Photo Contest Tips from Your Judges

Entering photo contests can be an excellent way to improve your photography skills, but only if you know why you didn't win. As nature photography judges, we see countless images and each judge develops unique ways of sorting through the contest images, narrowing them down to the final winner or winners.

In my years of judging the FOAR photo contests, those few images with glaring technical errors are immediately eliminated. But many rejections are due to much less obvious criteria - a small technical error, an annoying crooked horizon, a glaring bright specular highlight, a composition that is unbalanced because the subject is smack dab in the center, and many more.

Perhaps more important than why an image is rejected is why an image is kept to the very end of the process, even an image that might not be technically ideal. These images have what some call a "Wow Factor," They are the ones that defy all of the rules and still make it to the final rounds. Photos either have it or they don't, and judges will know it when they see it.

Follow the Rules

The process we follow for a FOAR photo contest starts at submission. Images will be rejected immediately if they do not follow the rules – minimum size, no watermarks, taken during the contest period, etc. Please read and follow the rules.

First Pass

Images with obvious flaws are rejected and the Wow Factor images are identified on the first pass.

Exposure/Light – Severely under or overexposed images will be rejected immediately. Bad lighting conditions such as harsh midday light, while a bit more subtle, will usually eliminate a photo at this stage.

Focus – Your subject should be in focus. For wildlife, preferably the entire subject, but at least one eye should be seen and must be in sharp focus.

Composition – Obvious compositional errors, if distracting, will result in rejection. Ask yourself …

- Do I have a clearly defined subject?
- Can I break the rule of thirds?
- Is my subject large enough in the frame?
- Are there distracting elements in the image?
- Is the horizon straight?
- Is the subject crowding the edge or smack dab in the middle?
- Did I leave room for the bird's "virtual" legs and feet that are unseen in the grass?
- Does the chosen depth of field minimize a distracting background?

Noise – Each image is closely examined for noise. Excessive noise will eliminate an image. However, poorly executed noise reduction that results in loss of detail (mushy feathers, blurry landscape elements, etc.) will also lead to rejection. TIP: While high ISO will increase noise, the worst offender is trying to pull detail out of the shadows of an underexposed image. Noise lurks in those shadows. Be careful with exposure. Compensate in camera when necessary.

Second Pass

Images that make it to this stage are scrutinized more closely for the subtle technical aspects and for use of advanced compositional techniques. A few examples are listed below.

Catch light present
Interesting head angle
Simplicity of composition – minimum distracting elements
Contrast
Compositional balance
Color balance – Is the critter the right color? If not, is it on purpose because of golden light?
Leading lines and s-curves
Vanishing point

The Nitty Gritty

If more than one image makes it through the second pass, the more subjective criteria begin to take over. This is when we look for the creative, original images, the ones that have some special relevance to promote the refuge, or the ones with artistic merit.

There are times when a photo might be technically flawed, but still win the contest because of that subjective Wow Factor. So, don't take anything written here as carved in stone. That less than technically perfect image with the beautiful colors or the intricate pattern or the heartwarming story might just beat out all of those technically superb images.

Most importantly, enjoy your visit to the refuge. Have fun. Think great thoughts. And, share your photographic special moments with us. We love seeing them – all of them!