

Snap a Cat - Abyss in Action

Photographing pets can be difficult at the best of times but when you have an energetic Aby on your hands the word patience can take on a whole new meaning. Abyssinians would have to be one of the hardest cat breeds to photograph. They are active, fast moving, playful cats who never seem to sit still when you want them to and you can struggle to capture their 'essence' as they blur across your viewfinder.

The bare essentials for photography are the camera, a subject and of course the photographer. Having an assistant is always a bonus when working with animals. Someone dangling a toy to attract the cat's attention and to keep it focussed is handy and can make your life a lot less stressful when trying to get a decent shot. Sometimes that isn't possible and you have to do both which can be interesting.

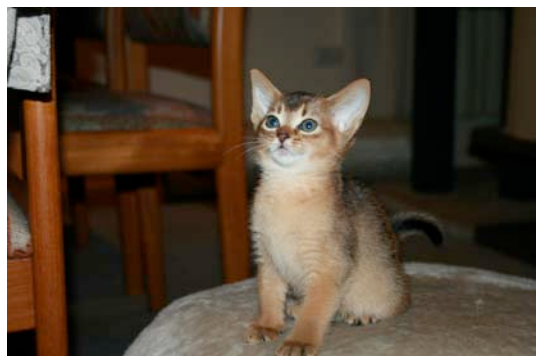
With animal photography and particularly when dealing with fast moving animals a good camera is important. The main issue with many of the compact cameras you can buy is that there is a delay between hitting the shutter button and the photograph being taken. This time delay is heightened when using a flash so you often miss the moment you were hoping to capture.

When selecting a camera to buy you can choose between the smaller and cheaper compact cameras or the more versatile single lens reflex (SLR) cameras. There are many digital SLR cameras on the market now that are affordable although generally more expensive than a compact camera but if you are semi-serious about your photography then they are the way to go. These cameras give you the option of using the manual or automatic modes as well as various settings that allow some flexibility and creativity with your photography. So don't feel scared off by SLRs; they can be as easy as 'point and shoot' to use.

I would say that most of the well-known camera brands make good quality cameras so it really is a personal choice as to which brand of camera you select. If you are interested in developing your photography skills look at the functions available, the batteries required, how easy the buttons are to use and if there is easy access to various functions. How does the camera feel in your hands? For me weight was a major factor as I know my arms and wrists get tired when I am photographing for extended periods and it also affects how still you can hold a camera, which is important for clear shots.

There are several aspects of a photograph that increase its ability to hold the viewer's attention. The subject, composition and lighting are probably the main aspects that affect the effectiveness of a photograph. Many parts make up the composition of a photograph such as background, positioning and balance. It's these parts that when combined effectively create an aesthetically pleasing photograph.

Whether you orientate the camera for a landscape or portrait shot it is important that you think about the composition of your photograph. When composing a photograph the rule of thirds is often talked about. This refers to the division of the area in the viewfinder into thirds and the photographer's ability to use these thirds effectively. If Photograph 1 were to be divided into vertical thirds there would be two sections with nothing of interest in them and this therefore detracts from the overall picture created.



Photograph 1

The background of a photograph should be free of distracting objects and preferably be a different colour than your subject. Sometimes you do not have a choice but generally speaking a plain background or one that is uncluttered will give you a more striking photo allowing the viewer to focus in on your gorgeous Aby rather than be distracted by background objects. If you have an SLR and you know a little about settings and depth of field then aim to have a short depth of field so that the background looks out of focus while your subject is sharp. On digital SLRs use the aperture priority setting, this allows you to set the aperture and the camera sets the shutter speed. The lower the f-stop you use the more light that is let in through a larger aperture hole. This makes less of the background and foreground in focus. **Tip** Check that the shutter speed is still fast enough to get a clear photograph.



Photograph 2

Aby's like to be up high, they like to perch on things so use this to your advantage and find an area that allows them to pose naturally. Using a place like this to position the cat may give you a few seconds longer to photograph them as they contemplate their surroundings and where to jump next. It may mean you have to continually pick them up once they have jumped off and put them back but that is part of the fun!

Often people include a lot of the surroundings in photographs they take, which leaves plenty

of room for distracting objects (see *Photograph 1*). Get close to the subject or if that is not possible zoom in so that the cat fills the viewfinder (see *Photograph 2*). This will allow for less distraction and will automatically make the viewer focus on your subject rather than objects that are surrounding it.

Check the angle that you are using. Would it be more effective if you moved slightly left or right or perhaps you need to be slightly higher than the cat? Just moving a small distance can make a lot of difference to the photograph you end up taking. Would the subject fill the frame more if you took the shot portrait style rather than landscape? In *Photograph 1* I have photographed the kitten sitting on something using a landscape style shot but there are chairs in the background, the angle isn't quite right and there is a lot of space around the kitten that does not add anything to the photograph. The chair in the foreground on the left-hand side is particularly distracting.

In *Photograph 2* I changed the orientation of my camera to take a portrait shot, moved slightly to the left and zoomed in a little, this created a photo that has a background that is less cluttered and the focus is on the cat's expression and beautiful colouring creating an lovely shot of the kitten.

Lighting is an important factor when photographing animals. Natural light can create stunning shots and produce a photograph that shows more depth than ones that have been created using a flash. Using natural light inside is really only possible when you have rooms that get a lot of sunlight otherwise there is not enough light for the camera to take a clear shot. Natural light shots taken inside with limited light will lack clarity and colour and will have a grainy look. In this situation if your camera has a fill-flash or 'soft' flash option it will give a small flash that will light up the subject enough to take a clear photograph without bleaching the subtleness that natural light brings to a photograph. This technique can also be used

outside when there is bright sunlight but your subject is in shadow (see *Photograph 3*).



Photograph 3

The use of a flash inside can also lead to cat 'red eye' creating eyes that glow. The flash reflects at the back of the cat's eyes on the retina, creating the glow. The physical positioning of the flash close to the lens is the culprit in this situation and a compact camera has little option where a flash can be built into the camera body. At times, even the SLRs with their pop up flashes tend to get eye glow, although not as badly as the compacts. To reduce the glowing effect try moving closer to the subject, create more light so the cat's pupils reduce in size or use an additional mounted flash for your SLR; this creates distance between the flash and the lens resulting in natural looking cat eyes.

I think one of the most useful advantages of digital cameras is that you can take plenty of shots and not worry about wasting resources or the expense of processing. Regularly when I was using film I would be happy with one shot out of a whole roll of film. Recently, *Photograph 4* was printed in a book called 'Cheeky Little Cats'. In the process of achieving this photograph I took twenty-four

other photographs that I feel didn't make the grade. These days I take many more shots than I used to but that gives me more options and a better chance of capturing the moment for which I am looking. You can also learn instantly from the photographs you take and decide how they can be improved as soon as the photograph has been taken.



Photograph 4

Overall my advice would be to take lots of shots, have some patience and choose a good time to photograph your pets. There are times that are better than others to photograph your cat and that time is not always when you want it to be. Just like everything in an Aby's life they like to help...when it suits them. So if you are having trouble finding that 'right' time, catch them while they're sleeping! Happy snapping.

Wendy Newton

