

pet paradise

Local pros offer advice on 'shooting' pets

By DICK CONKLIN
Keys Sunday contributor

Keys pet owners love to take pictures of their favorite subjects. A few have achieved fame and fortune from their efforts. We talked to four of them, all more than willing to show off their best work and offer some advice for newbie pet photogs.

Mary Beth Martel is a Middle Keys photographer whose photo of her dog Shooter recently scored third place in a national contest, winning \$5,400 for the Marathon animal shelter.

"I took him out on a sandbar in the Content Keys," she says. "I used a simple point and shoot camera, on my butt in the water to be at his eye level, ready for the moment. Little did I know that the photograph would win."

When asked for some tips



Mary Beth Martel's photo of Shooter recently scored third place in a national contest, winning \$5,400 for the Marathon animal shelter.

and techniques on capturing the right pet moment, she rattled off a few of her own prize-winning secrets.

"First, you must have the patience of a saint. Second,

always have your camera handy. Third — shoot, shoot, shoot — after all ... it's digital."

"Don't over-discipline your pet because they will lose their spirit — the sparkle in their eyes — and the photo shoot will no longer be fun."

"Photograph at your pet's eye level. Yup, I've photographed on my belly for the little guys. Sound is the best attention-getter for dogs; for cats it is motion."

She warns against using a flash for indoor photography. Just as pictures of humans often yield the dreaded "red eye" effect, pets often get "green eye."

Martel urges photographers to be flexible. "Let your pets be themselves, after all, that's why you love 'em."

How to finesse felines

One of the more well-known

pet pictures is actually a sequence of three shots — aptly named "Fat Cat Capsizing" — by Key West photographer Richard Watherwax, whose images can be found in galleries and gift shops everywhere.

"I took the photos in 1989," he says. "I was holding the cat in all of the photos, and using an electronic shutter release with the camera on a tripod. But it still took me two rolls of film (70 pictures) to get the three that I wanted. I then retouched myself out of the photos with Farmer's Reducer, which is similar to bleach. This was long before I had a computer or Photoshop."

So now you know the secret of this famous set of images showing a slightly overweight cat toppling over backwards. We asked Watherwax for his best advice on pet photography.

"Patience is a virtue — and a telephoto is helpful. Try to keep the background simple. And if you're using a flash on the camera, move the animal away from the wall so there won't be a heavy shadow on the background."

Watherwax cautions against having another person in the room trying to help you, because the pet will look at the source of the voice, and not at the camera.

"Treats, such as some kind of food, help with dogs, but cats usually won't fall for it. I've done two photographic books and several posters featuring cats, and my 'secret weapon' is a very thin length of fishing line attached to a pole. Cats can see it, and will look at wherever you wave it (most of the time), but it doesn't show

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Photo by RICHARD WATHERWAX

"Fat Cat Capsizing," by Key West photographer Richard Watherwax, was painstakingly done the old-fashioned way, in the pre-Photoshop days.

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pet paradise

Digital cameras, software have revolutionized pet photography

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up in the photo. If it does, Photoshop to the rescue."

"On the other hand, once you have a dog in place and the camera focused, don't make a 'kissing' sound or whistle to attract their attention, because most of the time they'll come running to you."

Bribes can work

Photographer Alan Maltz, who has studios in Key West and Duck Key, was recently commissioned by a company that manufactures accessories for pets.

"I used my own crew to do the modeling," he said. "If I were to title the photo shoot, I would call it 'Trance Temptation.' I got these guys (dogs and cats) to cooperate by dangling a string with chicken tied to it, close enough to capture their attention, but far enough away so they could not snag it. Obviously it worked. After the shoot, we all celebrated with a chicken dinner!"

Composition is key

If you attended the recent Pigeon Key Art Festival, you probably noticed the collection of pet paintings by Deb



A photo from Alan Maltz's photo session that he calls "Trance Temptation."

LaFogg-Docherty. Most of her work begins with a photograph, so the quality of the photo carries through to the painting.

"Whether I'm in the field gathering images for my next wildlife painting, or painting someone's beloved pet from a photograph, the quality of the image being used for reference is extremely important," she says. "While I can take liberties with the photos I use as inspiration for my wildlife paintings, it's an entirely different story when painting pets

from photos."

"Whenever people are submitting photos of their pets as a reference, I always tell them the painting can only be as good as the photo upon which it is based, since in most cases I will never meet the animal."

"If they provide a photo of their pet that was taken with a flash and is a mile away, I will turn down the job. I want something that best represents how the pet actually looks."

"Here is what I look for in a pet photo: Is it in focus? How close was the photo taken? Was a flash used? Is the true color of the pet still there, or is it washed out and flat? Does the photo best represent the pet's personality?"

LaFogg-Docherty says that all of these considerations are very important to the outcome of the portraits, which are done in pastels, acrylics or oils.

"I'm frequently asked how people should photograph an all-white or all-black pet. Wait for an overcast day to take the photo. Or, if you have a nice shade tree, take the photo under it on a sunny day. Since the reflected light of the surroundings brings out more detail than you can imagine, I always tell people not to use flash.

"If you have a black or



A photo and the resulting painting by Deb LaFogg-Docherty.

white cat that doesn't go outside, try taking a photo while they are on the patio or by a window.

"Digital cameras have taken a lot of the guesswork out of photography, and I love it when people e-mail their images to me. That way I can get to work right away and don't have to wait for snail mail."

LaFogg-Docherty is a frequent visitor at the National

Key Deer Refuge, where her images are displayed for sale, as well as featured on the Friends And Volunteers of Refuges t-shirt. She also illustrated a soon-to-be-released children's book featuring the Key Largo woodrat found at the Crocodile Refuge.

"When I'm at one of my favorite wilderness areas, I rely heavily on my Canon to capture magical moments that previously escaped me," she says.

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