



Perfect pawtraits

Top pet photographer **Nick Ridley** shares some of his secrets to getting the perfect picture

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Basics

To capture great pictures of your cat, you will need a few basic pieces of equipment and a few special tricks up your sleeve. You will also need the stalking skills of an SAS soldier and the stamina of an Olympic athlete... photographing cats can be hard work!

The first thing you will need is a camera. Many people think that to take stunning photographs you need high-spec professional gear, but this is not necessarily true. Digital cameras have improved dramatically over the past few years and excellent results can be produced with modestly priced cameras. The main thing to look for when buying a digital camera is the detail – resolution – that it can capture and this figure is published as ‘mega pixels’. Nowadays you should really be looking at a camera with a resolution of no fewer than four – million – mega pixels, ideally six or even eight will be better and allow you to make bigger prints from the digital file.

The biggest advantage of using a digital camera is that you have the facility to check the pictures as you take them and delete any that are not up to standard; you can also take several shots so you don’t miss out on getting that once-in-a-lifetime shot. After you have downloaded them onto your computer, you can then create a multitude of effects using an image manipulation programme, but remember to burn a CD of your images first so that you have a backup of the files and treat these as your negatives. ▶

Getting it in focus

The art of good cat photography is being able to capture the character of your pet and the ability to 'see' the potential of a picture long before the shutter button is pressed. Most modern day cameras are auto-focus so the chance of getting blurred photos is greatly reduced, however, care should be taken to make sure the camera is held very still while taking the picture.

The most common fault when taking pictures of cats is when the photographer fails to get down to the cat's eye level and, in some cases, this may mean lying flat out on your stomach. Another option is to get the cat settled on a raised area such as a sofa or outdoor chair. Before starting out on a photo session, there are a few tips that are worth remembering:

- Be patient. Cats cannot be trained like dogs, so you must remain calm and try to anticipate your cat's movements and mood to ensure success
- Be prepared to take plenty of pictures; make sure you have sufficient film or memory cards and plenty of charged batteries. There is nothing worse than your cat suddenly turning into a film star only for the low battery warning light to start flashing!
- Get to know your camera; when the action starts you may not have time to keep checking the settings or the manual
- Cats are especially sensitive to having their space invaded; they may turn their heads in an effort to avoid eye contact or even run away. If your pet is showing signs of being uncomfortable, move further back and use a longer lens
- Keep your sessions short. Most animals have very short attention spans and will soon become bored
- If you want to get your cat looking alert, get a selection of cat toys. It is easier to have a handler that can help out, rather than trying to manipulate a camera and the latest cat gadget yourself
- And finally – and in my view the most important thing to remember – is never let your cat become distressed or upset by your photographic efforts. No picture is worth causing harm to your cat



Indoors or out?

Given a choice I would always opt to take pictures of cats outside; they are in their natural environment stalking through the flowerbeds or dozing in the shade of a tree and you do not have to worry about the problems of using flash to light your subject. Many people think that the best time to take photos is on a really bright, sunny day but in fact the best lighting conditions are when there is a good covering of high cloud that acts like a massive diffuser to soften the sunlight. Early morning or later in the afternoon are the best times to get out with the camera and, if possible, try to avoid the strong midday sun. That said, if you see a good photo opportunity, forget about the rules, get the camera and start snapping.

If your cat is settled and perhaps even taking a quick doze, do not be too quick in trying to get his attention. Get down to his eye level and, using the zoom on your camera, focus in close on his face using the eyes as the main point of focus. This will create a very intimate portrait. When you have this shot in the bag, give a very quiet squeak or just whisper his name and, as he opens his eyes, fire the shutter button. Do everything very softly and slowly as you don't want him to jump up and run off.



Action stations

Taking successful action shots of cats can be very difficult. The best time to try these are when they are playing with toys or stalking through the bushes. You will need to be very quick and be able to anticipate your cat's movements. You will also have to adopt a 'stalk and shoot' technique. This entails you following your cat around – at a suitable distance – and being prepared to take plenty of pictures as opportunities arise.

Try to avoid brightly coloured flowers or plants in the background, as these will distract the viewer's eye from the main subject. A good technique to try and use is what I call 'frames within frames'. Basically, you try and photograph your cat within a frame; this could be some leaves or a plant or even a wooden chair. This technique has the effect of focusing the viewpoint on the cat; once you start looking at this type of image it can become quite addictive... so be warned!

There may be occasions when you will have to photograph your cat inside and if you do not have plenty of natural light flooding in from windows or patio doors, you will have to use artificial light such as flash. One problem that may occur is what is known as red eye in humans but is called 'green eye' in cats. This is a phenomenon where the light is reflected from the back of the retina and will be worse if the cat is looking directly at the camera. Most modern cameras with built-in flashguns will have a red eye reduction mode and this can help. If you plan to download your images to a computer you could also correct it using your image manipulation programme, but by far the best method is to try and avoid using flash in the first place unless you can afford the more advanced flashguns or units. Most cats like to sunbathe and if they can find a suitable windowsill or sunny spot on the floor you should have enough light to get some good shots without resorting to using flash.

When taking pictures indoors, try to avoid untidy backgrounds and heavily patterned furniture and curtains – a background of one solid colour is best. Another factor to bear in mind is contrast; avoid photographing a dark cat on a dark background or a light coloured cat on a light background. One popular technique is what is known as 'high key' and it can work really well with white cats. You need to be able to flood an area with lots of light and use a white backdrop the resulting image will be something very different and quite special. This may be beyond the abilities of the amateur photographer, but should your skills develop or you decide to take your cat for a professional sitting it is worth trying or asking for this type of shot.

People take photographs for many reasons but one thing is certain – if you do not keep your camera somewhere it can be easily found and it is ready to use, you will no doubt miss that once-in-a-lifetime photo opportunity. ●

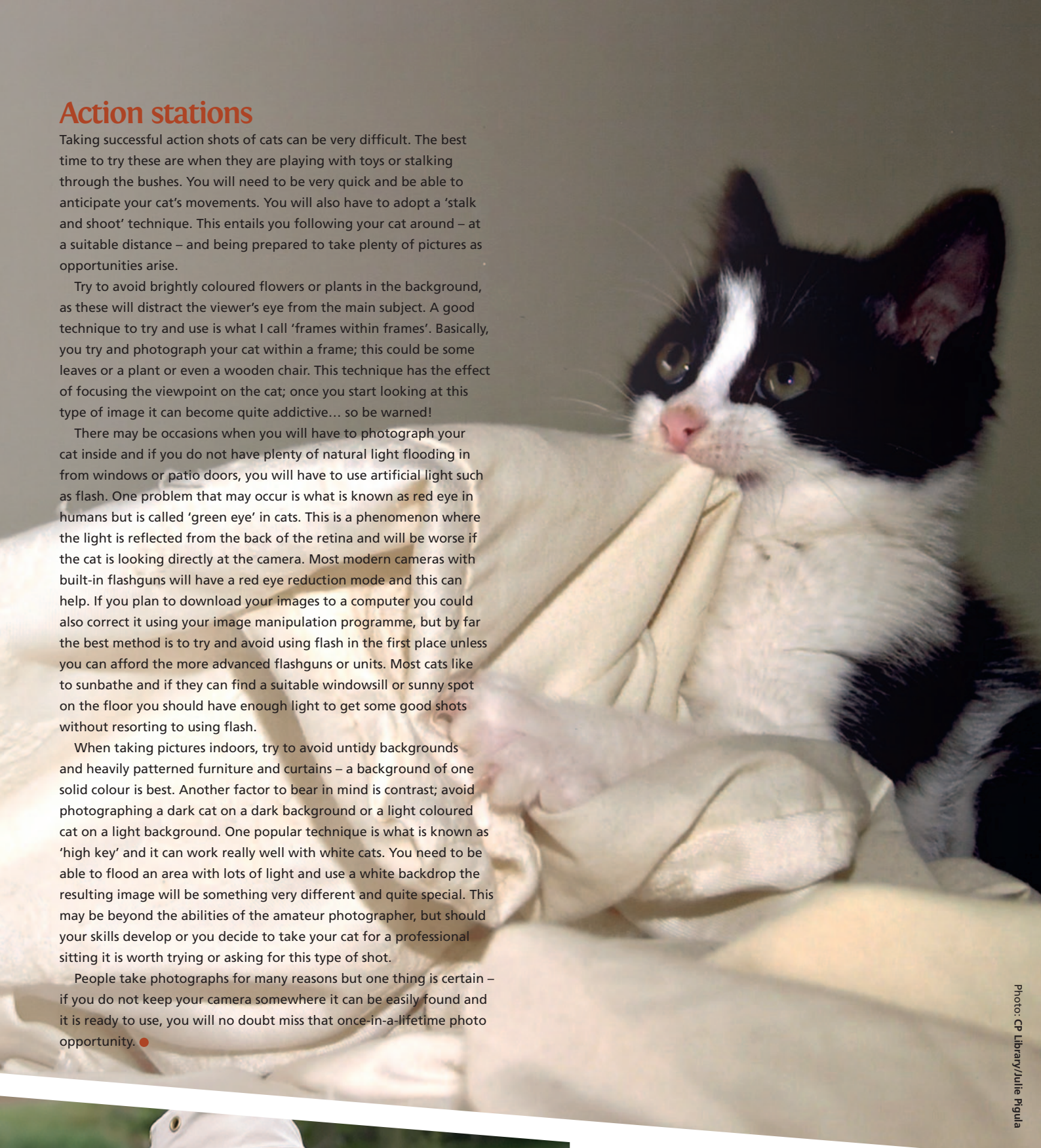


Photo: CP Library/Julie Pigula



About the author

Nick Ridley is one of the country's leading pet photographers. He has been involved in photography for over 25 years and has written a number of books on how to photograph pets. Nick runs courses for those interested in learning more about animal photography. For more information, visit www.nickridley.com. Nick's book, *How to Photograph Pets*, (£19.95) is published by GMC Publications Ltd (www.thegmcgroup.com. Tel: 01273 488 005)

