



*Michael Snedic* explains the techniques he uses to capture images of **frogs and reptiles**.

# Shooting **Frogs** Reptiles

**P**eople (especially photographers) seem to have a fascination with frogs and reptiles. Unlike most birds and mammals, which tend to move around a lot, frogs and reptiles generally sit in one place, allowing a close-up view. This lack of movement makes for easier photography, but there are a number of mistakes people regularly make when shooting these subjects.

My aim is to offer advice on how you can rectify some of these. I'll also suggest a number of tried and tested photographic techniques that have worked successfully for me in the past.

## **Capturing Frogs**

Australia has quite a number of frog species, with a wide range of colours and sizes. During the wet season in northern states they're present in many backyards across the country. There are a number of organisations which can supply you with tadpoles and give suggestions on how to feed and look after them in your own pond. They also regularly end up on back verandas, on windows or drinking from a dog's bowl – they're the perfect photographic subjects!

Photos of frogs are regularly published in calendars, diaries and books about Australian wildlife, but trying to emulate these shots can lead to disappointments. One of the most common mistakes people make when photographing frogs is to compose the image from above. My recommendation is to get as close as possible to eye level with your subject, even if this means lying on your stomach!

**LEFT** Green Tree Frog in Heliconia. This Green Tree Frog was enjoying clambering all over a Heliconia plant. I had twin flash units set up on light stands in the general direction of the frog and waited for what seemed like an eternity for it to pose in an interesting, photogenic pose. When it grabbed the Heliconia leaf and tried to hoist itself up, backside exposed, I couldn't resist the temptation to take a few photos. Nikon D70, Nikon 105mm 2.8 macro lens, f/22, 1/200s, ISO 200, Nikon SB600 and SB800 flashes with diffusers on.

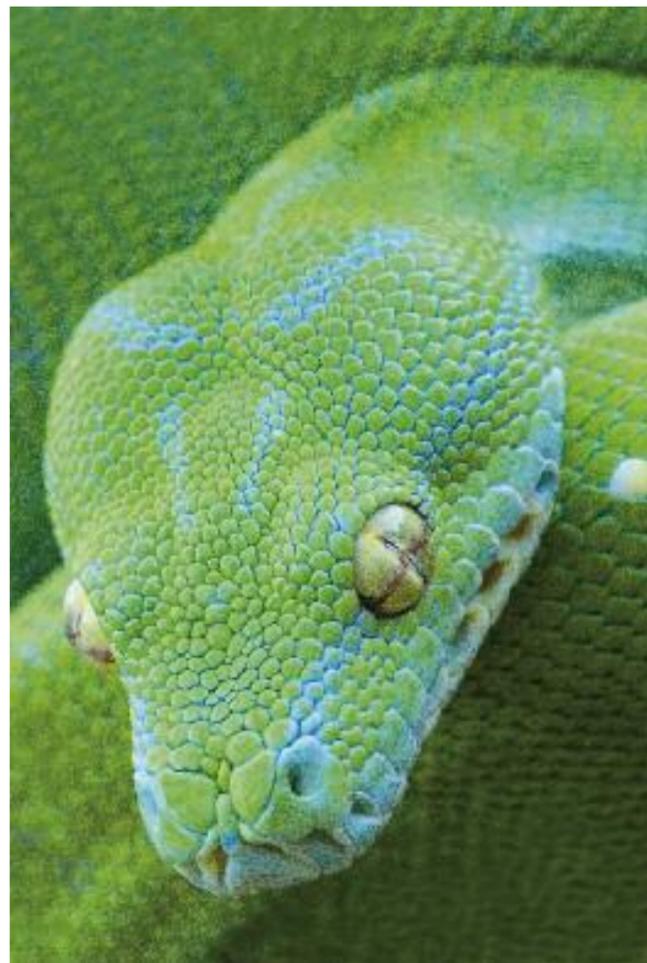
If you prefer natural light to flash, try fitting a tripod when you're photographing a frog. Although most frogs are nocturnal, if it's raining, some will venture out during the day. By attaching your camera to a tripod or placing it securely on the ground, you can stop any camera movement caused by hand holding. If the shutter speed is below 1/60th of a second and the frog you're photographing is perfectly still, a remote or cable release can also be used. Another option is to activate the self-timer. Both these methods will remove any camera shake. When photographing smaller frogs with a macro lens or lens with smaller focal length on an SLR, an aperture such as f/22 or f/32 is advisable. This creates greater depth of field, which gets the whole frog in focus. The smaller the aperture opening, the greater the depth of field, the more the frog will be in focus. If you're photographing a larger frog from a distance and using a telephoto or zoom lens, aperture settings such as f/5.6 or f/8 are acceptable, as more of the frog's body will be in focus.

**Tip:** *If you're out on your own at night and don't have anyone to shine a torch on the frog, a head lamp is great idea. The lamp will help with focusing and will leave your hands free to concentrate on using your camera. I prefer manually focusing on the frog's eye with my SLR, the eye being the most important focal point in any wildlife photo.*

Focus as closely on the eyes of your subject as possible. There are a number of different ways to illuminate a subject. With prosumer film or digital cameras, the in-built flash will need to be activated. Set the camera on aperture priority at the smallest aperture opening available to you, or if the frog is tiny, set it to macro (a flower symbol). Compose your shot and press the shutter – the flash will automatically release the right amount of light. With 35mm or digital SLRs the in-built flash can also be used, but I prefer to use external flash units. When using an external flash on the camera's hotshoe it's best to use the flash's inbuilt diffuser to minimise and diffuse the power of the flash. This produces a

## How To: *Photograph Frogs & Reptiles*

much softer light and therefore a more pleasing, less contrasty image. Another method is a set-up with two or three flash units. If using three flash units I normally place the first and second units facing the subject, one on the left and the other on the right. The third flash is placed above my head and facing down onto the frog. The three flash units help to create even three-dimensional lighting which is free of harsh shadows. Alternatively, a ring or macro flash will offer great results. The flash clips onto the front of your lens and it's easy to move around with this 'portable' lighting system.



### Macro Shooting

Rather than just taking shots of an entire body, why not take a few close-up shots of a creature's eye? Quite a few frogs have intricate patterns in their eyes and composing a close-up shot allows this feature to be accentuated. With SLR cameras a macro lens is by far the best way to get really close. Macro lenses come in a variety of focal lengths and some of the more common focal lengths include 60mm, 105mm or 200mm. The larger the focal length on a macro lens, the further away you can be from your subject yet still focus incredibly closely. Macro lenses are extremely sharp and every minute detail can be captured. Another method is to use extension tubes. These tubes can be added to an existing lens and will allow the lens to focus much closer than normal. They're normally sold in a set of three, each larger than the first and all three can be added on top of each other. As there's no glass in extension tubes there's no loss of image quality. There will, however, be a loss of light so artificial lighting such as flash is recommended. Extensions can also be more cumbersome to operate, and as such they're very much a second option.

Green Tree Python. This Green Tree Python's head is the size of a 10-cent piece. I wanted to show its brilliant colourings and scales. I used natural light for this photo and a tripod to keep the camera and lens perfectly still. After composing, I chose my settings and due to the slow shutter speed, I connected a remote cable release. Nikon D70s, Sigma 180mm macro at 185mm (due to 1.5x conversion with Nikon DSLR), f/18, 1/3 of a second, ISO 200, cable release, tripod.

Red-eyed Green Tree Frogs. This image of male and female Red-eyed Green Tree Frogs was taken one evening in Lamington National Park, Queensland. It had been raining heavily one night and the frogs were calling madly. There were dozens of male frogs amplexing (expanding their throat pouches), but there was one particular male positioned on a rock next to a female. I used a headlamp to shine on the frogs, composed my scene and took a number of handheld shots as the male's throat pouch was expanding. Canon A1 (35mm), approximately f/8 on aperture priority, ISO 100, small flash connected to camera's hotshoe, diffuser on flash.



### Capturing Reptiles

Reptiles include lizards such as skinks, dragons, geckos and monitors as well as crocodiles, turtles and snakes. There are hundreds of different species around Australia and finding them can be quite easy. As with frogs, most reptiles generally remain very still and are consequently an ideal subject for photography. Parks and botanic gardens are often abundant with tame dragons wandering around, while geckos and skinks can be found in many northern backyards. Some households might also have an occasional Carpet Python lurking around the shed or veranda (whatever you do, never photograph a snake if you're not absolutely sure what species it is – it may be venomous). Zoos and wildlife parks are also great places to photograph crocodiles, and snakes can often be photographed through the glass.

Since many lizards can be found lying in the sun, the conditions you'll find them in aren't always conducive to photography. Photographing in the middle of a sunny day will inevitably create photos which are harsh, contrasty, and full of shadows. To avoid these shadows, an external flash unit can be fitted, using the diffuser to soften the harsh lighting. The best time to photograph lizards without the help of flash units is early in the morning or late afternoon, when natural light is at its best.

Try photographing a lizard side-on, with the subject's head facing the camera. Even though it's important to focus on the eyes, the rest of the body needs to be in focus too. If the lizard is positioned in a way that doesn't allow for side-on photography, it may be worth considering a close-up head shot. This can be achieved either by getting closer to your subject or moving in with a zoom or telephoto lens.



Knob-tailed Gecko. My intention was to capture the intricate detail, texture and colour of this beautiful gecko. He remained perfectly still on the ground, so I lay on my stomach in order to get as close to eye level as possible. I manually focused on one eye and took a number of shots using different apertures. Nikon F90X (35mm), Fuji Sensia 100, f16 using aperture priority, Nikon SB29 macro flash, hand held.

### Shooting At Zoos

Zoos and wildlife parks often have crocodiles on display so it's easy to compose a portfolio of different images. You can choose to take a photograph showing only a crocodile's jaws, its entire body or even a group shot if there are a number of animals in one enclosure. I suggest getting as low to the ground as possible when taking photos of crocodiles as the effect is always more natural and pleasing to the eye. If you're after more than a photo of a dormant crocodile or two, it may be worth finding out their feeding times. A shot of a crocodile snapping at some food, jaws agape, can make for a dramatic image.

Whether you're photographing a green tree frog, a gecko or a curled-up carpet python, it's always worth trying to shoot your subject against a natural background. If the frog or reptile is positioned on a log or rock, move around your subject and compose the scene from various different angles. There may be a wall or fence behind the subject from one side, yet by moving around it a fraction the background might appear more natural. When photographing with a lens that has a longer focal length, try a wider aperture opening such as f/2.8, f/4 or f/5.6 to create shallow depth of field, and subsequently blur out the background. The use of this effect means the subject will be in focus while the background is blurred, thus concentrating the viewer's attention on what the photographer considers is important.

For digital cameras try setting the camera at the lowest ISO possible (for film use a lower speed film such as ISO 50 or 100). When using a tripod or artificial lighting, or if the conditions are bright enough, then an ISO of 100 or 200 is good. The lower the ISO, the less grainy or pixelated the image will be. With many reptiles the aim is to capture their scales, skin or eyes as sharply as possible. The higher the ISO setting, the grainier or noisier the image will appear either on screen or as a print.

### Positioning

The position of the frog or reptile you're photographing will depend on whether you choose to shoot in a portrait (vertical) or landscape (horizontal) format. Always look at how the subject is positioned and how it will look in the photo.