Pet Photography with Nigel Danson

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I am a landscape photographer and that means for the most part, my subject doesn't move. Mountains, trees and rocks are good at staying still when asked. Unlike my Springer Spaniel, Pebbles! When Nikon asked me to make a video on pet photography, I was a bit surprised to say the least!

The thing is, if you carry on doing things that you know, you don't develop your skills and if you aren't careful, things can become mundane. I was excited about the challenge and began by having a chat with Pebbles about it. She was up for it and we ordered more treats!

I have photographed Pebbles a lot over the last three years, as she is always with me on my hikes whilst making my YouTube videos www.youtube.com/nigeldanson around the Lake District and occasionally I get an image that I really like. The good thing is there are a lot of elements that cross disciplines in photography like light, timing and of course, composition.

I made a video about the process I followed – you can see that the number one skill is perseverance.

I shot all of my images with a Nikon Z 7 and made the most of the new animal autofocus feature. I used a variety of Z Series lenses because they are incredibly sharp and the speed is important for a speedy Springer Spaniel like Pebbles – allowing for quick focus.



I had my camera set on shutter priority with Auto ISO up to 1000 maximum and had the aperture as wide as possible.

Here are a few tips that I found helped me get the best photographs of Pebbles.

Shoot at eye level

As with photographing people, it is important to get down to eye level or even slightly below. This has two major advantages: It allows you to blur the background easily, as the distance is greatly increased and you see a view that most people don't when looking at their pet, so it stands out.



Use sunlight to your advantage

It is important to think about sunlight and how it impacts your image. I mostly like to shoot in the shade, as you can get some nice soft reflected light cast into your pet's face.

In this image, I used the band of light to create an interesting composition with dark / light / dark bands. The key thing is always to be aware of how light falls on your pet and the background of the image.



I also like to shoot at sunset when you get lovely soft and warm light. Luckily, in this shot Pebbles stayed on the rock for around four seconds - just long enough to grab this shot.

Hide your pet

Photos can look good when you don’t reveal everything to the viewer. Imagination is often better than reality!



In my garden, I tried to get Pebbles to run through the long grass but we were both tired by this point and I didn't quite get the shot I wanted. I did make sure that I only photographed Pebbles in 10 minute sessions and only two sessions a day, as it was very mentally tiring for her (and me!)

This is a more successful one on the sand dunes in England.



Think about different angles

Shooting your pet from different angles (and with different focal lengths) can be a great way to capture a stunning pet photo. In this shot, I photographed from above whilst Pebbles was trying to sit for a treat. This isn't something she does very well. Come to think of it, I wouldn't sit waiting for somebody to give me a cake whilst saying, "sit sit sit stay…."



Capture behaviour



This is the most important tip but it is also the most difficult. I tried to get Pebbles to react to different sounds or capture a moment when she was exhibiting different behaviour. One that is still a work in process!



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