

# Essential criteria for Natural History photography in competitions

by Bill Hall AFIAP DPAGB ABPE

## Definition of Nature and Wildlife Images

*(As defined by FIAP/PAGB, for exhibitions under their auspices)*

“The Nature section of an exhibition is restricted to use of the photographic process to depict observations from all branches of natural history, except Anthropology and Archaeology, in such a manner that a well informed person should be able to identify the subject matter and to certify to honest representation.

The story telling value of a photograph must be weighted more than it's pictorial quality. Human elements shall not be present, unless, on the rare occasion where they enhance the story, they are unobtrusive.

Photographs of artificially produced hybrid plants and animals, mounted specimens, obviously set arrangements, deviations and manipulations that alter the truth of the photographic statement are not permitted, with the exception of detailed macro photographs, and scientific banding on wild animals.”

“Accurate, descriptive titles, rather than pure titles are recommended for nature pictures. Identification of the species being a minimum requirement.”

(An example would be say, “Hippos fighting” being a correct nature title, whereas “Clash of the Titans” for the same image would not be correct in a Nature section). (Cute titles such as “Bonny Baby” should definitely be avoided, in favour of a more realistic “New born fox cub”).

“A **WILDLIFE** picture is defined as showing one or more organisms living free and unrestricted in a natural habitat.”

In my experience these rules are somewhat loosely followed, and can be regarded in effect as guidelines. In particular the definition that story telling aspects be weighted more than pictorial ones are rarely followed, although there is a trend nowadays that rather more is going on in a picture than previously. Birds on a perch are still well represented though, but if that bird is singing, or fending off a rival, or doing anything, so much the better.

Flower and fungi photographers will of course rightly argue that you can wait a long time for something to happen with these subjects, and it will be pictorialism above all else that scores here. Some other points to consider are :-

## Composition.

The positioning of the subject/subjects in the frame, and with relation to the surroundings, is of the utmost importance. If there is more than one of the subjects, they should relate to each other in a balanced way. There are not really any hard and fast rules, but a good composition just looks and feels right, while a poor one feels uncomfortable to view.

Quite often “Less is more”, as a simple image with single subject can work well, as opposed to an overcomplicated one, with a lot of subjects competing for space and attention.

Flowers and fungi can be shown to great advantage in their natural habitat, especially if they are in a favourable setting. Alpine flowers with a mountain back-drop for example, or wide angle shots

of fungus in a sympathetic woodland setting work well, but the composition of the landscape now too becomes just as important.

### **Size and position in frame.**

Related to composition, the subject/subjects should not be too small or too large in the frame, and not too close to an edge or smack in the middle. Certain subjects, such as butterflies, moths, and dragonflies look better if placed on a slight angle, rather than square on.

Flowers can be tilted slightly in a vertical (portrait) framing, rather than starkly upright.

Birds bodies will generally be upright, unless on an angled tree trunk or branch, as will mammals, unless on a hillside, as many Scottish deer are commonly seen for example.

### **Viewpoint.**

Rarely looks right if looking down on the subject, typically a lot of shots are taken like this from Safari vehicles, and the subject looks diminished.

Exceptions would be insects, or ground hugging flowers.

It is generally best to try and photograph birds and mammals from their own level.

Although not always possible, impact can be gained by shooting from below that level.

Birds of prey particularly look more majestic if shot from just slightly below.

### **Setting.**

The surroundings can make or break a picture, too complicated bushes, branches, grasses, or undergrowth can look “fussy” or “busy” for want of a better term. Simple perches or stems are ideal, but should not be too large, solid, or new, or show bright ends where they have been broken off.

An old post or gate is a good perch, or an old weathered branch, for a bird shot. Insects on a single reed or grass stem, butterflies on a softly muted flower, moths on a sympathetic piece of bark are examples of what works well.

### **Backgrounds.**

Some people spend as much time considering the background as the main subject, and it can show in the result. Anything that distracts in the background should be avoided, and should not be unnaturally either too light or too dark, or too even in tone suggesting an artificial backdrop.

In a totally blurred out background such as we see with the big super-telephoto lenses, it does help to have a range of tones to prevent an overall blandness.

### **Technique /Sharpness and Exposure.**

Must be VERY sharp, you should be able to clearly see excellent detail in fur, feather etc.

Top quality lenses, and technique to keep the camera still are essential.

Ideally the subject should be sharp throughout, but a certain degree of fall-off is acceptable.

It is essential to have the maximum sharpness around the head, and particularly the eyes.

Exposure, has to be just right, especially without any burnt out areas. If flash has been used, obvious “overflashing” and unnaturally dark, backgrounds, giving an unnatural feel to the lighting should be avoided.

### **Lighting.**

Great lighting can make the difference between a good picture and a great one.

A lion drinking at a waterhole will look better in early morning or late evening light.

Catchlights in the eye is an old myth, as long as you can see the eye in detail.

A bird with a black eye in a dark head would of course require a catchlight so you can make out where he eye is, and definitely one to look out for, there is a current trend to add catchlights digitally, this can look terrible if not done carefully.

**Condition.**

For a straight portrait, the subjects should be in first class condition, however some poignant pictures have been made of injured or dying subjects, or those caught by a predator.

**Impact.**

Not easy to define, some pictures just grab you immediately.

**Originality.**

A different view, uncommon species, unusual behaviour or new setting will be successful.

**Artistic Merit.**

Again not easy to define, and subjective to the eye of the beholder.

The BBC wildlife photographer of the year has increasingly leaned towards the more artistic ethereal, impressionistic, original image in recent years. After all, when you are looking at 20,000 or so of the world's best nature pictures, a kingfisher on a perch, no matter how good, may not do that well, it has been seen so many times before. A locust in flight, a blur of leopards fighting, backlit in the African morning sun, an Eagle grabbing a blackbird in flight, will do well anywhere, as they are the best of the best. But how do you quantify a fuzzy arctic hare running away from the camera in a snowy waste, where everything, including the hare, is soft and indistinct, or a swirling blur of bramblings leaving their tree roost, where it is difficult to make anything out, yet these are the creative visions that are winning contemporary awards, so keep an open mind, one day it may be you winning that award.

**Bill Hall *AFIAP, DPAGB, BPES***

January 2010