contest secrets
What to Know Before You Enter a Photo
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Winning a photo contest can elevate a nature photographer’s credibility and visibility. It can bring publications, assignments, and clients. But winning isn’t everything.

Contests also present photographers with an opportunity to learn: what makes one image unique in a field of thousands, what moves viewers or resonates with them, and—perhaps frustratingly—no two judges are completely alike.

In this handbook, winners of prestigious nature photography contests offer tips and inspiration, experienced judges explain what drew them to particular photographs, and a nature photographer who is also a retired attorney helps us think critically about the costs of any contest.

The choice is yours, but this much is obvious: You can’t win if you don’t enter.
Getting from NO to yes

by Karen Schuenemann

A few years ago, a friend said to me, “You already have NO.” I asked what he meant. His response has stuck with me ever since, and has served me well.

If you sit back and don’t put in the effort, you already have NO. If you don’t try something that you dream about doing, you already have NO. If you don’t attempt to do anything at all, you already have NO.

When I first began to think about entering photo contests, I wondered why I should even bother. It takes time, money and effort, right? But when I encouraged some talented friends to enter contests, I heard a different objection. I heard, “I don’t have anything special.” Having seen their work, I knew they had some special images. So what did I say that got them to enter the contests? I told them that they already had NO!

I started entering contests, too. One thing that motivates me to enter a few, select contests each year is that I learn so much from the photos that win, and seeing them helps me better understand what makes a great image. From the dazzling beauty of a grand landscape to the small intimate details in a macro image, from the environments in which the images were shot to the animal behaviors they depict, I learn and am inspired.

From reading the contest details, to choosing and preparing my images, to finally hitting the “submit” button, I also learn about my photography. This both excites and moves me forward. It is no longer about winning a contest because, from the start, I am winning! I’m learning how to select and prepare the best images I have for that particular contest.

I’m learning from past winners. I’m improving my understanding of composition. When the contest-winning images are announced, I celebrate, even if none are mine. I often keep the magazines that feature the best images of contests I’ve entered. Those photos continue to inspire me long after the contest ends. I study the craft that went into making the fabulous images.

It is, of course, your decision which contests to enter and which images to select. Be aware that, in order to really figure out if the image is good, you absolutely have to set aside any personal bias or affection for it. Our minds are clouded by what our photos evoke: that great time, special place, magic moment, wonderful person… the list goes on. We need to set those factors aside and focus on the image: Is it exposed properly? Is it well composed? Are there any technical faults?

Beyond the basics is what I refer to as “the Magic.” Does the image convey something special? Does it connect my heart to the natural world? Is there something different and unique about the image? Does it speak for itself?

When I attended the Wildlife Photographer of the Year recognition dinner in London, the man sitting next to me happened to be one of the judges. He remarked that the judges all looked for
something unique about the images that were awarded. Many images look nearly the same, so challenge yourself to photograph your subject in a different way.

Your photographer friends can be a great help in evaluating your images. Ask their opinion and listen to what they say. Show your pictures to your friends or coworkers and ask what they think. Watch their faces and read their responses. This can tell you if your photos are resonating and creating an emotional reaction. What you learn can help you better select and edit your work for contests, and help you take better photos in the future.

Once in a while, we have an image that is transcendent—we simply know that it is a great image the moment we take it. When I was in Bosque del Apache in January 2017, we had gray, overcast, stormy, cloudy weather. Bosque was actually closed our first day there, and half of it remained closed for the entire trip.

I took my workshop participants to Bernardo, about 20 miles down the road, and discovered more Sandhill Cranes than I’d seen in years in Bosque! Even with those dark, menacing skies and frigid air, I knew that there was going to be a liftoff. I told my group to hang in there and wait. Even if we had a flat and dreary sky, it would still be worth it to see the birds ascend. All of a sudden, the sun peeked through the clouds and thousands of Snow Geese and Sandhill Cranes took off. It was a magical experience, and the images that were produced were, likewise, magical.

I entered one of my images from that cold, dreary day in a contest. It was honored by the 2017 Audubon Photography Awards as Professional Photographer Honorable Mention, one of top awards in the prestigious contest. I was, and still am, so honored and humbled. As I prepared to enter the photo in the contest, never in my wildest dreams did I think that I would receive this honor, but I did believe in my image.

Of course, not every prize-worthy photo is going to garner instant fame. Ten years ago, I learned something important about persistence. If you believe in your image, don’t get discouraged if it doesn’t win the Grand Prize, or even get an Honorable Mention. If it really speaks to you, that’s important. Don’t give up on it.

One of my first successful contest entries was an image that I’d submitted to a variety of local and national contests over the preceding two years. I really liked the image, and my photography friends liked it, too. Something about its mood and simplicity spoke to me. On a lark, I decided to enter it in the Los Angeles County Fair. Later, I attended the fair and saw a big ribbon next to it. Initially I thought that the ribbon was for another person’s image. Guess what? It was mine! I was honored with Best of Show for an image that had gone nowhere in previous contests. This illustrates several key takeaways:

1. Believe in your image;
2. A contest is a crapshoot, by which I mean that anything can happen and;
3. If you don’t enter, you already have NO.

Now my motto is “Keep on Shooting for the Stars.” You never know what may happen.

I tell anyone and everyone to put your work out there. Enter at least a few, select contests that reflect your style of photography. Give it a try.

No matter what the judges say, you will be a winner when you overcome your self-doubts, when you learn new techniques, and when you are inspired by other incredible photographs. By pushing the boundaries of your own photography, by processing and preparing your own beautiful image, by pushing yourself to be a better photographer, you’re a winner in every contest that you enter.

And remember, you already have NO!
Photo contest rules may look like the kind of legal gobbledygook we often gloss over, like the Terms of Use for an app, but understanding the rules is critically important. Here’s why.

You were certain that magnificent image would win the contest and get you published. Sadly, it wasn’t selected but, even if it was, that might not be the end of the story. For instance, you might not own it anymore.

Did it occur to you that, by entering your photo in a contest, you might be giving up your right to publish or sell it later? If you don’t know the answer to that question, you haven’t read the contest rules.

Unfortunately, some contest sponsors, as well as others who solicit your images for publication (such as for a “photo of the week” competition), often include in their rules provisions that permit them “in perpetuity” (forever) to use, sell, and distribute your image; to permit others, at their discretion, to do the same; and to do so without further payment to or permission from you. Rules provisions may also include authorizing them to crop or edit your image, and whether or not your credits will appear with the image. A few contest sponsors will even include what I consider to be highly-objectionable provisions which give them exclusive future rights to your image.

While provisions like these may not seem important to the amateur or hobbyist whose main interest is getting recognition for his or her work, it does have an impact on the professional and on the amateur who later becomes a professional. For them, images are potential income and not to be given away lightly.

Why do sponsors include these provisions?

To be fair, not all contests have problematic rules and not all problematic rules are written with nefarious intent. At least some of the expansion of image rights has been motivated by an effort to protect the sponsor and provide it with flexibility in the use of an image in a fast-changing media environment. Some is just an overzealous attempt at covering every conceivable eventuality.

However, contest provisions like those mentioned above permit the sponsors to very quickly amass large photo libraries from which they can sell images to media organizations, travel agencies, airlines, and other clients. This puts sponsors in competition with legitimate photo agencies representing photographers. A contest sponsor may sell contest images in the same markets as you but at lower prices, because it doesn’t have to share the proceeds with you and your agent. If that wasn’t bad enough, it is customary to pay sponsors a fee to enter their contests. Yes, you are paying the sponsor to make a profit from your image, a profit you do not share.
Let’s take a look at some language currently appearing in the contest rules of a well-known, well-respected sponsor:

You retain your rights to your photograph; however, by entering the contest, you grant the (Sponsor, and those authorized by the Sponsor) a royalty-free, world-wide, perpetual, non-exclusive license to publicly display, distribute, reproduce and create derivative works of the entries, in whole or in part, in any media now existing or later developed, for any purpose, including, but not limited to, advertising and promotion of the magazine and its website, exhibition, and commercial products, including but not limited to (Sponsor’s) publications. Any photograph reproduced will include a photographer credit as feasible. The Sponsor will not be required to pay any additional consideration or seek any additional approval in connection with such uses.

That short paragraph tells you the sponsor or anyone it authorizes can use, sell, distribute, or exhibit the image pretty much as sponsor and its designees see fit, in any media (even those not yet invented), forever, and at any place in the world, without additional payment or approval. It is interesting that the rule speaks of additional payments because, unless you are one of the winners, you have received nothing and, in fact, have paid an entry fee to the sponsor.

The paragraph also says that you will get a credit if sponsor decides it is “feasible,” meaning, unless you are a winner, you have no assurance of a credit.

The good news from this paragraph is that sponsor’s use is “non-exclusive” which means you can also sell prints, submit them for use by your agent, and do all the things you might otherwise do with the image without limitation.

It is crucial that the contest rules explicitly state that sponsor’s rights in the image are “non-exclusive” or that you retain all rights in the image. If not, you may have given up all rights to sell, license or otherwise control your image.

An often overlooked and troubling provision in the rules of some contests is this:

By participating in this contest, you release and agree to indemnify and hold harmless Sponsor and its employees, directors, officers, affiliates, agents, judges and advertising and promotional agencies from any and all...
damages, injuries, claims, causes of actions, or losses of any kind resulting from the use of the image and your participation in this contest or receipt or use of any prize.

This provision is a large red flag waving to tell you do not enter this contest! You would be giving the sponsor the right to use the image in any way they choose and, if the sponsor uses the image in a manner that results in them being sued … “Well, not my problem!” says the sponsor. “The photographer indemnified me from all claims arising from the use of the image.” Unfortunately, you paid to enter the contest and now you might have to pay legal fees and judgements too.

Most amateur and hobbyist photographers need not be concerned about giving contest sponsors non-exclusive rights for the use of their images, but they certainly should have second thoughts if it exposes them to a potentially expensive indemnity liability.

The objective of virtually all contests is to showcase images of a particular subject matter, or to illustrate a particular subject matter in support of the sponsor’s business or publication objectives. In those circumstances the only authorization a sponsor really needs is the non-exclusive right to use the image in support of those objectives. And neither the right to use the image in perpetuity, to sell it, use it for other objectives, nor be indemnified for its use is necessary to carry out those objectives.

A good example of a set of rules that meets those sponsor objectives without going overboard are those for NANPA’s Showcase which provide:

NANPA assumes no responsibility for submissions. Winning entrants agree that NANPA has the right to use their photographs, without compensation, in Showcase 20__ on the NANPA website as well as in the journal Expressions. NANPA may also use the images for promoting future Showcases, journals and competitions. The photographer also grants permission to NANPA to use the image(s) in other publications and promotions, unless he/she checks off the appropriate box on the online entry form.

Note that the last sentence of the NANPA rules provides for additional use of the image unless such use is not authorized by the photographer thus giving the photographer control over any use of the image beyond those specifically listed in the rule.

Unfortunately, in the last decade there has been such a significant expansion of the rights sponsors seek to acquire that one might reasonably ask if sponsors are conducting a photo contest or a rights grab.

While the exact language of contest rules may vary from contest to contest, it is important to read all the rules for every contest you consider entering, and make sure you understand them.
Photo contest secrets

by Wendy Shattil

Shortly after I graduated college and moved to Denver, I entered my first photo contest. It was the Kodak International Newspapers Snapshot Awards, known as KINSA, an annual competition that started way back in 1929. Newspapers around the country sponsored regional KINSA contests each year, and I won Colorado’s Grand Prize from the Denver Post in 1972 with a photo of my cat. The image went on to win special merit in Kodak’s International Competition and while the $150 prize was nice, more importantly, it validated my photography.

Years later when I met Bob Rozinski, who became my photographic partner for 36 years as well as my husband, we discovered that he had entered the same Denver Post KINSA contest two years before I did, winning Colorado’s Grand Prize in 1970 with an image of President Ford falling while skiing. The photo was also picked up by Saturday Night Live’s “Weekend Update,” where they described it as Ford campaigning in Wyoming. Sorry, Ford family.

In the early 1980s, National Wildlife magazine’s annual competition run by photo editor John Nuhn—a longtime leader in the NANPA organization—provided another important milestone in our nature photography careers. Bob won first place with Mountain Goats Nose-to-nose, and my Grizzly Cub Discovering Foot ran on the inside cover of the National Wildlife contest issue. A third entry—Sandhill Cranes in Sunrise Fog—caught John’s attention, and he asked to hold it until he found the right place in the magazine. Thirteen years later, it was a two-page spread. Our success in this contest gained us entrance to John’s want list, essentially an editor’s topic list that showed images needed for upcoming stories. This expanded our publishing opportunities well beyond Colorado.

Bob and I entered other contests—sometimes with success, sometimes not. Bob won first place in Nature’s Best, and my Young Red Fox was awarded Grand Prize in BBC’s Wildlife Photographer of the Year. I was the first woman to win it. Sir David Attenborough presented me with the award in London, and my confidence and profile grew exponentially.

Those are a few examples of what photo contests could do for you.

We each have our reasons for photographing nature, and at the foundation, our goal is typically to capture an experience, not enter contests. So if you’re thinking about it for the first time or want to increase your chances in the next contest on your mind, read on.

Reasons to Enter

Perhaps we enter because contests are fun and challenging, or because winning is admittedly one of the most exciting things we can imagine. Sometimes photographers want to see how their work measures up to others, or feel connected to the nature photography community. Some contests benefit causes we believe in, and that’s another good reason to enter.

Exposure and recognition are common reasons to give it a try. Contests put our images in front of audiences. When images are seen, they can influence and impact people, change opinions or make a difference. It isn’t unusual for photographers to be contacted about licensing their images for publication.
or other uses. In a recent NANPA Showcase, a judge requested a particular contest image for a magazine article and it appeared a few months later.

But a contest isn’t worth entering if it’s a rights grab disguised as a contest. Understand what you’re agreeing to, and be sure you’re not relinquishing rights simply by entering. In the extreme, shady contests have licensed images and pocketed the money without compensation or attribution.

How to Succeed
There are three factors under your control when entering a photo contest:

- Follow the rules
- Choose a competitive image
- Gain insight into the theory of judging

Follow the rules precisely. Be aware of what can disqualify entries—perhaps names, watermarks, borders or other identifying marks in the image. Look carefully at images during your upload as well as after, and replace them if necessary. I hate to see one disqualified simply because someone forgot to uncheck ‘watermark’ upon export from Lightroom.

Leave yourself plenty of time to upload entries. There’s always a flurry of submissions near the end of a contest, and it’s best to avoid this. Rushing often leads to mistakes or missing a deadline. Submit images early and reserve the final days for last minute swaps or additions.

Judging Insights
Judges should be seasoned professionals with reputations for evaluating images fairly and objectively, but a score isn’t as clear as golf’s hole in one. What scores higher: simplicity or complexity? Behavior or portrait? Dramatic or subtle light? It’s worth repeating—judging is subjective. That’s why some photos are winners in one contest and come up short in another. I see that reality in every single contest I administer, and I try to remember it with every contest I compete in.

Judges are always excited by an image they’ve never seen before, a common subject taken in an original way, or a behavior rarely captured with a camera. They know that new interpretations require creative thinking, skill, sometimes luck and often trial and error. Most entries don’t fall into the never-seen-before category, but well-captured photos can still reach the highest tiers.

What are the judges looking for? At minimum, cover the basics: an interesting subject in proper focus, good composition, excellent lighting, and competent processing.

A successful contest image begins with a great capture, though these days, processing is also necessary to interpret an image the way you want the viewer to see it. Entries should be free of technical flaws that distract from the impact of the image. Avoid obvious
mistakes. You know what they are. Avoid excessive or improper use of a tool or technique. Judges shouldn’t see a technique before the subject. Keep in mind that less is more, and just because you can use a tool, doesn’t mean you should.

On the other hand, going against the rules of photography might set your image apart if handled proficiently. An exception to a rule can make it stand out. Non-traditional compositions might add attention and interest over more conventional photos. Subtle humor can also be rewarded, and it’s a welcome break for judges to see anything refreshingly different.

You definitely don’t need the most expensive camera to be competitive, nor a conventional camera.

As long as the capture quality is good, even a smartphone or point-and-shoot can capture a winning image in many contests.

Photograph an uncommon subject, or take an unconventional photo of something familiar. Many nature photographers tend to shoot similar subjects and locations. Some are always popular like Alaskan brown bears, birds in flight or night images. Dozens of photo tours going to the same places in Alaska generate a lot of similar brown bear images. Locations in Florida where bird photography is easy, such as the Alligator Farm, generate plenty of lovely portraits of nests and wading birds in breeding plumage. But if you go where many other photographers shoot, create a different look. There will always be a new way to photograph even the most common subject.

Don’t be satisfied with capturing an image like you’ve seen before. You can’t duplicate it anyway, so make it your own. Get up an hour earlier. Stay an hour later. Take a less traveled path. Go out when you may not feel like it. After all, you’ll never know what you missed if you aren’t there! Try a new technique or simply get out of your comfort zone.

Contests vary in whether or not they allow processing beyond traditional photographic tools. Some, like the NANPA Showcase, accept entries with more extreme processing than conventional photography as long as they’re designated Photo Illustration. Read those rules carefully.

When using the Photo Illustration designation, it’s in your interest to state in the caption or title what was done to warrant it. Judges can only go by what they see in the image or read in the supporting info provided by the photographer.

Anticipate judges’ questions such as: if Photo Illustration, why?

Or explain the circumstances of an uncommon aspect, or if an element might be questioned ethically.

For example, live baiting isn’t allowed in Showcase. If a judge sees an entry of a snowy owl flying straight toward the camera, talons extended, the assumption is that mice were set out as bait. Of course you wouldn’t create an image that way, so it’s in your interest to say so in your caption.

Step back from your entry, put yourself in the judges’ place and give them answers to likely questions.

The bar is high in the NANPA Showcase, with many excellent captures competing to be the best, and the sense of accomplishment and prestige are considerable in this members-only competition.

This 2020 NANPA Showcase Top 250 winner by Patricia Bauchman illustrates the point about captions that anticipate judges’ questions. Patricia wrote: “A young pine marten leaps from one tree to another in my direction. I was shooting out of an open window. Silver Gate, Montana”
What the Judges Said...

Red-winged Blackbird, 2020 Showcase Judges’ Choice in Birds, © Stan Bysshe

“A routine situation of a calling blackbird is made into a winning image because the photographer was in the right position to capture the bird’s breath with the morning back-light. When was the last time you saw a bird’s breath?” — George Lepp

Icebergs on Diamond Beach, 2020 Showcase Judges’ Choice in Scapes, © Don Larkin

“Beautiful light combines with the right shutter speed for a feeling of motion in the waves yet with clarity in both the ice and the foreground.” — Tom & Pat Leeson

Prairie Dogs Threatened by Development, 2020 Showcase Judges’ Choice in Conservation, © Emma Balunek

“The clear juxtaposition between the homes of the prairie dogs and humans illustrates the ongoing crisis of habitat destruction for wildlife.” — Amy Gulick
About the Authors

Bernard P. Friel

Bernard Friel is a Charter and Life Member of NANPA. He served on NANPA’s Board of Directors, as President and Treasurer, as well as NANPA Foundation’s Board. He is a retired lawyer, having practiced with the St. Paul firm of Briggs and Morgan P.A. (now Taft) for nearly 60 years.

Bernie’s wildlife and landscape images have been widely published in magazines, books, websites and calendars including two covers of National Wildlife.

In pursuit of images, Bernie has canoed the Canadian wilderness, backpacked and rafted the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, hiked countless wilderness areas of the American southwest and Alaska, hiked jungles of Papua New Guinea, led a private raft trip down the Grand Canyon, sailed the South Pacific, Indian Ocean and North Atlantic on a small sailboat, climbed Mounts Rainier and Kilimanjaro, and safaried the Serengeti.

The survivor of a heart attack at age 38, Bernie has been a motivational speaker for the American Heart Association for 50 years.

Karen Schuenemann

Karen Schuenemann is a nature and wildlife photographer frequently found exploring the parks and wetlands of Southern California.

She received a Highly Commended Award-Bird Behavior in Wildlife Photographer of the Year sponsored by the London Natural History Museum in 2018 and Professional Category Honorable Mention in 2017 in the National Audubon Contest, one of the top seven awards.

Her work was exhibited in Davos, Switzerland, at the World Economic Summit in 2019 and has hung in the London Natural History Museum, San Diego Natural History Museum, The G2 Gallery, Palos Verdes Art Center and Armenia Conservation Show. She has been published in numerous magazines.

Learn more about Karen at wildernessatheart.com.

Wendy Shattil

Wendy Shattil has been photographing wildlife for 30 years, driven by her desire to produce thoughtful images that can influence people to care for the world we live in.

She was the first woman awarded Grand Prize in the prestigious BBC Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition. She has produced 17 books and numerous magazine articles, and has led nature photography trips worldwide—many with her long-time partner, the late Bob Rozinski.

Learn more about Wendy at dancingpelican.com.
More resources

**Contest Secrets: What to Know Before You Submit a Photo**

Written by conservation photographers for others interested in the field, this handbook explains important concepts and offers insider tips:

- Get inspired
- Think like a conservationist
- Work with scientists
- Use photography in storytelling
- Adhere to nature photography ethics
- and more

**NANPA Expressions**

Learn more about contest-winning images by studying the winners of the NANPA Showcase, an annual photo competition recognizing the Top 250 nature photography images created by our members. Winning images and nature photography-related articles are published each year in *Expressions*, a full-color journal available digitally and in print.

**Make It Work: The Business of Nature Photography**

Can you make a living as a nature photographer? Get the hard facts, tips, insight, and inspiration you need from five highly accomplished nature photography pros. Topics covered include:

- Differences between full-time and part-time pro
- How to earn an income
- How to get published
- What you should not send a photo editor
- What skills you need to succeed
- Pros and cons of leading workshops and tours
- What the day-to-day grind really looks like
- and more

NANPA members can access current and past digital issues of *Expressions* in the Members Area of nanpa.org at no charge.

Members or guests can purchase printed copies of *Expressions* from 2011 to the present at MagCloud.
NANPA members share a passion for nature photography and a desire to shine light on what’s beautiful, threatened, and/or unique in the natural world. They believe in the power of storytelling to effect change.

Whether you’re a professional nature photographer, hobbyist, vendor, publisher, conservationist, or other nature photography enthusiast, you’ll find inspiration, resources, and opportunities at www.nanpa.org.