

# Making Competitive Nature Images

By Rick Cloran, HonFPSA, GMPSA, HonNEC

Many things go into creating a successful competitive nature image. Some of these will be determined by the type of competition (e.g., club level, international salon, commercial, etc.). However, every competitive nature image must first be a good, that is effective, nature image.

What makes a good nature image?

- Technical execution
  - The primary point of focus must be a key story element.
    - For animate subjects the eye and facial area must be sharp
    - For inanimate subjects the key elements must be sharp
  - Depth of field must be adequate for the story being conveyed.
  - The exposure must be reasonable
    - Detail has to be present and discernable where it needs to be for the story being conveyed.
  - Distracting elements must be minimized.
    - Eliminated where possible
    - Controlled when you can't eliminate them
  - Color should be accurate or at least reasonable.
    - Avoid excessive saturation
    - Watch for color casts, particularly under warm or artificial lighting
- Impact
  - Control the viewer's eye.
    - Make it go where you want it to.
  - Lighting is often more important than technical execution for maximum impact
  - The keys
    - Lighting
    - Exposure
    - Focus
    - Angle of view / perspective
- Interest
  - Builds on impact but is independent of it.
  - You need to keep the viewer involved in the image.
  - Keys to interest
    - Exposure
    - Zone of sharpness (depth of field)
    - Composition
    - Simplicity (minimize distractions)
    - Story

What makes a competitive nature image?

- The consultant's answer – It all depends
  - What is the focus of the competition?
    - Pictorial nature (PSA PID-C) versus nature specific (PSA Nature)
  - What is the type of competition?
    - Club vs interclub vs international vs commercial
  - What is the level of competition?
    - Amateur versus professional
- Pictorial Competitions
  - e.g., PSA PID-C, Council “Pictorial”, Club General or Open
  - You can be very successful with controlled condition images
    - High Jinx, studios, zoos, game farms, etc.
  - Judges generally lean more to pictorial quality than to nature story
  - The Judges are often less well versed in nature
    - They may overlook a significant nature story because they just don't understand what is taking place
  - Keys
    - High impact
    - Very good to excellent technical execution
    - The simpler the better
    - The subject needs to be prominent
- Nature Specific Competitions
  - e.g., PSA – FIAP Nature, Council and Club Nature if following PSA rules
  - Depends much more on the sponsor of the competition and the intent
    - Controlled condition work may be scored down or even prohibited
      - e.g., PSA Wildlife sections, etc.
    - Improper subject identification can cost you in some cases.
      - You need to know more about what you are submitting
    - The focus of the competition and the geographic location may influence selections
      - European competitions prefer more habitat
      - Competitions for general public showings often stay away from graphic predator – prey images particularly if bloody or extremely violent
    - Judges are generally more knowledgeable but may be specialized
      - Try to learn what their area of expertise is
      - Be careful about playing to their strengths
        - The type of images or subjects they shoot will be compared to what they have done even if they are doing it consciously
  - Keys
    - Impact
    - High interest
    - Good to excellent technical execution
    - The stronger the nature story the better

- More habitat rather than tight portraits unless the subject or story is unique
    - What the subject is doing needs to be clear
    - Simplicity always helps
  - A closer look at technical issues
    - What need to be sharp?
      - Critical focus needs to be at or very close to the key story element
      - Depth of field needs to cover the key story elements
      - When working with telephotos, particularly with multipliers, you are always effectively in “selective focus” mode
        - Bracket focus points rather than exposures
        - Use the rules allowing you to blend multiple images for depth of field aka Focus Stacking (e.g. Helicon Focus, Zerene Stacker, and similar software or techniques)
        - Use the rules allowing you to stitch multiple frames when creating panoramas
        - Use the rules allowing you to blend multiple exposures for greater dynamic range (HDR)
          - Just be very careful with saturation, keep it natural
    - How perfect does the exposure need to be?
      - The key story elements must have good detail
        - Whites need to be nearly perfect
          - You may have some small color cast because of lighting or reflections from foliage but it cannot be strong
        - Dark features still need to have good detail
          - Which means you have to either avoid, control, or eliminate (in post processing) bright highlights which will draw the viewer’s eye from the key elements
      - Decide what tones are most important to the picture and try to nail that exposure
        - Highlights, even whites, shouldn’t be on the right edge of the histogram
          - That is a value of 255 which is a detail less white
        - Use tools like Nik Viveza or Shadow/Highlight to open darker values and control highlights
          - The effect cannot be obvious or you have failed
            - The overriding factor is all adjustments must look natural / realistic
    - Composition
      - Can you be too tight?
        - YES!!!!
        - Leave room for the subject
        - Don’t forget about the “virtual feet” when the subject legs and feet don’t show clearly

- Pay attention to classical composition guidelines
      - You still want to control the viewer's eye as it travels through your image
    - If you need to shoot centered and then crop, do it
      - Use a higher mega pixel body to allow for cropping
    - Allow room for the subject to move in the frame
      - The exception is pictorial competitions where tight portraits can be effective
    - If you do crop into a subject make it severe enough to be obviously intentional
  - Backgrounds
    - Use the largest aperture that you can and still hold adequate depth of field
      - If you aren't doing macro work, you rarely need F16 or beyond
      - Remember that super telephoto lenses are actually optimized to be shot wide open or only one stop down
        - If you have a 400 or 500 F4.0, you shouldn't be going past F 11 unless you can verbalize why.
    - Controlling conflicting highlights or isolated dark elements in backgrounds is often more important than controlling the degree of detail
      - The eye will go to an odd tonal element faster than to one that is slightly too sharp or slightly blurred
  - Play to the strengths of your equipment
    - Best autofocus option for that body to get the highest percentage of sharp images
    - Higher ISO speeds to get the shutter speed you need
      - Animate subjects like birds almost always demand 1/500<sup>th</sup> or faster to freeze action
        - Shoot at faster speeds than you think you need to
      - Good focus and depth of field aren't worth anything when the head is blurred
    - Higher megapixel bodies to allow you to avoid tele-extendors
      - Cropping to a tack sharp image is safer than trying to nail one through added glass elements
    - When using a tele-converter stick to the 1.4x
      - Use 2x or stacked converters only after you have a solid shot with just a prime lens or a prime plus 1.4x
    - Remember that mirror slap on older DSLR's is exaggerated as focal length or magnification increases
      - If you have a mirror lock up feature use it
- Competition considerations
  - What are you up against?
    - This will change with the competition

- If it is a common subject (e.g. egret, elk, polar bear, etc.) put it in the first round or two before the judges become “tired” of seeing many of them
  - What makes your image different?
    - Try to capture images that have something that sets them apart from similar images you have seen
    - Unusual or unique images will have both greater impact and greater interest value for the judges
  - How good is the nature story?
    - Portraits, even those taken in the field, should be used more in pictorial competitions
    - The story (what is happening) has to be clear almost immediately
      - Most competitions don’t allow the judges a lot of time to study an image for subtleties
    - Where is the interest?
      - Close your eyes then look at the image. Does your eye go to the story or to some other element?
  - Relative Strengths
    - Most images are a combination of pluses and minuses
    - Try awarding yourself points for the strengths and subtracting points for the weaknesses to see how the image ends up
      - Your starting point is a 9 on a 15 point scale (three 3’s from the judges) or a 21 on a 27 – 30 point scale (3 7’s from the judges)
      - Be very honest in your scoring (that’s the hard part)
    - You’ll need at least an 11 to stand a chance in most competitions
      - The typical international requires 11 or 12 for acceptance
      - HM’s generally need 14’s or 15’s
      - Medals may need perfection unless the image has something unique going for it.
- Final considerations - What is the intent?
  - The use often determines what you can and cannot do, particularly in post processing
    - You may need multiple versions of an image if you want to use the image in multiple venues
      - e.g., if you enter both nature and pictorial competitions you may want a second version of the image with a distraction cloned out for the pictorial entries
  - Pay very close attention to the rules
    - They evolve over time
    - They may change from one competition sponsor to the next
      - Make sure you know what is and is not allowed to avoid a DQ
    - Evidence of human activity can often cost you if not kill you if it is not necessary for the nature story

- “Necessary” means the story does not exist without the element being present
- There is some allowance for what is termed “adaptive behavior”
  - Study the PSA Nature Guide to better understand what is and is not allowed
- Scientific collars and banding are allowed exceptions
- Can you say what you are showing in a single sentence?
  - This is a good exercise to train yourself to simplify.
  - If it isn’t in the sentence, why is it in your image?
- Looking realistic is still imperative!!!!
  - It won’t matter what you are allowed to do to an image if the result doesn’t look natural.