# NECCC
You Be The Judge Miniseries

Episode 1

Nature

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Universal Judging Considerations

- Assessing Images
  - Personal Biases
    - The "ideal" for a judge is to be completely objective in the assessment of any image.
      - The reality is that everyone of us has certain biases for or against certain things that operate subconsciously when we are faced with those things.
    - As a judge, you should complete your assessment / scoring of an image based on the information contained in / quality of that image on a standalone basis.
      - Avoid allowing your personal feelings about a subject (aka bias) to impact the score.
      - Avoid comparing the image to others of the same subject you may have seen in the past, including those you made yourself or that you have seen in another category or class of the current competition.
      - To the extent possible, try to avoid comparing the image to others of the same subject that you may see within the same competition, competition class, or competition category.
    - It is entirely logical to anticipate that our biases will impact or "ranking" of like (equal scoring) images when it comes down to assigning final awards.
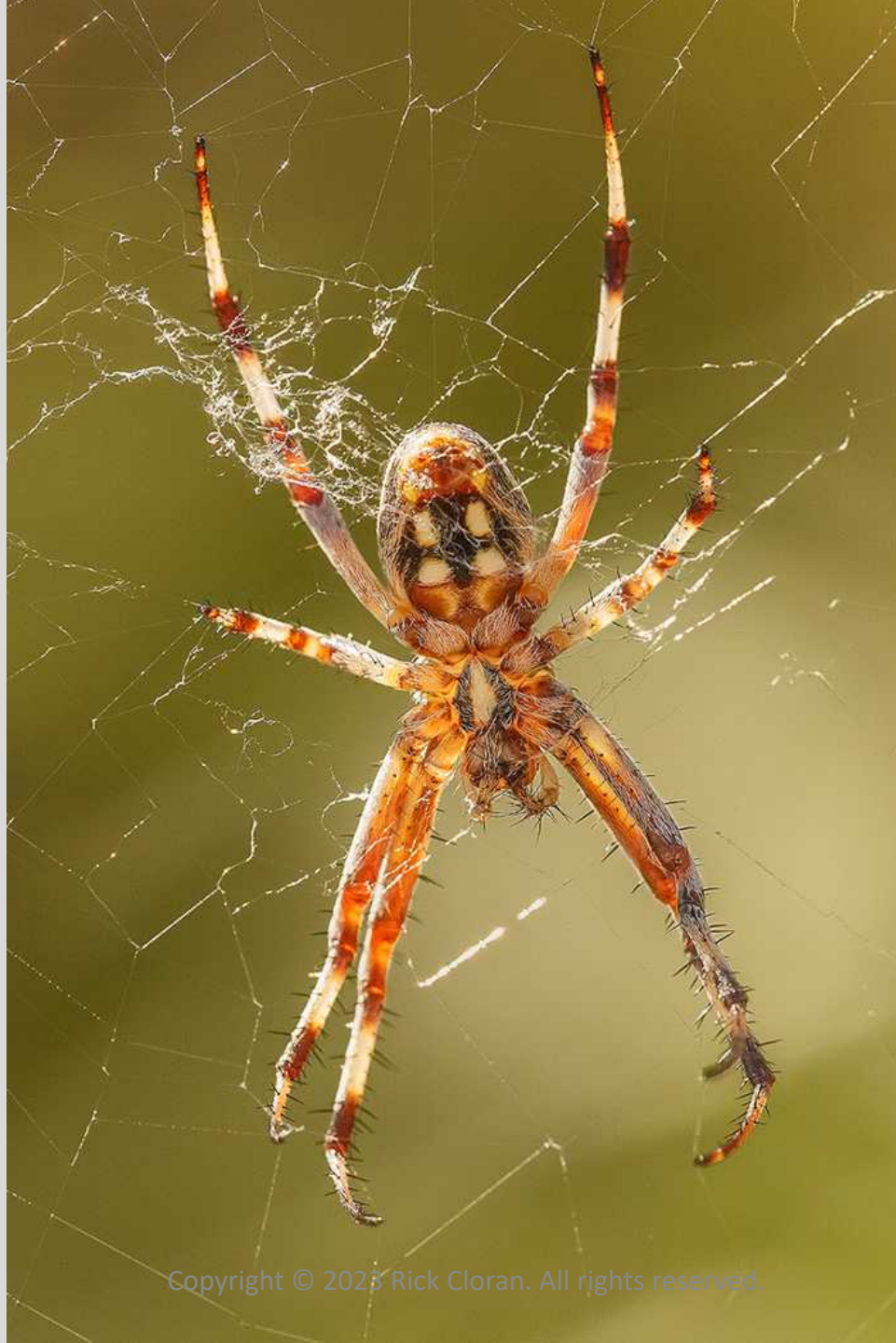
Universal Judging Considerations

- Any number of factors can be cited as relevant to the assessment of an image. In the majority of competition judging situations four factors will dominate the score awarded and the commentary: Impact, Technical Quality, Composition, and Interest. In Nature competitions there is a fifth factor – Nature Story.
  - Impact
    - Does the image command the viewer's (judges') attention?
  - Technical Quality
    - Exposure
      - Is the exposure accurate for the subject and lighting conditions?
      - Are there significant areas where highlights are clipping (without detail) or shadows blocked up?

Universal Judging Considerations

- Factors
  - Technical Quality cont.
    - Focus, Depth of Field, and Sharpness
      - Is the primary point of focus on the main subject?
      - Does the Depth of Field adequately cover the main subject and any other key element?
      - Are the key elements appropriately sharp?
      - Over sharpening is as large a flaw as under sharpening.
      - **For any animate nature subject the eye and facial area should be "tack" sharp**.
  - Composition
    - Does the viewer's eye flow easily to the main subject and then to other key elements?
    - Are there elements (e.g., highlights, odd colors, dark areas, detail, etc.) that pull the viewer's eye away from the main subject, supporting elements, or the "nature story"?

Universal Judging Considerations

- Factors cont.
  - (Viewer) Interest
    - Viewer interest can be summed up as the factor(s) in an image that make an "uninformed" viewer want to stay with the image to study it or to appreciate the emotion or feeling it creates for them.
      - "uninformed" means that the person has no knowledge of what you, as maker, experienced or underwent when making the image and so they do not have your memory of that situation to create a "tie" to the image. The image has to do that on its own.
      - "uninformed" may also mean the viewer does not recognize or understand / have any knowledge of the subject or situation they are seeing in the image.
        - Hence, otherwise excellent images can fail to communicate the "story" to the viewer because of the viewer's lack of knowledge.
          - This typically results in a lower score because the visual association / connection was not formed between the viewer and the subject or situation depicted in the image.

Universal Judging Considerations

- The Judging Process
  - The "ideal" situation is when you, as a judge, have access to the images and are able to make multiple passes through the images as you assess and score them.
    - This gives you the option of a first pass to familiarize yourself with the images, a second pass for an initial scoring, followed by one or more subsequent passes as you convince yourself that the score you assigned is appropriate and rank equal scores for possible awards if images with the same score do not all receive the same award.
  - Many clubs and some interclub and international judgings are effectively "on the spot" situations where you cannot make repeated passes through the images to assign and refine your scores.
    - If at all possible, try to secure a full initial run through of all of the images to at least have a sense of what is there.

Universal Judging Considerations

- The Judging Process cont.
  - When the volume of images to be judged or the time constraints on the judging preclude seeing all of the images before they are judged.
    - It is natural to try to score on a conservative basis waiting for those few "star" images that might be worthy of the higher awards.
      - Doing this may well cost you an opportunity to see a truly excellent image in the award rounds.
    - We recommend that you score high on any image that you feel may be worthy of an award.
      - Worst case you will have some added images to go through and drop when making your final decisions.
    - If the competition has special awards / themes, be sure to hold any images that meet the score criteria for consideration as you go.
      - Worst case you may have more images for a given award, but you will not be hamstrung by having only a few images that you are not entirely satisfied with.

Universal Judging Considerations

- Scoring at the Club Level – One Possible Matrix

Assessment of Image	Score Range 1-15	Score Range 1- 29/30
Scores rarely used unless club dictates for an image that is out of category / disqualified	1-6	1 – 17
Image has significant flaws that limit impact and interest	7	18 – 20
Image has flaws that limit impact and interest	8	21 – 22
Image has reasonable impact and interest but exhibits several flaws	9	23 – 24
Image has good impact and interest and largely solid technical and pictorial quality	10 – 11	25 – 26
Image has good impact and interest and solid to excellent technical and pictorial quality	12 – 13	27 – 28
Image has good impact and interest and excellent technical and pictorial quality	14 - 15	29 – 30

Universal Judging Considerations

- Scoring at the Interclub or Exhibition Level – One Possible Matrix
  - Assumes three judges each scoring in the scoring range shown

Assessment of Image	Score Range 0 – 5	Score Range 1 – 9/10
Scores rarely used unless organization rules dictate use for an image that is out of category / disqualified	0	1 – 4/5
I would be embarrassed if the image were accepted in the competition	1	5 – 6
I prefer that the image not be accepted in the competition	2	6 – 7
I am ambivalent on whether the image should be accepted in the competition	3	7 – 8
I feel the image should definitely be accepted in the competition and possibly be considered for an award	4	8 – 9
I feel strongly that the image should be accepted in the competition and should be considered for an award	5	9 – 10

Universal Judging Considerations

- Commenting on Images
  - As always, a judge should strive to tell the maker / audience what they feel the maker did well in the image and how it could be improved rather than providing a list of negative aspects.
    - Before commenting be sure you are aware of any special club, organization, or competition specific rules for what may or may not be done to an image to qualify for the competition or category you are judging and commenting on.
    - Try to avoid the "I like this" comment as much as possible.
      - It introduces confusion when one "I like this" gets a 9 and another a 13.
      - It doesn't tell the maker or the audience whether the image was well crafted.
      - It doesn't tell the maker the why behind what you found effective or appealing in the image.
    - It is generally more effective if you lead off with the positive aspects of the image before noting areas where you feel the image can be improved.
    - Where negative aspects (weaknesses) are commented on, a judge should try to articulate whether that aspect could have been avoided in capture or have been corrected or at least lessened in post processing.
      - If you are comfortable in post processing and time permits add an idea of how the adjustment might be made.

Key Considerations For Nature Competitions Abiding by the PSA "Rules" for Nature

PSA Statement on Subject Matter

The fundamental rule that must be observed at all times and applies to all sections offered in exhibitions with PSA recognition is that the welfare of living creatures is more important than any photograph. This means that practices such as baiting of subjects with a living creature and removal of birds from nests, for the purpose of obtaining a photograph, are highly unethical, and such photographs are not allowed in any exhibition with PSA recognition. Under no circumstances may a living creature be placed in a situation where it will be killed, injured or stressed for the purpose of obtaining a photograph. Images that show live creatures being fed to captive animals, birds or reptiles are not permitted under any circumstances.

Key Considerations For Nature Competitions Abiding by the PSA "Rules" for Nature

PSA/FIAP Nature Definition

Content Guidelines

•Nature photography records all branches of natural history except anthropology and archaeology. This includes all aspects of the physical world, both animate and inanimate, that have not been made or modified by humans.

•Nature images must convey the truth of the scene that was photographed. A well-informed person should be able to identify the subject of the image and be satisfied that it has been presented honestly and that no unethical practices have been used to control the subject or capture the image. Images that directly or indirectly show any human activity that threatens the life or welfare of a living organism are not allowed.

•The most important part of a Nature image is the nature story it tells. High technical standards are expected and the image must look natural.

•Objects created by humans, and evidence of human activity, are allowed in Nature images only when they are a necessary part of the Nature story.

•Photographs of human-created hybrid plants, cultivated plants, feral animals, domesticated animals, human-created hybrid animals and mounted or preserved zoological specimens are not allowed.

•Images taken with subjects under controlled conditions, such as zoos, are allowed.

•Controlling live subjects by chilling, anaesthetic or any other method of restricting natural movement for the purpose of a photograph is not allowed.

Key Considerations For Nature Competitions Abiding by the PSA "Rules" for Nature

PSA/FIAP Nature Definition

Editing Guidelines

•   Processing or editing must be limited to making the image look as close to the original scene as possible, except that conversion to grayscale monochrome is allowed.

<u>Allowed editing techniques</u>**:**
- Cropping, straightening and perspective correction.
- Removal or correction of elements added by the camera or lens, such as dust spots, noise, chromatic aberration and lens distortion.
- Global and selective adjustments such as brightness, hue, saturation and contrast to restore the appearance of the original scene.
- Complete conversion of color images to grayscale monochrome.
- Blending of multiple images of the same subject and combining them in camera or with software (exposure blending or focus stacking);
- Image stitching – combining multiple images with overlapping fields of view that are taken consecutively (panoramas);

Key Considerations For Nature Competitions Abiding by the PSA "Rules" for Nature

PSA/FIAP Nature Definition

Editing Guidelines (Cont.)

- <u>**Editing techniques that are not allowed:**</u>
- Removing, adding to, moving or changing any part of an image, except for cropping and straightening.
- Adding a vignette during processing.
- Blurring parts of the image during processing to hide elements in the original scene.
- Darkening parts of the image during processing to hide elements in the original scene.
- All conversions other than to complete grayscale monochrome.
- Conversion of parts of an image to monochrome, or partial toning, desaturation or over-saturation of colour.

Nature Judging Considerations

- Factors – One additional factor comes into play in a Nature competition
  - Nature "Story"
    - While it is true that all images of a nature subject show some level of "story" it is more effective to think in terms of how much information about the subject(s) is being conveyed to the viewer.
      - Information can be "descriptive" (physical characteristics) or "behavioral" (how the subject interacts with its environment and other animals).
        - From a story strength perspective, behavioral information is "stronger" than descriptive.
    - When only basic information about a subject is conveyed, the story is deemed weak.
      - This is often the case for images of natural landscapes, weather phenomenon and other situations that do not contain animate subjects or physical characteristics or conditions that are not commonly recorded.
    - When more detailed information about a subject is conveyed, the story is deemed moderate or average.
      - Common situations would be portrait type shots showing the physical characteristics of the subject, environmental portraits where some of the habitat that the subject exists in is also shown, and common behavior in animate subjects such as grooming, solitary flight, landing, etc.

Nature Judging Considerations

- Factors cont.
  - Nature "Story"
    - When significant information about the subject is conveyed to the viewer, the story is deemed to be strong.
      - This level of story value is more often found in images of animate subjects engaged in less common behavior. This can include: mating, rearing of offspring, hunting, territorial display or disputes. The interaction can be between members of the same species or between two or more species.
        - Interaction between two or more species is often deemed the strongest level of story because information about more than one subject / species is being conveyed to the viewer.
      - Botany images can rise to this "strong" level when multiple stages of a plant's life cycle are shown in the image or when the level of interaction between a second species and the plant rises above the more common pollination or food situations.
      - Natural landscapes and weather phenomenon can rise to this level when conditions that are not commonly recorded are shown.
        - e.g., volcanic activity, glacial calving, tornadic activity, etc.

Nature Judging Considerations

- Factors cont.
  - Nature "Story"
    - Having a "strong" nature story is not a guarantee of a good score.
      - The image must successfully communicate the story to the "uninformed" (potentially lacking knowledge of the subject) viewer.
      - The general "rule of thumb" is that the story must be "readily apparent" to the viewer.
        - This means that even without specialized knowledge of the subject, what is taking place (the story) will be understood by the viewer.
  - Shifting emphasis
    - Under the current 2023 Nature Definition, the story value of an image should be weighed more heavily than the pictorial or technical quality.
    - As of late 2022, PSA and the FIAP are in discussion to lower the current emphasis on the nature story as it is felt that images with superior technical and pictorial quality are being passed by because of that emphasis.

Nature Judging Considerations

- ## Assessing Nature Images
  - ### Ability to be an effective judge
    - When asked to judge a nature competition be honest with the requesting party relative to your level of expertise / knowledge of natural history, nature subjects, and the behavior of nature subjects.
      - No one knows everything, but liking birds is not the same as having a knowledge of birds and bird behavior.
      - If you feel you are not generally well versed across a broad spectrum of natural history and subject behaviors, inform the requesting party up front as to your reservations.
        - This is more difficult when nature is a category within a broader competition rather than the focus of the entire competition, but is still worth discussing before accepting the judging request.

Nature Judging Considerations

- Assessing Nature Images
  - Ability to be an effective judge
    - If you are judging nature images, tailor your comments to your level of expertise / knowledge / comfort relative to the subject in the image and the situation depicted.
      - If you are not comfortable making comments relative to how the capture of the image may have been approached differently, limit your comments to the qualities of the image (initial impact, technical quality, pictorial quality).
      - It won't help anyone if you do not understand the signs / signals a given animate subject might be displaying (e.g., ear position on an ungulate) but chose to make a suggestion on how to behave relative to that subject to get a better initial capture.
    - Be sure to review the latest PSA Nature Definition and Guide prior to judging.
      - This will help to ensure that you do not accept / score and image that is in violation of the current "rules".
      - Avoid making recommendations on processing that would violate the current rules.

Nature Judging Considerations

- Assessing Nature Images
  - Under the existing PSA – FIAP Nature Definition and rules, the strength of the nature story in an image should be weighed more heavily than the technical or pictorial quality of the image.
    - Since the understanding / appreciation of the nature story in an image will vary greatly from one judge to the next that stipulation does not always translate into the actual scores assigned in any given competition.
      - Remember that the story must be "readily apparent" to the viewer (judge).
  - A logical approach to assessing nature images would therefore be to rely first on the four traditional keys of: Impact, Technical quality, Composition and Interest. The latter two being what we often refer to as pictorial quality.

Nature Judging Considerations

- Assessing Nature Images cont.
  - Logical approach cont.
    - On a second pass through the images the judge can then evaluate what the nature story is, their assessment of the relative strength of that story, and then use that added information to "rank" images of like score.
      - If you have the luxury of multiple passes, don't be afraid to stop and look something up on the internet or in a guidebook to confirm or improve your understanding of the subject.
    - To be true to the current requirement, a third pass through the images would be used to evaluate whether one of a lower score but with a very strong story, should be elevated to the next higher score.
      - This would also take into consideration whether the weaker images at that higher score were still significantly superior to the image in question.
        - E.g., An image scoring a 7 but with a very strong nature story is considered for possible "promotion". The images at the lower end of the groups receiving scores of 8 are evaluated. If the strength of the story places the 7 at or near the same level, it is upgraded to an 8. If it does not meet the quality if the lower ranked 8's, it is not promoted.

Nature Judging Considerations

- Scoring Nature Images – One Possible Approach

Assessment of Image	10 point scale	Score Range 1- 15
Nature Story (weak to strong)	1 – 5	3 – 8
Technical and Pictorial Quality (weak to strong)	1 – 4	3 – 5
Bonus point for that "something special" quality	1	1 – 2
Average Nature Story (typical portrait) , Average Technical Quality, Average Pictorial Quality, lacking that something special quality	3,2-3,0= 5-6	5,3-4,0 = 8-9
Good Nature Story (some behavioral element),Strong Impact but Average Technical Quality, Good Pictorial quality, has a little of that something extra quality	4,3-4,0-1 = 7 to 9	7,4-5,1 = 12 or 13
Strong Nature Story (strong behavioral element), Strong Impact and Technical Quality, Strong Pictorial Quality, has that something extra quality	5,4,1 = 10	7-8,5,2 = 14 or 15

Nature Judging Considerations

- Commenting on Nature Images
  - Under the current PSA-FIAP Nature definition, one would assume that the initial and principal comments by a judge to begin with the nature story.
    - This is actually not entirely practical because the audience / makers, are not exclusively dedicated to nature photography under PSA-FIAP rules.
  - A suggested approach is along the lines of commenting on general pictorial images.
    - Begin with comments relative to the initial impact the image has on you as viewer.
    - Move next to comments on Technical and Pictorial quality noting where the image held particular interest for you as a viewer.
    - Finish by noting the nature story and explain how you interpreted the strength of the story and how it factored into you final score for the image.

Final Thoughts

- Before accepting a role as a judge for a nature competition run under the current PSA-FIAP rules be comfortable that your knowledge of nature subjects enables you to evaluate the Nature Story shown in the image.
  - Be sure to review the latest PSA nature Definition and rules prior to judging to be familiar with what is and what is not allowed.
    - Reviewing the Nature Photography Judges Guide will add context.
  - If you have the ability to review the images repeatedly, don't be afraid to stop and look something up on the internet or in a guidebook to help with your understanding.
- Start with your assessment of the core image technical and pictorial qualities and then add your assessment of the nature story strength to arrive at a final score.
- Try to begin your comments by acknowledging what the maker did well in the image
  - Limit your comments to the areas you are comfortable in discussing.
  - Avoid making recommendations for corrective action that may violate nature specific rules or might place a maker in danger in the field.

The End