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5 TIPS FOR PHOTOGRAPHING PETS IN COSTUMES

Short Guide
Written by Andrew Darlow



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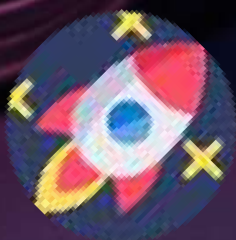
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Every year, millions of people in a number of countries across the globe dress up to celebrate Halloween. And like with so many other family events, pets are often included in the fun. I've photographed quite a few pets wearing costumes over the years, and I've seen images of pets wearing everything from baseball hats to full-body "hot dog" suits, complete with mustard-looking trim. (Of course, Dachshunds are almost always the type of dog chosen for this humorous look!)

In this article, I will cover five tips for taking better photos of pets in costumes. Although Halloween is my main focus, I'll mention other holidays and situations where you might consider photographing pets wearing costumes and/or accessories. Also, many of the tips I cover (especially the lighting tips) are applicable to a wide variety of other situations.

Most of the tips are designed to generate ideas, but Tip #2 covers some technical information based on years of photographing pets, people, flowers, still-life scenes and architecture.

Important Note: Always Keep Pets' Safety in Mind

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It's very important to always think about the safety of the pets you plan to photograph. Some pets will require more supervision than others. Some of the costume-related items to be careful with include:

- Any small items, such as toys or accessories that might be mistaken for food or a toy;
- Any costume that causes a pet to become too warm;
- Any item that restricts a pet's movement, breathing or vision; and
- Any costume that contains sharp or pointed items.

TIP #1

Decide which costume(s) you will purchase or create. Some ideas for what costumes generally work well for pets are:

- A ghost — a white costume can be made from a sheet, fabric, or t-shirt.
- A witch — a small hat can be purchased, and optionally, a black costume can be made from a sheet, other fabric, or t-shirt.
- Jack-O'-Lantern — an orange costume can be made from an orange sheet or other fabric, with cut-out black shapes glued or sewed onto the fabric.
- A Court Jester — Either purchase or make a stylish neckband like the one you see in the photo of the beagle (described in Tip #2). [Here's a link to a DIY option from hgtv.com.](#)
- A "Cool Cat" or "Biker Dog" — With just a pair of sunglasses (or specially-made eyewear like the protective eyewear made by [Doggles](#)), plus a bandana or faux leather jacket, you can transform your canine or feline into a cool dude (or dudette!).



Andrew Darlow

This chihuahua would probably fetch more candy than most if he went trick-or-treating in his super cool costume! His eyewear is made by Doggles, and his jacket was made for dogs, but purchased from a store that specializes in human outerwear. Lighting came from three continuous lights in softboxes on stands, placed side-by-side (camera right), about 10 feet from the subject. The reason was twofold: Multiple lights gives the feeling of multiple windows when you look into the subjects' eyes (when the subject is looking straight ahead); and the extra lighting was needed to avoid blur, even with about 1000w equivalent of Compact Fluorescent Bulbs in each softbox. Two large white reflectors (similar to the 5-in-1 reflector disks pictured in Tip #2) were placed camera left to fill in the shadows.

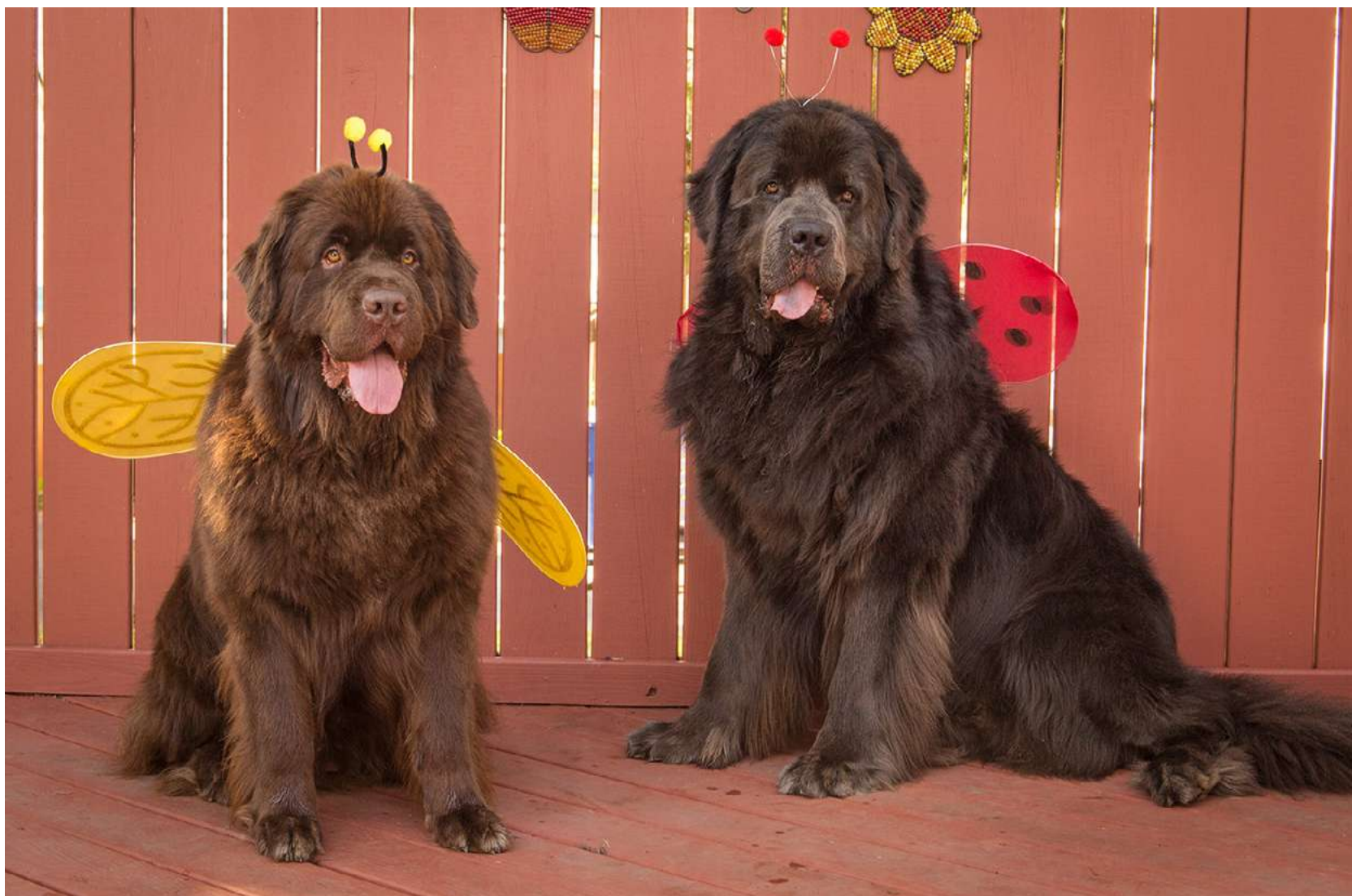
Camera: Canon EOS 5D Mark II

Lens/Focal Length: Canon 24–105mm @ 105mm Aperture: f/5.6

Shutter Speed: 1/100 sec

ISO: 1000

On a related note, [this YouTube video](#) with two Dachshunds dressed up as Minions is so funny that I had to share it. It's a good example of a pretty complex costume, but it does not seem to bother the dogs at all!



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I took this photo of two Newfoundland dogs with a white umbrella and I pointed a shoe-mount flash directly at the dogs through the umbrellas to simulate the look of the daylight that was coming from the left side.

Camera: Canon EOS 6D

Lens/Focal Length: Canon 28-135 IS @ 56mm

Aperture: f/9

Shutter Speed: 1/80 sec

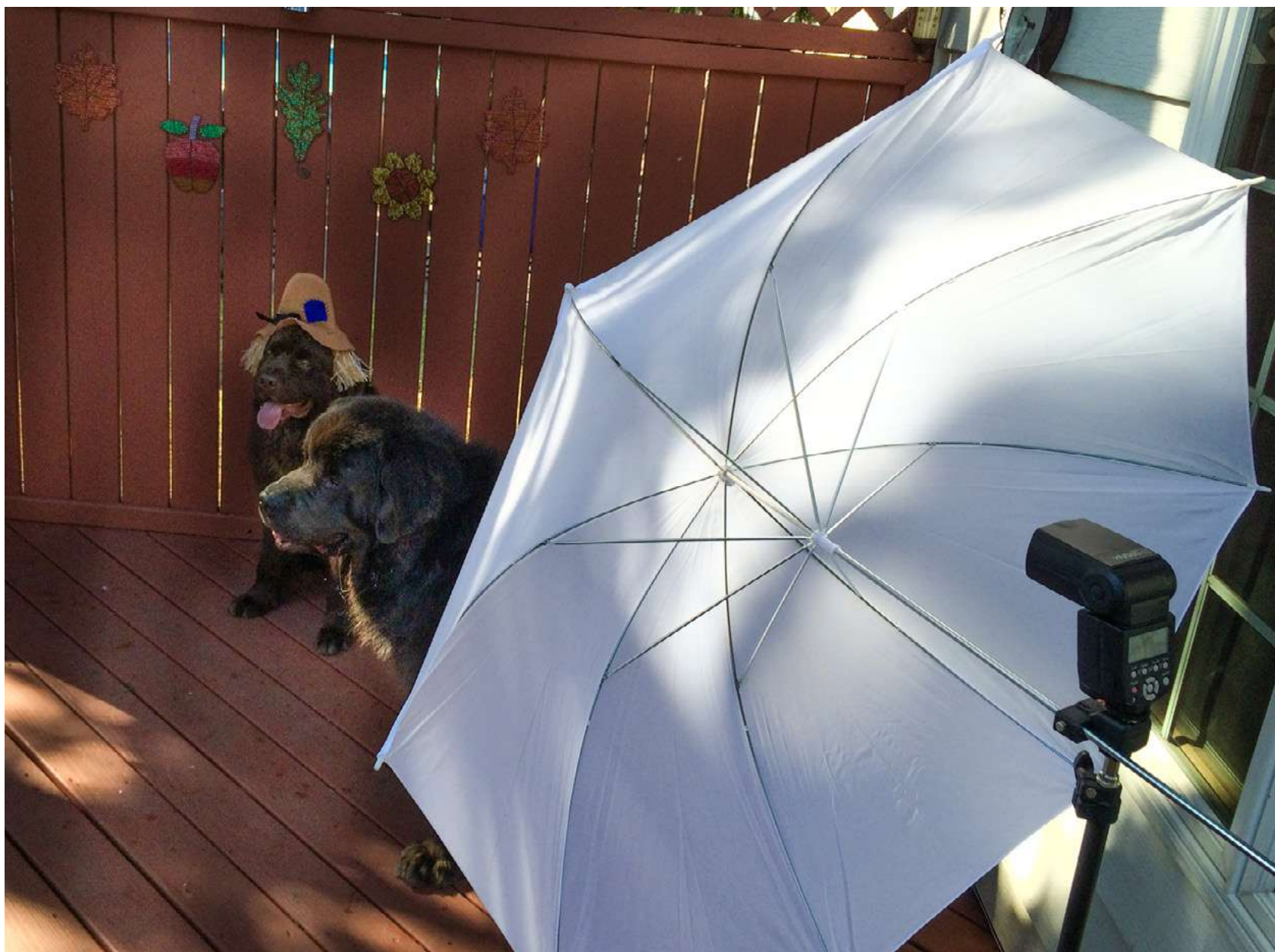
ISO: 640

TIP #2

Get Great Photos with Off-Camera Flash, or Just a Reflector

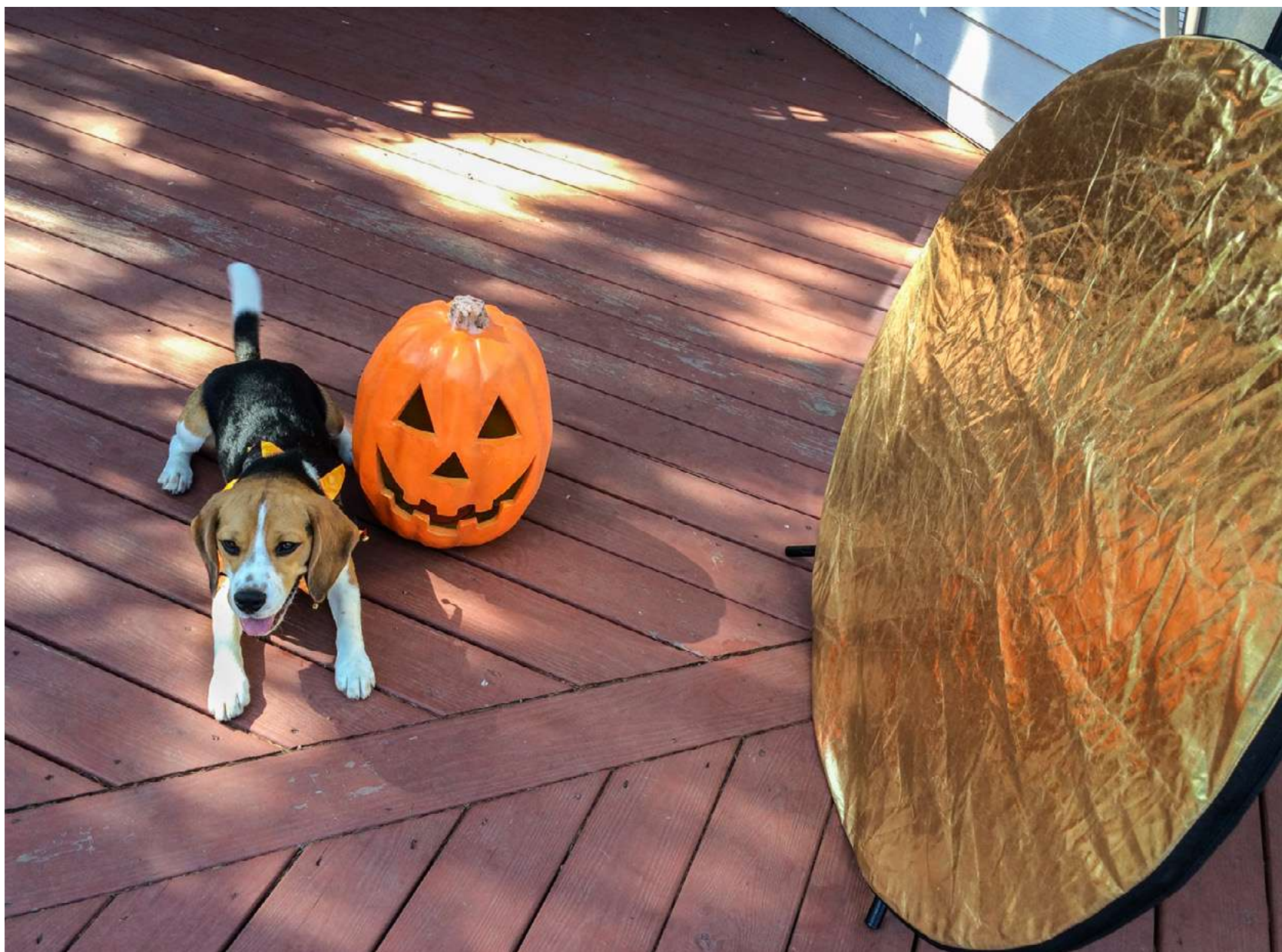
The following two lighting scenarios can be applied to many different situations:

1. **Off-camera flash:** There are countless ways to use an off-camera flash, and because of that, there are many looks you can create. For example, you can use a white umbrella and create a look similar to the sun, or you can use a black umbrella with white or silver reflective material for softer shadows. The most important thing to know is that it's relatively easy and inexpensive to set up a wireless flash system for your camera.



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2. **A white, silver or gold reflector:**
Using one or more fill cards or reflectors can do wonders for your photographs. A fill card helps to direct light onto the subject. Reflectors can be white foam boards, white walls, posters, aluminum foil (for more dramatic effects) or anything else that helps to fill in or add drama to the main light. The sun shades often used to keep cars cool can be excellent fill cards, and some even fold up nicely into a small circle, like more expensive options from photo-related companies.



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I normally use the white covering for the “5-in-1 reflector set” shown here as a compact on-the-go reflector. However, the gold option worked well for the Halloween theme with the Jack-O’-Lantern because it added a warm glow to the scene. To find similar products, just search for a 5-in-1 Circular Collapsible Reflector Kit for many affordable options (Westcott is one brand I’ve used and like a lot). Rectangular options are also available.

If you think of the sun as a light bulb, you can create many effects with natural light. Start by locating the sun in the sky. Then have your subjects turn slightly away from the sun, or find a place without direct sun so that the sun does not make them squint their eyes. Then use reflectors to direct light toward them. It helps to have an assistant hold the reflectors (but a stand or even a chair or wall can do the job as well).

Always be careful outside when using any type of stands, tripods, etc. (especially when they have a reflector attached), because they can easily get blown over by the wind. Sand bags or backpacks can be used on the legs of tripods or light stands to keep things more stable.



Andrew Darlow

For this photo of a beagle wearing a court jester neckband, I reflected back light coming from camera left using the gold “5-in-1 circular reflector” described earlier in the article.

Camera: Canon EOS 6D

Lens/Focal Length: Canon 70-300mm @

110mm Aperture: f/6.3

Shutter Speed: 1/500 sec

ISO: 800



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TIP #3

Photograph Your Pet with Bunny Ears or a special hat for Halloween or Easter

Easter is observed by more than a billion people worldwide. The Easter Bunny is a part of that tradition, and because of that, adjustable bunny ears are sometimes worn by people and pets around Easter. Halloween is another time that bunny ears are commonly worn, though you should not expect them to stay on very long—I haven't met a dog or cat who enjoys wearing them. That being said, the photos you can get of dogs or cats wearing bunny ears is nothing short of hilarious! You can also find other types of "ears" such as antlers and bee antennae.

For this photo of a Doberman Pinscher photographed indoors during a Kennel Club dog show, I asked the dog's owner to put the bunny ears on him (always the best option if you don't know the animal very well). I really

like the expression on his face and how the ears sit on his head. I selectively sharpened his eyes a bit to draw a bit more focus there, however the focal point is clearly on his nose, which I think is interesting. Lighting came from a studio strobe light (flash unit) placed behind a large translucent disk reflector. That produces both a soft light and nice catch lights in the eyes.

Camera: Canon EOS D60

Lens/Focal Length: Canon 16–35mm @ 35mm

Aperture: f/8

Shutter Speed: 1/60 sec

ISO: 200

This type of photo takes patience, so be persistent if you want to get usable images. And if the dog or cat is very uncomfortable with the whole process, I recommend trying something that doesn't require placing anything on the pet's head, such as the neck band option described in Tip #1.



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Photograph Your Family When Watching or Participating in Sporting Events

Pets and team merchandise can be a very funny (and sometimes expensive) combination. You can express your love for your favorite teams by outfitting your dog or cat with shirts, jackets, or other gear specifically made for them (or you may be able to use or alter human clothing slightly to make it fit).

Even more photographically interesting is to have pets match the rest of the family on game day. However, don't just limit the fun to professional team wear. Consider making outfits with the same colors as the Little League baseball or football teams in which your family participates, or buy shirts or sweaters with matching colors. Then hit the field (or backyard) and capture the color-coordinated fun!

TIP #4

I photographed this man and his Chinese Crested at an outdoor dog agility event in which the dog was participating. I asked for his permission and then photographed both of them from a number of different angles (in both horizontal and vertical orientation). I chose this image because I think it captures the special bond between a man and his sports-loving pooch. I added the catch lights you see in the dog's eyes to help give more sparkle and life to the photo. Natural daylight on a clear day provided all of the lighting.

Camera: Canon EOS D60

Lens/Focal Length:

Canon 28–135mm/56mm

Aperture: f/5.6

Shutter Speed: 1/2000 sec

ISO: 200

TIP #5



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Capture Memories of Christmas, Chanukah, or the New Year

The winter holidays of Christmas, Chanukah, and the New Year (summer holidays in the southern hemisphere) are filled with opportunities to take pictures of pets and other family members. Classic holiday sweaters and Santa hats can really make a fashion statement. Sweaters are also ideal for wearing outside during walks in cold weather.

Some photo ideas include:

- Pictures of just the pets (or with other family members), near the fireplace or in front of a Christmas tree or Chanukah candles/lights, all wearing a similar shirt or sweater style.
- A photo of the whole family dressed up and standing in the front of a home decorated for the holidays (day or night).

- Photos taken around your local town or even in front of shopping store displays during the holidays (such as the famous displays at Macy's in New York City) can capture the spirit of the holidays in so many ways.

I photographed this Boston Terrier, Cupid, just before Christmas outside her family's home under some trees at about 1pm. The "Little Red Riding Hood" coat was perfect for Cupid, and it looked as though she and her assistant were ready to give Santa a helping paw or two (or four). Natural daylight shaded by trees provided much of the lighting, and a single diffused off-camera flash provided some fill light. The off-camera flash also provided the catch lights in the subject's eyes.

Camera: Canon EOS D60

Lens/Focal Length:

Canon 28–135mm @ 28mm

Aperture: f/11

Shutter Speed: 1/125 sec

ISO: 200



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About the Author



Andrew Darlow is a photographer, author and digital imaging consultant. He is the former Editorial Director of Digital Imaging Techniques Magazine and the current editor of [ImagingBuffet.com](http://www.imagingbuffet.com), an online imaging magazine. His photography and how-to articles on topics from marketing to fine-art printing have been featured in numerous magazines and websites, including Photo District News, PDN Gear Guide, Popular Photography, Rangefinder, and Studio Photography magazine. For more than 15 years he has taught thousands how to improve their photography, workflow and digital print output at conferences, industry events, and educational institutions, including the PDN PhotoPlus Expo, the Arles Photo Festival (Arles, France) and the International Center of Photography (ICP) in New York. He regularly exhibits his work, and his prints are held in many private collections. He is the author of three award-winning photo-related books and he publishes the [Inkjet & Imaging Tips Newsletter](#), available free to subscribers.

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