

Winning the NANPA Showcase Competition

Winning a photo contest is difficult, yet not impossible. A beautiful image is not necessarily the secret to success. You must start with a sharp, well-exposed image to make any headway at all, but to stand out among thousands--or even tens of thousands--of sharp, well-exposed images, your work must have more than pretty going for it.

If you enter the NANPA Showcase competition--by the deadline of September 16--your image goes on a circuitous route.

After all entries are in, a small team of three preliminary judges weeds through all the entries and whittles down some 3,000-4,000 images to about 1,000 semi-finalists. The whittling-down process is fast; all images are viewed in two days. Each is looked at as both a thumbnail and an enlargement. Images are assigned one of three numbers by each judge working independently: 0, 1 or 2. Ones are given to respectable images that are well-exposed and although not a "winner," still is a reasonable second best. Twos are given to extraordinary images; those that really make an impression on the preliminary judges.

Zeros are given to images with obvious flaws--ones that are out of focus, poorly composed, badly lit (under- or over-exposed), have noise or other electronic problems, carry an identifying watermark (judging is anonymous and watermarks prevent anonymity) or show stress or other inappropriate behavior on an animal subject (these are, fortunately, few and far between). The most common problem is exposure, but more and more often it is an obviously poor "Photoshopped" image where the colors appear unnaturally pumped up and the results are unappealing.

When the team has completed scoring, the scores of the three preliminary judges are combined for each image--any image receiving a total of 4, 5 or 6 is immediately passed on. Anything with a total of 0 or 1 is immediately rejected and then the 2s and 3s are reviewed by the preliminary judges in a teleconference. If any judge feels strongly about an image, it is usually passed on to the main judges, unless there's a compelling reason not to--for example, if there's another nearly identical image that two of the three judges feel is better.

What every entrant would like to know is how does an image get a 2 from each preliminary judge and thereby make it into the semifinals? Much depends on the competition, of course, but the following might help you decide what to enter:

Subject matter

In an organization of nature photographers, people tend to shoot similar subjects. The most popular subjects submitted to Showcase each year are birds (particularly herons and egrets) and bears (mostly brown). So for these subjects, an image would have to have a special behavior, scene or lighting to get noticed. Straight portrait shots of these subjects would almost assuredly get bypassed in judging. Less popular categories such as landscapes, flora, underwater or aerials might have a better chance of getting noticed.

Position of subject

Where your main subject is positioned in the image has a great deal to do with its overall appeal. Images where the subject is dead center and small in relation to the overall scene do not usually make for appealing photos. If the subject is facing left or right, it's best if it is facing into the scene, not out of it. Composition is an important element in any photo.

Time of day

Images shot at high noon or when the light is harsh and the contrast too great are usually rejected in favor of those shot early morning, late evening or with other magic light.

New and noteworthy

Judges are always excited by an image they've never seen before, a subject taken in a new way or behavior rarely caught on film. Never-seen subjects require doing the research and then putting yourself in the right place at the right time. Shooting a subject in a new way takes creatively thinking about how you frame the photograph. And, shooting behavior rarely caught on film requires patience and time.

Judging is subjective

Each year, Showcase has a new set of judges for the final selections. While one judge may have judged before, the combination of the three is always a new one. Each judge brings a unique vision to the contest, based on his/her background and exposure to these types of images. This makes the Showcase competition, like most photo contests, unpredictable from year to year. It also gives everyone with a decent image a fair shot at getting noticed the next year if this image made it to the semifinalist status but wasn't a winner (winning entries cannot be resubmitted the following year).

When reviewing these guidelines, please keep in mind that there are exceptions to every one of them, which, if executed well, can make an image compelling enough to score highly.

Good luck with any photo contest you choose to enter. Make sure you understand the rights being asked for when you enter a contest, and consider entering NANPA's 2020 Showcase competition. Remember the deadline: September 16. For details, log in at the NANPA website at <https://www.nanpa.org/members/members.php>.

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