacting and benefiting the animals at Best Friends...and for being willing to share your knowledge, expertise, experiences, encouragement, and time. Each time you help one of us...you also help the individual animals we are able to help.

Response from Clay Myers:

Yes, a full power flash will delay the speed of your camera. I would recommend getting a separate flash unit. All digital SLRs will accept a hot shoe flash, and some point and shoot cameras will as well. These units have their own batteries and will not affect the speed of your camera.

I totally understand your frustration about missing good shots. It can definitely be hard to catch animals in a whimsical or endearing pose, and to miss it while waiting for the camera to do its thing, well that's just criminal!

It's important to have good photos of homeless cats and dogs on Petfinder and other websites, and the right photo gear can really help! I would say that an electronic flash is perhaps the most useful tool you can purchase. The red, or more accurately green eye, in the case of animals, is really only a problem in dark lighting conditions when their pupils might be large. Don't forsake flash for this reason, try to photograph them outside in the shade or in a bright room, and use a good flash!

I don't know what type of camera you're using but if you can afford a digital SLR, get one. With your knowledge of manual cameras you should master a digital SLR fairly quickly. And don't think for one second that switching to digital is cheating. Some people get way too worked up over the notion that a photograph taken on film is a sacred and pure thing. The famous landscape photographer Ansel Adams did magical things to his photos in the dark room. He invented the Zone System of light and used that technique to make his prints spectacular. Trust me, his film could no way capture all the different shades of black and white that we all enjoy seeing.

I used to shoot good old Kodak Kodachrome slide film, once renowned for its brilliant color. That might have been true in sunlight, but in the shade, greens for example, were murky and boring, not at all what my eye saw. And by the way, we can now fix that problem digitally.

Cameras and film/digital are tools that we use to express our vision of the world. And in the case of homeless pets, we should use the latest technology to help find them homes! Okay, I'm done with my tangent now! Seriously, your Digital Rebel is a great camera, especially for the money. Try using the AV setting, (aperture priority), in this mode, you set the aperture and the camera sets the shutter speed. This is especially useful for blurring a background - f5.6 or lower number, or maximizing depth of field – f11 to f22. Have fun with it, blast away, and be creative!

If you fill that 1 Gig card up with images, it will take a few minutes to download. And at the risk of going back on my digital tangent, a heck of a lot faster than waiting for film to be processed. You might need to upgrade your computer to a faster processor with tons of storage space. And don't forget to back up your images on CDs, DVDs or external hard drives! In today's other posting, I mentioned some magazines and websites that you'll find useful. Here's one more website: www.leppinstitute.com.

Consider joining a local photo club. Talking with people and sharing ideas is a great way to learn about photography, especially in today's digital world. I would do the actual sizing in Elements and then process them through Petfinder's software, it probably filters the images for faster downloads.

Thanks for the kind words about my photos and Best Friends. We are more than happy to help other people help animals. We can't do it alone. Our dream of a world with no more homeless pets must take place at the grassroots level. Yes with people just like you!

Shedding some light on lighting

Question from Jessica:

All the great photos I see have perfect lighting. I know the ones that are taken outside are using natural light and probably taken early in the day. But, what about indoor pictures? I've taken lots of pictures of foster cats lounging on cat furniture, stretched out on the floor or curled up in their beds, and the lighting always comes out poorly.

There's a window in the room and I use that for natural light but should I buy a special light to help bring out the cat's colors and make the photo look more professional? There are dark areas in the pictures and other things are overexposed and too bright. Thanks.

Response from Clay Myers:

You're right; the photos I take outside are with a natural light exposure, and almost always with fill flash. While I try to do most of my outside work in the morning or late afternoon, there are times that I must shoot at high noon. When that's the case, I always find some shade and use fill flash to give the image some pop. Most modern cameras set on automatic, with built in flash or an external flash, have good fill flash capabilities and produce nice images in outdoor light. Fill flash means that the flash doesn't set the exposure; instead it adds just enough light to fill in shadows and give the image more life.

Take that same camera, with the same settings, in a dark room and now the flash sets the exposure, due to the lack of available light. This type of exposure produces the typical bright, or sometimes overly bright subject, and a black background. The reason for this is simple – the flash reads the distance of the close up subject and produces what it calculates to be sufficient light. Everything beyond that distance will be dark because the flash doesn't reach that far. If you were in a bright room, the results would be a lot better.

One way around this flash drop-off problem is to take an ambient light reading of the room and manually set your exposure for that amount of light. This method would probably require what is referred to as a

“fast lens”. If you have a SLR camera, film or digital, consider buying a 50mm f1.8 lens. With this size lens you can shoot in dark rooms and use fill flash.

Your description of that window light can lead to some really nice images; nothing better than the soft glow from a window. If there is strong window light at the time, make sure that the subject is near it, not in it. Having the subject in bright light will confuse your camera’s meter and could lead to some unsatisfactory results, especially if the background is dark. It sounds like that might be some of your problem: too much light on the subject and not enough in the background.

Another light or two would definitely help, but you might want to use them to light the background instead of the subject. The light coming through a window should be enough to light the subject; you may just need to brighten up your background. You can use regular 100-200 watt lights bulbs in a lamp or purchase photo lighting. Most photo lighting, except for the really expensive ones, will produce the same color of light as regular lamp bulbs. The big difference is you can buy photo lights in higher wattages.

Speaking of backgrounds, look at them closely. For example, if there are dark objects, i.e. beds, towels, furniture, etc., try moving them out of the way. If you are shooting digital or can scan the film, some of this problem can be fixed in a software program. You can definitely boost the subject’s color for more pizzazz, and adjust the tone of image to minimize the effects of difficult lighting.

Great expectations for photographers to shoot by

Question from Ian:

I'm a photographer with Wayside Waifs in Kansas City. From your experiences, what are some of your expectation of a good photo shot? What components are always present in excellent pictures? Is there a checklist you go through in your mind when setting up a shot?

Response from Clay Myers:

A good photo shoot, well that’s an interesting question. Let me start out by saying that I think almost that any photo I take could be better. That’s the bane of a photographer’s existence; if I only had done this, if the dog’s head was turned just slightly the other way...But in a more down to earth sense, especially when it comes to shelter pet photography, a good photo shoot produces an engaging image that didn’t stress out the animal.

I have a good idea going in what kind of photo I’ll get from a particular pet. If they’re nervous and frightened, the best I might hope for is a photo where you can see theirs eyes clearly. I always look for a

moment when a dog lifts its ears or cocks its head. And with a nervous or angry cat, I look for a time when their ears are not pinned back.

As to what makes an excellent pet photograph, I would say capturing a moment in time that tells who that animal is and what makes them special. I tell people all the time that a good photo always has that certain magical quality. You can have the best camera, beautiful models, both people and pets, great lighting, awesome backgrounds, assistants to help with everything, but at some point something special has to happen. In the case of people with pets, I look for that moment when the animal says, yeah I like you, I trust you, let's be friends.

While there's never any guarantee that that elusive, magical moment will occur, you can certainly help it happen. A good photographer not only takes the picture but also knows how to instruct people to look a certain way and how to get a pet to feel comfortable. Pets are like people in that they are all different. Each pet has their own personality and what works for one might not work for another.

My checklist involves looking at the light and very importantly, the background. How should I position the camera to make the photo really sing, what angle works the best? Also on the list, if there are people helping or watching, is to crack jokes and keep it light. Never be moody or bossy around people or pets. No one likes a grumpy, pushy photographer!

Thanks to the wonderful world of digital photography, I always take a test shot and check the exposure level on my camera's histogram. What a great feature this is; I don't know how I ever shot slide film for all those years!

But the most important thing on the checklist is to keep in mind that this photo might help get this animal a home. With that as one's primary objective, things just kind of fall into place and you'll have a good shoot.

Photo editing: making the most of the shots you've got

Question from Kristina:

I use an older version of Photoshop (7.0) and Elements to enhance my photographs. I know many software products have similar capabilities. What are some of the most useful capabilities in photo editing software do you use and advise we research to enhance our photos? A lot of my group sends me photos to improve, so I don't always have control over "taking a good picture" to begin with.

Response from Clay Myers:

I understand completely about enhancing photos that are, let's say, technically challenging. I would use Photoshop 7 instead of Elements and if you can afford it, step up to Photoshop CS2. One of the great features in CS is the Shadow/Highlight tool. While it can be a bit tricky to figure out at first, this tool can do wonders for dark images. It's kind of like a super Dodge and Burn tool.

I utilize many of the adjustment tools in Photoshop. And I'm sure you know that there is usually more than one way to do things with this program. My first step with every photo is to open the Levels Tool and check its tonality, making sure that the black and white points are set. Then, instead of using Level's gray slider to brighten or darken the gray point, I usually use curves. Of course all the while looking at the image's overall color. I use Hue/Saturation, Selective Color, sometimes Color Balance, and usually some Brightness and Contrast. After the image looks good, or as good as possible, I use the Unsharp Mask.

I'm sorry I can't spend time going over the nuances of each tool. I would recommend checking out the photo magazines I mentioned earlier this week for more instruction. They always have easy to understand, helpful tips on color adjustment. These periodicals also have good reviews on new software.

I'm sure the people in your group really appreciate your Photoshop talents. Not everyone can learn how to adjust images, or even afford the software for that matter. I've been doing the image adjustments here at Best Friends for three years and have learned a lot about color, light and computer software in general. I really think that understanding these areas of digital imaging can actually make one a better photographer.

When digital noise makes too much racket

Question from Mike:

We have a pretty basic digital, a Kodak DC4800, 3.1 Megapixel. It's served us well and certainly does a well enough job to have gotten lots of animals adopted.

Still, sometimes I feel like I'm 'shooting in the dark' when it comes to graininess. Some of the shots come out really grainy, some don't. And there's no way to tell just by reviewing the shot on the camera--it needs to be downloaded before that kind of detail is revealed. Which means it's often too late to just 'take another shot.'

My partner theorizes that the pictures are less grainy if the zoom is in use. So, we've been using the zoom in all situations, taking shots of the same situation from several different angles and light levels, and hoping for the best. Are there any more surefire solutions? Thanks for a terrific week--I have already learned so much!

Response from Clay Myers:

The graininess you refer to is actually called digital noise. While in relative terms it is the same difference as film grain, in that it degrades your image, it can be controlled somewhat with software. I use a program called Neat Image, available at www.neatimage.com. It only costs around forty dollars and can do wonders for noise problems. The software is a bit overwhelming at first, perhaps it has too many controls, but the good thing is that it has a preview window and lets you see what's going on. Normally I just use the default setting, and then utilize the Edit/Fade feature in Photoshop to lessen the effect of the filter if necessary. It can make everything look a little too soft at times.

I've never used that particular camera so it's hard to say what's going on with the image quality. Certainly the lens could be part of the problem. Most zooms have a "sweet spot" where one point along its range might be better than another. However that anomaly usually affects sharpness, not noise. Do you know if the camera automatically adjusts the ISO level? That's the big culprit in the world of digital noise. Higher ISO settings, especially in point and shoot digital cameras, usually result in unacceptable noise levels. Most of these cameras do a good job at ISO 100-200, but above that level, say 400 or higher, the pixels become really chunky and lead to very noisy images.

Another place where noise loves to hide is in shadows. Avoid taking photos with a lot of dark shades when using your camera at higher ISO settings. Make sure the image is properly exposed and the noise will be less of a factor.

I'm glad you liked this week's forum; I really enjoyed answering the questions and hope I was helpful. Keep up the good work, Mike! And the same goes for everyone else who is using his or her photographic skills to help solve America's homeless pet problem.

Member Comments

Comments about helping animals stand out:**Comment from Mickey:**

ADD A BANDANA... the features pop right out.. works every time.. we just had two cases of dogs not getting noticed and then when the bandanas went on we got emails right away!

Comment from Debbie:

This has been a great topic, I had so much fun today taking new photos of our cats. I took a wire dog crate and hung some blankets that were donated to us in it for a backdrop. I also used a large white

blanket draped across our rocking chair so the dark colored cats would stand out. They look much better in the pictures, which are posted to our petfinder site.

Comment from Jessica:

This is how we did it: We found a company, there's probably some on the internet also, that makes sheets of colored plastic, about one-fourth inch thick. You can probably buy clear, hard plastic sheets and paint them yourself, too.

We first measured the kennel side walls and back. Three sides were made of brightly colored yellow plastic that we simply set inside the cage to act as a great background for the pictures. We made two more sets, one in red and the other bright blue. Sometimes we mixed the colors up if the dog pictured had a quirky personality. The pieces did not have to be attached to one another and after each animal had their picture taken we simply took out the plastic and washed it with our special cleaner.

We ended up with smiling dogs sitting in front of brightly colored walls instead of dogs sitting in those awful cages. It worked wonders for our adoptions. Use bright, happy colors! This cost a few hundred dollars but our dogs got adopted so it has been worth the initial cost and effort. Make sure the colors are solid so they really show up boldly in the picture. You don't want a lot of transparency when the colors will be adding so much to the picture.

Comment from Sandra:

Any chance the picture can be taken before the animal is placed in a cage? The shelter where I volunteer now takes pictures of the cats and dogs before they are placed in the kennels/cages. One thing they have started doing is using some sort of back drop (like an old bed sheet in good condition). Sometimes if there is a special holiday a theme backdrop is created. It's very inexpensive and makes the animals look a whole lot better. Whatever back drop you decide to use, keep color in mind as some colors wash the animal out.

Comment from Judy about getting media attention with photos:

In addition to adoption ads, I have found that one of the most important parts of a **news release** for a fundraising event is a great color photo to accompany the release. A good photo will set your event apart from the sea of black ink that readers are looking at. My advice: Make sure the photo is crisp & clear, content matches the event, has a well thought out placement of subject and of course is of an animal!

Remember the photo will most likely be reduced and printed in black and white, so a close up is always better. Sometimes, I will set up a "photo shoot" before the event with "models" (cats and dogs) to get the right shot to promote the event.

I have the photo shop print as many copies of the photo as I need, because the media loves to use a photo to help get the message across. If you print on your computer, use photo paper and the proper settings. Be sure to put a label with your organization's name, event name and contact info on the back of the photo, in case it gets separated from the press release.

Comment from Beri about photo editing:

I like to try and get pictures of animals with children whenever possible. This is excellent especially with dogs that are "good with kids." My neighborhood kids are huge hams.

You can also try changing photos to Sepia, a fancy name for black and white. There's a button you can hit and it will turn color into black and white. It makes a difference and can give a real retro look.

I have the HP software that came with my camera. I'll explain with Windows XP: Go to your start menu in the lower left hand corner. Select "Paint". This is a pretty simplified version of photo editing. Your picture appears and you can add colors, etc. I usually hit edit, enlarge the shot 6x, and click in the color to change 'alien pet eye colors.' You can usually even put a white pixel in for sparkle! Gmail is free and they also have an excellent photo shop program named Picassa that is free and included.

Kim Komando has an excellent book on digital photography:

http://www.komando.com/estore/comersus_viewItem.asp?idProduct=47

Closing comments from forum moderator:

Thank you to the many members who sent in questions and comments for this week's forum!

Transcripts from this and all other forum weeks, including Best Friends' Elizabeth Doyle's week on Adoption Ads That Really Work (<http://www.bestfriends.org/archives/forums/032805adoptionads.html>), are archived for easy reference, and are made available to all at <http://www.bestfriends.com/nomorehomelesspets/weeklyforum/forumarchives.cfm>. Meanwhile, those of you who joined the forum midweek can view the complete transcripts right away at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/NMHP/>.

Frequently, members contact us asking for permission to share the information posted through this forum. The answer is always yes. We just ask that the source is acknowledged (No More Homeless Pets online forum, hosted by Best Friends Animal Society) and that the web page for the forum is provided (<http://www.bestfriends.com/nomorehomelesspets/weeklyforum/>). That way they know where to go to find out more!

As always, thank you for being part of the forum, and for everything you do for the animals!

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Kindness to animals builds a better world for all of us.