Reptile Photography

May 2016

Focus

So, what part of an animal should be in focus? Most of the time, small animals are photographed from the front or side. In these cases, you should ensure the eye is in sharp focus. The rest of the picture can be blurry but still look natural. When the subject's eye is out of focus, but the rest of it is in focus, it can look very unnatural. Keeping the eye in focus generally looks more appealing, as we humans tend to look for an eye in a picture, if it is clear and sharp, we tend to "identify" with it a little more. Eye contact in pictures works wonders, so keep the eyes sharp if nothing else.

Focus

Another example of eyes in focus but not the entire reptile.

How do we focus correctly? With modern digital cameras, you will have, in most cases "autofocus" points. The method I use to get focus just right is as follows:

- Select one autofocus point (see camera manual)
- Aim at feature that needs to be in focus
- Push button halfway down
- Allow camera to achieve focus
- With the button still halfway down, move the camera so that the animal is in the correct position in the frame
- Press button fully to take picture.

Angle

The angle is vital – it can make or break a picture. So what do you want, a shot for identification? If so, you may want to take the photo so it shows both the back and sides of the animal.

Photo for identification

Angle

The angle is vital

The previous photo is not very "personal" as there is no eye contact between the animal and the viewer of the picture.

If you want more of a "feel good" or "arty" image, try experimenting with angles and perspectives. Photographs seem to touch a chord with viewers if the animal looks like it's having some sort of conversation with them. Pictures taken at eye level from the front and slightly to the side have that "conversation" aspect.

Photo for presentation

Lighting

Lighting is also important in a good picture. Light must reach the film or sensor and there are several ways to control this: aperture, shutter speed and ISO. As for the light itself, generally the best is natural light, but you'd want to avoid bright, overhead sunlight in most cases.

Human eyes see many shades of light and dark, but cameras only see a few. What looks like minor shadow to our eyes at midday will likely be interpreted as black by the camera. Dappled light under, say for example a tree can show as pure white "burned out" spots on a photograph where our eyes would see detail.

Photo with natural light

Lighting

There are many ways to soften harsh natural light like using frosted glass or plastic between the sun and the subject (known as "diffusers"), filling in shadows with flash or using reflectors of some type to add light from another angle. Cloudy days produce excellent diffused light without the harsh shadows, as does early morning and late afternoon sun.


Photo with flash fill

Position of subject

Where the subject sits in the picture will have a massive impact. If you have the time, use the viewfinder for its intended purpose and move the view around until you get the position you want.

Dead centre, or "bullseye" in the frame has its moments, though should not be over-used. Typically, use the "bullseye" position when you want to emphasise symmetry. Most other times putting the subject in the dead centre can make a picture very "static."

The other position that works well in many situations and is a great "go-to" idea is to use the "Rule of Thirds." This basically divides the image into three equal horizontal parts.
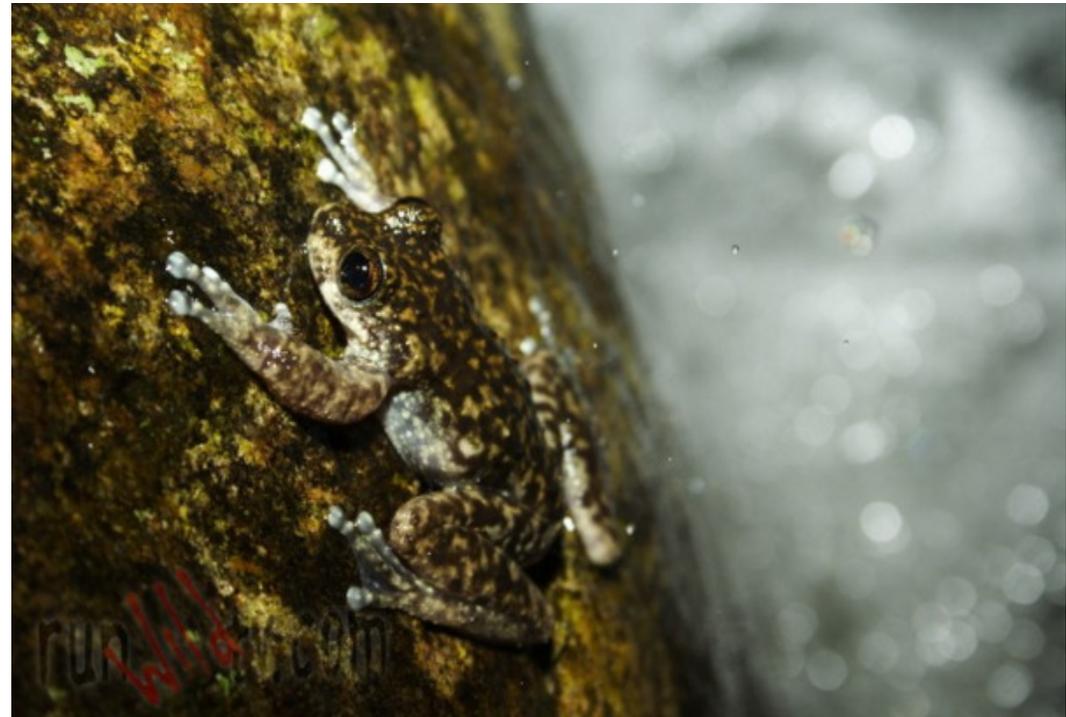
Background

As for choice of backgrounds I would suggest to put subjects in front of an appropriate background. For example if you had a picture of an arid country gecko on a fern leaf, this would not be good. If you want to really emphasise natural environments you cannot do better than photographing subjects in their habitats.

Be careful for distracting background features that may take away the interest from the main subject.