

# You CAN Master the Art of Great Animal Phototography - Simply

Article and photos by Jennifer Clark

**Y**ou no longer need to settle for bad pictures to “show off” your prize animals. By simply following a few basic rules of good photography, you can be proud of the images you create.

Animals, especially alpacas, are challenging to photograph. This is especially true when it comes to taking portraits featuring individual animals, the type most commonly needed for advertising and auction catalogs. The process can be time consuming, physically demanding, and is often frustrating. Achieving successful results requires planning, patience, good weather, the right equipment and knowing how to use it, a practiced eye, luck, and did I mention patience? It's a lot like the game of golf, people either love it or they hate it. Many of the people I know fall into the latter category. And to be fair, most people did not start raising animals so they could practice their photography skills.

It is important to remember that photography is an essential part of the camelid business. The quality of photos used to market them influences how favorably others view the quality of your animals and your business as a whole. Collectively, this holds true for how the outside world views the entire industry. Marketing studies have proven this over and over again. Good advertising starts with good photographs. So, what makes a photograph good?

## What Makes a Photograph Good?

The easiest way to answer this question is to demonstrate what a good photograph isn't. In this article, I will use photos to identify mistakes commonly made, and offer tips and suggestions to help readers get around these obstacles. With practice, I hope these tips and suggestions will make your photographic experience more enjoyable, and the fruits of your labor more satisfying.

Some of the tips are technical - they deal with light and focus and stuff that can save you a lot of trial-and-error time. A few of the tips deal with the artistry and composition of good picture making. Most of the tips are like condensed books - a lot more can be said about them. And, in future articles, I plan to do that.

Most importantly, take it easy! Each time you go out to “shoot” your herd, try to make use of just one or two of these tips. Before long, you will see improvement. It's just a matter of practice and paying attention to the details. Of course, photography, like golf, is not for everyone. That's okay. If you don't want to do it, find someone who does.

## Things to Consider when Photographing Llamas and Alpacas

### 1. Avoid very bright light.

To capture the natural beauty of llamas and alpacas it usually best to photograph them under soft light conditions. This occurs when the sun is low on the horizon (morning and early evening) or, under light to medium cloud cover. You get bright light when the sun is high in a clear sky (middle of the day) and it causes unflattering high contrast conditions. While high contrast light can produce dramatic effects, it tends to render overly sharp features, dark shadows, extreme highlights, and harsh colors.

### 2. Planning and Patience

Allow yourself enough time to do the job right. Groom the animal removing hay, dingle-berries, eye and nose crud, and neck tags. In the field it is important not to rush and to anticipate the behavior of your alpacas. Move slowly to gain their trust. Wait for the right moment before taking the photo. For portraits, or individual pictures, it is important to



*Dispelling the myth that bright sunny days are best for picture taking. Notice how harsh the light is in the photo above and how the highlights are “blown-out.” The photo pictured below is taken in the soft light of cloud cover. Note the absence of sharp features and shadows.*



*Some sunlight is necessary to capture the luster of suri alpacas and llamas.*



isolate the alpaca in the frame. All of this takes time and sensitivity toward the animals.

### 3. Take Control by Photographing Animals on a Halter and Lead

For individual animal body shots it is best to photograph them on a lead-line. This allows the photographer to isolate the animal and position it in a location with optimal lighting and background conditions. Animals photographed on a lead tend to stand more at attention, emphasizing their presence.

By using a thin halter that matches the color of the animal's face, and "painting" out the lead-line, the halter does not detract from the animals natural beauty. In the long run, this method saves time and ensures more satisfying results. Bringing a buddy along helps alpacas and young llamas being photographed stay calm and can save a lot of time. Who really needs a picture of a nervous or upset alpaca?



*Believe it or not, this is the same animal shot one day apart. See how much more presence the llama pictured to the right exhibits on a lead line from the llama above which was shot in the field. Also note, the location is better; the halter does not match and the lead line has not been "painted/airbrushed" out.*

### 4. Location, location, location

Location and light go hand in hand. The color of the animal can make a difference too. The idea is to find a place free of anything in the frame that could distract a person from focusing on the animal. This includes buildings, hay feeders, shadows, vehicles, close fences, people, other animals and poop piles.

Things like nearby trees and large open pastures affect how much light there is to work with. For example, trees absorb light, and wide-open pastures reflect more light. What does an animal's color and light have to do with it? A good rule of



*Note the importance of location in the two photos shown above.*

thumb is to photograph light animals with a dark background and dark animals on a light background. It is especially important to pay attention to make sure ears don't get lost in tree branches.

It is best to find as level a spot as possible. However, if it is hilly be sure to position the animal standing up hill.

### 5. Composition and the "Rule of Thirds"

When framing the photo, pay attention to the camera's frame lines in the view finder so that you do not cut off ears or feet. Composition is the mental part of photography. Put simply, it is arranging the existing elements (earth, sky, alpaca, trees, fences, etc.) into a pleasing snapshot. Some people have an intuitive knack for this, but for the rest of us there are some short-cuts, like the "Rule of Thirds."

This mathematical equation has been used throughout time to create a sense of balance. Example: Include a skyline that includes one third of the picture frame with a landscape taking up two thirds of the frame (or visa versa), and/or, have the alpaca fill a third of the entire frame.



*Above left: The intersection of grass and trees in this photo is approximately 1/3 to 2/3's. The llama occupies about a third of the entire photo and is placed one third of the way up and one third from the right of the photo. Technically, the background in this example is called negative space and the llama is referred to as positive space. Above right: Pictured here, two-thirds of the frame are occupied by the alpaca's head and the eye is about 1/3 of the way down from the top of the photo. Also, note the nicely blurred background and that the alpaca is wearing a halter.*

### 6. Avoid Shooting Down on Animals. Get Eye-to-Eye.

This is a simple and obvious tip, yet one that is often overlooked. Shooting downward, even at a slight angle, makes alpacas appear out of balance and distorts their conformation. It is best to aim your camera at the alpaca's eye level, or squat down and shoot up on the subject. Shooting at an upward angle tends to add a majestic or heroic feeling to the animal being photographed.



*Notice how much more majestic the alpaca pictured on the right appears.*



*See how the subject grabs your attention when the background is blurred, even though there is a building in the background. Having a telephoto lens and a low f/stop help in achieving this effect. Also note the light in the alpaca's eye.*

**7. Blur Backgrounds to Draw Attention to Your Subject**

To blur backgrounds and keep the attention on the alpaca, use a wide aperture, such as f/2-f/4, and focus on the eye of the alpaca. This will give you “depth of field”

and avoids letting the alpaca get lost in the background. To avoid camera shake and out-of-focus images, hold your breath and use a light touch when releasing the shutter.

**8. When Photographing Black Animals, Avoid High Contrast Light.**

The soft light of an overcast day is best for capturing the definition and features of black alpacas. This is especially true of huacayas. As a rule, suris need some sunlight to bring out their luster. So, in sunlight conditions, position yourself so that the sun is behind you (or on the same side of the alpaca as you are), and at a 20-30 degree angle to the alpaca. This will give you the best chance to capture the details of black fleece, and applies to both suri and huacaya types.



*Notice the angle of the shadow of the alpaca shot in the sunlight (above) and compare that same animal shot on an overcast day. Also note, the animal is positioned uphill.*

**9. Use a Flash to Soften Shadows in High Contrast Conditions.**

You can use your flash in the daytime to achieve better results. If all you have is a built in fill-flash, consult your camera manual for the proper distance. On overcast days using a flash will render a beautiful, soft picture. On bright sunny days, a fill-flash can help fill in sharp features and soften shadows.



*Note how warm, bright and appealing the colors are in the early morning and early evening shots pictured here.*

**10. Make Use of the “Golden Hour” to Capture Artistic Quality Photos.**

Photos taken during the Golden Hour (early morning and evening) will be “warmer”, provide more detail and create a more attractive and artistic portrait than you get under harsh light conditions. Just a little experimentation with Golden Hour light will yield a range of favorable results. Try it.

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**About the Author**

*Jennifer invites your feedback and/or suggestions of topics for future writing. Feel free to contact her at [clarkbydesign@earthlink.net](mailto:clarkbydesign@earthlink.net)*

*For shutterbugs inspired to learn more, right away, try “googling” your topic of interest. For example: “photography article lighting” or “Digital camera reviews”, etc. You will find every imaginable photographic topic published on the web.*

