



Field Notes

► by **Andy Rest**, regional manager, American Angus Association

So, you want to take cattle pictures

A good picture is worth a thousand words. That statement is one we've all heard and one that is definitely true in the purebred cattle business. High-quality cattle pictures are a very positive reflection on you and your operation, while poor pictures can do more to destroy your credibility than about anything else. Good cattle pictures don't just happen. They are the result of much planning and preparation.

The camera

Today most people have gone to digital cameras with excellent results. One of the biggest advantages of a digital camera is that you are able to see the results of your efforts right away. Another advantage is the ability to e-mail your final photo to livestock publications or other interested individuals.

Be sure your camera can take photos at a high enough resolution, which in digital photography is measured in megapixels. Generally, the greater the megapixels, the larger you will be able to print your picture (refer to "Digital vs. Film: The debate continues" in the February 2003 *Angus Journal*).

A telephoto lens is a must. Many of today's digital cameras have a telephoto lens built right into them. For those who have interchangeable lenses, I would suggest a lens

that goes from 75 mm to 210 mm. The benefit of this type of lens is that it allows you to have a close-up picture without having to crowd the animal's space.

A powerful flash attachment is another important piece of equipment. It will help provide "fill" light on a sunny day and instant "sunlight" on a cloudy day. It's a must for shooting pictures indoors at livestock shows.

The animal

The animal(s) that you are going to take pictures of must be clean. They should be washed and dried a day or so before you are going to take the pictures. This allows their natural oils to come back into the hair coat.

Depending on the time of year, they may need to be clipped. If so, they should be clipped about three weeks ahead of when you hope to take the picture. By clipping

them several weeks in advance, the hair will have a chance to grow back a bit, avoiding the scalped look. You will want to clip their heads, necks and underbelly, and blend in the shoulder area.

Your position

In general, to take profile shots, you want to be centered at about the middle of the animal. The hind leg closest to the camera should be extended back to level the animal's top line and lengthen the hip. It also allows a bull's testicles or a cow's udder to be easily viewed.

The animal's head should be up, and its ears should be forward. If possible, both ears should be seen. The animal should be standing so both front feet are visible with the front foot closest to the camera slightly ahead of the other front foot.

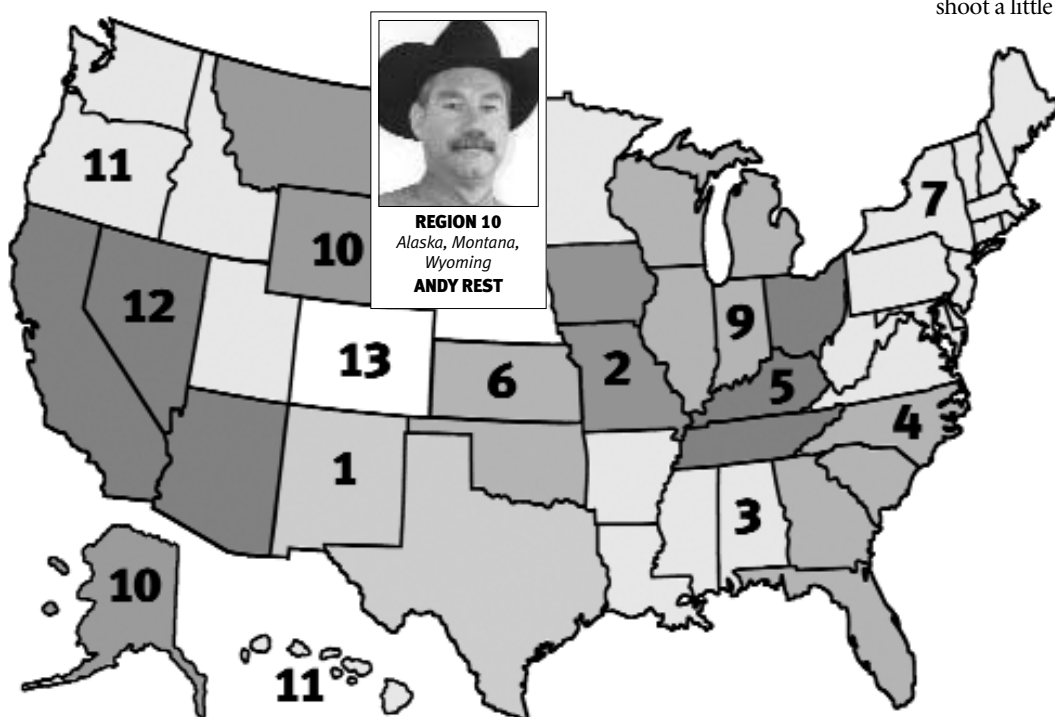
Analyze your animal for its strengths and weaknesses. Position yourself and your camera to highlight strengths and minimize weaknesses. If an animal has lots of muscle, a bolder shoulder or a lot of brisket, consider shooting it from more of a rear angle. If muscle is not the animal's strong suit, but it's very angular and long-necked, consider shooting from more of a forward position.

You want to bend down somewhat and shoot a little upward. I usually work in a kneeling position. You shouldn't be on your stomach unless you are shooting extremely small calves.

Time of day

The best time of day to shoot pictures depends on the time of year. Generally early morning and later in the day are the best. You want to avoid shadows as much as possible. The middle of the day, when the sun is at its highest point, is what you want to avoid because it creates the harshest shadows. The "soft" light of early morning or evening will help create some dynamic pictures.

Early morning or evening is also much cooler, and the



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animal will feel and look much better.

Remember to keep the sun behind you. You should never shoot pictures into the sun.

Picture pen

Picture pens come in all different shapes and sizes. You want them to be large enough so that the animal can be some distance away to make it feel more secure, yet not so far away that you have to chase it over a large area.

I have had good luck building a round pen with 20-30 fourteen-foot panels. I have also used panels to cut a small pasture or trap in half. I have also used panels or people on horseback with an existing fenceline.

If possible you want to build your pen on ground that has a little slope to it. Ideally, you want the animal to stop facing uphill, with its front feet higher than its hind feet. This will strengthen and level its top line. Be sure to mow the grass inside the picture pen.

The biggest thing is not to crowd the animal. Another key factor is to make your picture pen as escape-proof as possible. Once an animal gets out, the chances of getting them back in the pen, staying in the pen and getting a high-quality photo are almost nil. Another trick that has worked

well for me is to tie another animal out of camera range that the individual in the picture pen can see to help settle it down.

Wherever you build your pen, make sure there are no obstacles — such as telephone posts, buildings or large trees — behind it. Ideally, you want lots of blue sky in your background.

Help

Usually, taking pictures is at least a three-person job — one person taking the picture, one ahead of the animal to attract its attention and a third to move the animal into position. At a bare minimum, you need someone ahead of the animal stopping it and attracting its attention. If you try taking the pictures by yourself, chances are you will get pictures of low-headed animals looking directly into the camera.

The person “getting ears” has the most important job. Getting an animal’s attention so it picks its head up and puts its ears forward presents the animal in the best possible manner. The trick is to get its attention.

I have had good luck using a New Year’s Eve noisemaker. I have also had good luck waving a sorting stick with a rag wrapped on the top. Cracking a whip or using a whistle

also works. I know of other photographers who have used taped recordings of dogs barking or calves bawling and have had good results.

Patience

This might be the most important factor for getting good pictures. It is the one thing all good livestock photographers I know have in common. Patience can and will overcome a lot of other shortcomings.

You must go into a photo session in a relaxed manner, ready to go with the flow. Cattle in a picture pen are in a strange environment, and they need time to adapt to their new surroundings.

If you are calm and relaxed and work the cattle in a similar manner, they will pick up on this. If you are nervous or mad, the cattle will sense that, too. Many times I have had to take a deep breath or a short break to regain my composure.

Remember to expect the unexpected, and allow yourself plenty of time. Good luck.



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