

# The Big Picture of Dog Photography

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## *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Understanding the goals and challenges of dog photography
  - ▶ Using your skills to excel at dog photography
  - ▶ Seeing how different approaches yield different results
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**P**eople are showing a growing interest in pet photography of all kinds, especially dog photography (exhibit A: you're reading this book). At the hobbyist as well as professional level, dog photographers are popping up all over. This interest makes perfect sense — we share our lives with our wonderful dogs, but the time we spend together is simply much too short. Those of us who love dogs seem to be on a quest to immortalize our canine friends, to somehow hang on to these moments we share together forever. That's where dog photography comes in.

In this chapter, we reveal how snapping pictures of your (or someone else's) dog can change your life, and perhaps even the dog's life. But before you grab your camera, you should know something about the skills that can make you successful, so we also cover those. And just as your dog has his favorite tricks, you'll come to have your favorite ways to take photos of your pup. We outline your options at the end of the chapter.



## *The Scope of Dog Photography*

People have different motivations for wanting great photos of their dogs, so your first task is to figure out what that motivation is so you can take the right photo, whether for yourself or someone else. Do you want to capture images of Hercules playing his favorite game? Maybe you want just one nice

photo of Hogan you can use for your holiday cards this year. Or perhaps Quimby's starting to slow down a little and you want to make sure you have photos of him as you two go about your shared daily routine that you'll one day miss.

Whatever the motivation is, the goal of dog photography is pretty basic: catch those real moments of a beloved dog's life. The scope of what it takes to achieve that goal is, admittedly, a hearty challenge. You have to understand how dogs think and behave, be willing to get down and dirty with them, be just as clever with the dog's humans, and employ every drop of patience, flexibility, and tranquility you have. Just like Jesse's obedience lessons, dog photography takes hard work and practice, but in the end, there's nothing but tail wags all around.

### ***Capturing moments and stories that are fleeting***

The true goal of dog photography (as with any other photography) is to freeze time — to capture those precious moments in a dog's life for all eternity. When you reflect upon your dog and the relationship you share with her, what stands out? What do you always want to remember about her? When you want to show the “real” Millie in photographs, forgo the commands. Much of dog photography is just about being quick with a shutter button. In Figure 1-1, we caught an unplanned moment in which Henry decided it was time to play tug with his leash, perfectly capturing this little joker's personality.

One of the unique aspects about photographing dogs is that you can't really tell them exactly how to pose, and while that *can* be an obstacle, you also end up capturing some seriously genuine moments. Dogs can't really fake it; what you see is what you get. Sure, you can tell Jackie Brown to “sit,” but you can't instruct him to “back up 3 yards and then come running toward me with a happy grin on your face.” If you want that to happen, you have to follow Jackie around with a camera until he spontaneously does what you're looking for. Of course, there are a ton of tips, tricks, and strategies to encourage your fuzzy pal to do something cute or fun (and we tell you all about those in this book), but being quick on the draw results in your being able to freeze in time some very real-life moments.

### ***Understanding how dogs are like children to their humans***

Obviously, you know what your own dog means to you, so remember that feeling when you photograph other people's dogs. Always respect the humans' directions (as long as the dog isn't in danger) and defer to them. You wouldn't tell others how to parent their human children, nor should you do so with canine kids.



50mm, 1/160 sec., f/11, 125

**Figure 1-1:** Keep an eye out for unplanned moments like this.



The heart of the matter really is a matter of the heart. People love their dogs, just like you love yours. And that's probably why they're letting you take photos of them in the first place. Most times, you fall just as in love with them as their humans have, but sometimes, a dog may try your every last nerve. Just remember: That dog is someone's child. No matter how Max tests you, don't get angry and don't give up. Take a break if you must, but always strive to see Max through loving eyes, just as if he were your own dog (or child). And create images that truly bring out the parent-child bond that many humans share with their dogs.

### ***Keeping your canine subject at ease***

Dogs are energy experts. They can read it, they can give it off, and they can detect the most subtle changes in it. Energy is one of their main languages, which means that if you're stressed, dogs sense it. If you're calm, they know it. More than that, they mirror your energy.



When you're photographing dogs, get yourself into a peaceful state of mind and stay there until you're done. If you get all crazy and hyper (or even demanding and angry), you can expect the dog to do the same. Ever notice how those TV shows about improving pet behavior start with a clip of humans demonstrating a dog's horrible behavior as they yell at the dog in vain, but then the expert steps in, and suddenly, the dog is heeling, sitting, and ignoring the cat? It's not magic; it's energy. And to be successful with your dog photography, yours has to be good.

Different dogs respond differently, of course, so it's up to you to meet the dog where the dog is. In other words, a big Lab mix may not mind you bending down to give him a big greeting and a solid pat on the back, whereas a small Chihuahua probably doesn't feel comfortable with someone hovering over her. Your canine subjects need a lot of space, especially at the beginning. Remember that being the star of a photo shoot is probably a brand-new experience for them, so to keep them comfortable and calm while photographing, give them plenty of mental and physical space.

More important, keep the process *fun*! The more you can turn it into a game, the better your results will be.

### ***Using dog photography in rescue work***

Shelters and rescues across the United States (and throughout the world) house millions of homeless dogs just waiting to be adopted. Now more than ever, a good photo of a shelter dog has the power to literally save his life. Websites, social media, smart phones, and e-mail all contribute to the ability to send photos out over state and country lines and even overseas. When people hit the Internet to find their next canine companion, a compelling photo catches their eye and causes them to click a link to find out more.

Overworked shelter employees often don't have the time or equipment to take good photos of each of the hundreds of dogs in their shelter. Often, the only chance a dog has rests on a grainy snapshot taken while the dog was at his most fearful or injured. The animals waiting for adoption can benefit greatly from your skills as a dog photographer. Your high quality equipment, photography skills, and kind rapport with dogs can save lives when you produce photos that get dogs noticed.

In Figure 1-2, you can see the before and after photos of Sugar, a pit bull who had been abused and then dumped at the shelter. The photo on the top was taken on a cellphone the day she was found, and the photo on the bottom was professionally done. Using the cellphone photos didn't yield much interest in Sugar; the photos were small and grainy and simply emphasized her scar. The professional photos showed Sugar in a new light, garnering her much attention and support from countless individuals, as well as Molly's Mutts & Meows, an amazing rescue group that took Sugar under its wing and stood by her through thick and thin.

There's no better feeling than when someone who's just adopted a rescue dog says, "Oh, I saw the photo you took of him and just *knew* he was mine."

## Skills You Need to Excel

Just like any new activity, dog photography takes practice. As long as you're willing to spend the time learning techniques and trying them out, you can excel. Of course, having a few of these skills helps you produce even better photos:

- ✓ **Creativity:** Photography is an art, but dog photography is art with four legs and lots of slobber. Not only do you have to get creative with perspective, style, composition, color, and all that stuff you learn about in art school, you also get to work with subjects that don't really understand English, which makes things *really* interesting. From how you get a dog's attention (see Chapter 2) to how



50 mm, 1/500 sec., f/2.8, 125

**Figure 1-2:** One good photo of an adoptable dog can make a huge difference in how they're perceived.



to coax a shy dog to pose (check out Chapter 7) to how you do your final edits (flip to Chapter 12), dog photography really requires out-of-the-box thinking!

- ✓ **Dog handling skills/basic understanding of dog psychology:** There's lots to know about how dogs think and how to best work with them. If you want to photograph them, you have to understand them and be willing to communicate with them in their language. You need to be comfortable with how dogs interact with one another and with people, and you need to be able to direct them to some degree — at least enough to keep them safe and happy during your session. (We give you the skinny on dog psychology in Chapter 2.) Of course, the better you are at understanding and interacting with your canine friends, the better your photos will most likely be.
- ✓ **Proficiency with cameras, lenses, and more:** Obviously, you need a lot of technical knowledge and skills to be good at dog photography. You need to understand how the different parts of a camera work together to create the photograph you want. This is especially important with dog photography because the subjects move so fast. If Luca suddenly starts doing something really cute but you're occupied with fiddling around with your settings, chances are you'll miss the shot. Knowing where to set your aperture, what lens to use, and how much light you need for any given shot should be second nature. Practice until it is! (Chapter 3 covers photography equipment, and Chapter 4 provides basic information about camera settings and photography techniques.)
- ✓ **Business acumen:** If you want to make a business out of dog photography, a love of dogs is a good starting point, but you need much more than that. You have to be a good researcher, manager, marketer, salesperson, planner, accountant, and about a dozen other things. If you truly want to succeed, you have to work hard to develop all these areas. (If this sounds like the perfect career for you, check out Chapter 14.)

## *Picking the Perfect Approach*

Photography is all about options. You can choose how much light to use, where to shoot, what to do, and which colors to use. All these choices contribute to the overall look and style of your photo. One of the biggest choices to make when it comes to dog photography is your approach. You can aim for truly candid moments, candid-looking (but planned) shots, or totally posed portraits. Each approach is different and yields different (but equally delightful) results. As we discuss different settings and ideas throughout this book, keep in mind these different approaches and choose which one works best for you.

## *Capturing candid moments*

*Candid shots* are all about capturing and conveying what sets Libby apart from, say, Butch. These are the spur-of-the-moment, unplanned pictures that capture life as it unfolds. You don't need to use many commands or tell the dog what to do (well, not *too* much, anyway). You should let Libby do whatever it is she wants to do and just shoot. Anything goes! Portraits are nice, but the true joy of photographing dogs is getting those images that instantly say something about *your* specific dog. You want to be able to look at these photos and exclaim, "Oh my gosh! I captured Charm's ear thing perfectly!" or, "Aw! That's totally Sundance's dinnertime look!" You get bonus points if you make tears of recognition well up in your own eyes upon viewing the final images. Getting these images, though, takes equal parts persistence, patience, foxlike cunning, and just pure luck.



The first rule in capturing candid shots is to *always* have your camera, and *always* be ready to point it at your dog when the moment strikes, no matter what time it is. Most humans would probably punch you if you tried to stick a lens in their face before they've had their coffee. Luckily, dogs don't drink coffee, so you have more options when it comes to breaking out the camera. But that doesn't mean all hours are created equal.

Think about what your dog is like at different times of day and what you want to capture. If he's sleepy during the day and you want to get some shots of him curled up on his favorite bed or lounging around in his favorite sunny spot in the yard, try the afternoon. If you'd rather get shots of him playing fetch or running around, choose a time when he's most energetic — perhaps right when he wakes up. The key to getting the most genuine images is to follow your dog's natural daily routine.



Candid shots are great because they can happen anytime, so long as your camera is within reach! These shots aren't posed, so it's just a matter of keeping your eyes open for the right moments. Maybe you're with your dog at your favorite corner hangout when you notice how amazing the lighting is. Or maybe you discover him napping in the funniest position while you're cleaning the house. Figure 1-3 is a candid moment we captured at the end of our photo shoot with Flora. As we were packing up, we saw Flora plop down on the carpet and begin burying her tired eyes in her paws, so Kim quickly got down at her level and continued shooting. When shooting candid photos, quickly and accurately choosing your camera settings is important, so make sure you do your homework (see Chapter 4 for details about camera settings)!



50mm, 1/250 sec., f/3.5, 500

**Figure 1-3:** Candid moments can happen at any time!

### ***Planning candid-looking images***

Don't think you have to wait around for something to happen, though. You have some not-so-candid ways of *making* things happen that still result in a candid-looking moment. This is a good approach to use with dogs that like to play games and listen fairly well.

To pull this off, the first thing you need to do is set the scene. Because the photo is *candid-looking* but not really candid, you can take your time to make



sure the lighting and background is how you want it to be. After you set that up, the real fun begins — getting the dog to do what you want her to do.

Take Figure 1-4, for instance. You may think that Kim was serendipitously in the right place at the right time to capture this perfectly composed photo of Mac traipsing across the patio. Mac looks natural and is in his own world, paying no attention to the photographer, but what you can't see is one of Mac's humans standing to the right of the frame, calling his name so he runs to her. You also can't tell that this one photo took 20 minutes of Mac essentially playing "monkey in the middle" and cruising back and forth between members of his family.

What can we say? Sometimes the best candids aren't so candid after all!



25mm, 1/640 sec., f/3.5, 100

**Figure 1-4:** With an extra person or two and a little bit of persistence, you can plan shots that look totally spontaneous, even when they're not!

### *Posing for perfection*

Sometimes you just want a nice, posed photo of Violet in all her regal glory. Maybe you want that nice holiday card or something you can hang above your mantle. Or maybe you want to enter Violet into a cutest dog contest.



When you go this route, you should do so at a time when Violet has low enough energy that she's likely to listen to your commands but not so little energy that she sleeps through the session! (For more about doggie portrait sessions, head to Chapter 7.)

This approach typically takes a lot of mental energy for both the dog and you, so be prepared to take it all in stride. If your dog's obedience class rank is anything like our dogs', you have to use a lot of treats to persuade him to keep his position. Others, like Mya in Figure 1-5, are natural-born models.



25mm, 1/200 sec., f/2.0, 125

**Figure 1-5:** Mya strikes a pose.