

Making Competitive Nature Images

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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 1/500th 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.