

# PHOTOZOOGRAPHY



*John Tashjian,*

*P.O. Box 522, San Marcos, CA 92079-0522, United States of America.*

The dictionary defines *Zoography* as "the description of animals, their forms and habits". By describing an animal with a camera, that is, taking a picture of it, we can have *PhotoZoography* and eliminate a lot of unnecessary words.

In accordance with the purpose of the picture, the time allotted, and the character of the photographer, he may be satisfied to snap off a quick shot of a pet lizard, snake, frog, etc., in its cage showing the frame and clutter behind the back glass or screen. Or he may painstakingly arrange a specimen in a naturalistic setting and make a series of portraits of the entire animal from all relevant angles. Included also, should be precise closeups showing details of scale counts and arrangement, colours, patterns, morphological peculiarities, etc. He should also keep accurate records of the date, time, and place where photographed, photo exposure data, collection data and size of the subject. All of this adds to the value of the picture. Most of us fall somewhere between these two extremes.

Assuming that you are familiar with your camera and the use of your photo equipment, let's turn our attention to the animal to be photographed. First, to complement your herp-in-the-hand, spend some time and

*Masticophis taeniatus taeniatus. When an active animal such as this striped whip snake from Nevada stops in an interesting arrangement of loops, it presents a lucky chance to be grasped immediately by the photographer. This happened at the California Academy of Sciences.*



Photo by J. Tashjian

effort learning something about it. Is it terrestrial, living among fallen leaves, sand, rocks, fallen logs or other substrates? Is it arboreal? Is it usually found on trunks, limbs, twigs or amongst foliage? Is it aquatic, subterranean, etc.? All of this information and more should be considered in choosing backgrounds, foregrounds, and perches. With all of this in mind, plus compromises that circumstances will dictate, the simpler you keep the photo background, the better.

A tray of white sand is the simplest and least distracting background for a terrestrial animal. If an arenicolous (sand-dwelling) lizard looks a little too much like the sand and details do not stand out enough, try posing it on a flat rock. A saxicolous (rock-dwelling) animal will be out of place on sand and should be photographed on a large boulder. Sand will stick to a moist amphibian, turtle or any wet animal and spoil your picture. If you can't get your subject dry, try shooting it on a clean, flat rock or leaves. They can even be moistened with a spray bottle to make an amphibious animal feel more comfortable. Large leaves such as banana, philodendron or something similar can provide a good, solid background for a tropical animal. Any natural material may be used, but, of course, try to match the background to the subject's natural habitat. A nearly patternless, natural substrate of a colour and shade which contrasts with the subject, can help make a good picture.

To photograph an arboreal animal, a mass of foliage can be used as a natural appearing background. Be sure to cover the entire height and width of the picture area and all gaps through which foreign objects in back may be seen. A horizontal, vertical or diagonal branch or log placed a foot or so in front of the leafy background serves as perch for your animal. Separating the perch from the background helps the subject stand out in the picture. It makes the background darker if you are using an artificial light pointed at your subject, and throws the foliage slightly out of focus. This will make the leaves

less identifiable so you can get away with a little "nature-faking". For complete authenticity, background materials would have to originate in your animal's range, habitat and niche. It may be possible to collect these materials for a picture of a local animal but would be difficult for exotics. Besides, the whole truth may not be what you want to show. Some snakes, disregarding the aesthetics of gracious dining, may be found in garbage dumps where their favourite entrée, rats and mice, are abundant. A midden does not make a pleasing picture, so we usually fake it and create a pretty little jungle. Be careful not to overpower the subject with flowers or other bright objects, however, which will only distract from your subject. If you want a picture of a flower, take a picture of a flower - and forget the snake!

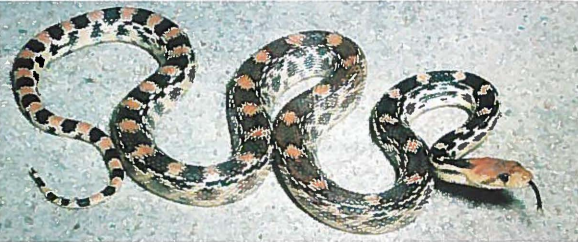
If you are using a large-format portrait camera with a high definition lens, a snake or lizard stretched out full length alongside a meter stick may be appropriate for scientific illustration purposes. This could show dorsal, lateral, or ventral aspects of the subject's form, colour, pattern and scalation. With your little Pentax, however, you usually want a good shot of the critter, with some indication of its habitat. Something that you would like to remember and show to your friends which they can see without having to squint. What you need to do is to pose your beastie in a more concen-

*Chondropython viridis.* The perch of this juvenile green tree python at the Houston Zoo was moved a couple of feet from the background foliage so the subject could be spotlighted by the flash.



Photo by J. Tasbjian

Photo by J. Tasbjian



*Pituophis melanoleucus bimaris.* This gopher snake from Baja California was brought to the photographer's home for a photo session. When placed on a tray of sand it assumed a beautiful pattern of S-curves with little or no prodding. A photographer must consider himself fortunate when something like this happens, and take the picture quickly before the animal decides to move.

trated space so that your picture will show a good overall view of it, as well as, some amount of detail. Composition is quite subjective and reflects the photographer's efforts toward his ideal, modified by the cooperation or contrariness of the subject. A common mistake is making the subject appear too small in the photo. A rule of thumb might be to get close enough so the subject fills at least half of the picture. In positioning a snake for a picture you may have visions of a ribbon placed in graceful S-curves or loops. Of course, the snake will have its own agenda and will often head for parts remote from your carefully set stage. Patience and forbearance are keys to any hope you may have of success at this time. Your critter can be outwaited if you have the time to spare, or outmaneuvered and outwitted with your superior intelligence. You might provide a rock or log for it to rest on, or try covering it with a hide-box until it feels secure enough to settle down. These or a number of other devices, which will be left to your own creativity and imagination, can be used to calm the subject's raging insecurities. It seems that if it is not in a basking mood, a herp often suffers from great anxiety when left exposed. Sometimes a warm spot on the substrate will help to persuade a recalcitrant reptile to tarry a bit and warm its belly, while you aim a few quick shots before it hurries off again. The specimen should be encouraged to assume a natural and relaxed pose as possible. This might be achieved with perhaps a little gent-



le prodding here and there for positioning. It might be wise to take a shot or two of a quiet animal in whatever position it may be, or even some quick closeups, before attempting any prodding. Considering the vagaries of the reptilian mind it may turn out to be your last chance.

A snake can get itself into some elaborate convolutions, and while this may be natural, it may not result in a good shot. If possible, it should be encouraged to face toward the centre of the picture. If this cannot be managed, as is often the case, then position your camera so as to leave more space between the animal's nose and the nearest border than on the opposite side of the picture, if at all possible.

It is desirable, to keep any part of your subject from being overlapped by any other object, including parts of its own anatomy. It is helpful for identification, in some cases, to be able to count the units of the pattern, such as blotches, bands or triads, throughout the entire length of the body and the tail. These and other key characteristics should be shown whenever possible.

Whether the subject is on the ground or on a perch, try not to have its head turned more than 90 degrees away from the camera unless your intent is to show a particular structure or marking on the back of the head. Few things give one's ego a feeling of rejection more than the back of another's head. The front of most models is usually more viewer-friendly than the back. The side of a more or less triangular head makes a good guide for placing the camera, which should be a little forward of an imaginary line perpendicular to the side of the face. This will produce something close to a profile. Moving the camera closer to the front will result in a greater angle, or more of a head-on shot like most people portraits.

In this writer's subjective opinion, a terrestrial animal should be photographed from slightly above, at an angle from which a person would normally observe it. Others have differing opinions on this.

Shots should be made from various angles to show

characters on other parts of the subject's body. In a general portrait, the head should be the centre of interest, and the eye, or a scale or a sharp-edged marking close to the eye makes an ideal point on which to focus. Body colours and patterns are important parts of any picture, but even though they may be eye-catching or even spectacular, without the head (and particularly the eye) in sharp focus, the picture loses a great deal. Good pictures can be made out of doors in natural sunlight by carefully positioning the camera relative to the sun and creeping up close to your subject or using a telephoto lens. Shooting indoors with artificial light such as flash unit makes it easier to standardize illumination on the subject and to minimize distracting shadows. This is done by keeping the light source close to the camera and on the same side of the lens that the animal is facing. It will keep the front of the head bright and separate in from the darker background. With a set of floodlights and a spotlight, you can produce studio-type illumination and preview the lighting on your subject, but this can prove cumbersome. Strong lights should be used with care in order to avoid overheating a delicate animal. All of the accompanying illustrations were made using a single, hand-held electronic flash unit, and all were shot indoors.

Good pictures can also be made shooting through clean glass. To eliminate reflections, treat the glass as though it is a mirror, because it will reflect the flash or any

*Sonora aemula*. A small ground snake from Sonora, Mexico, photographed on plain sand at the San Diego Zoo. In this case, the available sand was not very fine or uniform but this diversity adds to the informality of the substrate.



Photo by J. Tashjian



Photo by J. Tasbjian

*Dispholidus typus.* One of the distinct markings near the eye of this boomslang was used to focus sharply. The result was this flash photograph taken through the glass of a display case at the San Diego Zoo.

other light bouncing off your camera or other bright objects just as a mirror does. Try to place your camera a little above and to one side, rather than directly perpendicular to the glass; then place the flash at a greater angle on the same side of the perpendicular and do not forget about the glass at the back of the terrarium. It will reflect light just as much as the glass in front.

Some of the basic "mechanics" of photozoography have been touched upon here. In the effort to get that "perfect picture", the photographer must not become so involved in this aspect of photography that he neglects the well-being of his subject animal. He may concentrate so intently on getting that shot that he may forget that he is dealing with a frightened and fragile, little life form that can be stressed, possibly to the point of jeopardizing its health (if not its very life). If the animal shows signs of stress put it back in its cage, and let it regain its composure to reduce the possibility of harm. Consider some way to photograph it in its own cage, or use another specimen of the same species. As in other pleasurable interactions, being patient, gentle and considerate will give the greatest satisfaction to both parties.

If you have read this far, you may have reasoned that there are a number of factors to consider in "setting the stage" and manoeuvring your subject and equipment. If you have ever tried taking pictures of your animal, you are abundantly aware that it has theories of

its own on the dimensions of time and space, usually in direct conflict with your aims. Your ability to prevent its escape, to retrieve it carefully when, not if, it succeeds and to endure until it decides that you mean it no harm, and sits quietly for you till you get a shot of it will eventually reward you with a picture and qualify you for a black belt in *Photozoography* and a post-graduated degree as an agile stoic.

*This article has been published before in  
The Vivarium Vol. 2, no. 2, 1989.*