

Notes for the contest website --- by Bill Smith

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Judge's comments

What a great selection of images to have the privilege to study, judge and select winners. It is super to see folks out & about; I'd like to be at many of these places. None of the categories were easy to pick winners. The 5 criteria I graded images with each had a 2-10 scale with different weights per category. Excel did all the math and made it easy to sort by point total. The adult-wildlife category was particularly close. All-in-all I had a very enjoyable time and definitely learned some things in the process. Many thanks to all who entered.

Audubon's Hidden Agenda

One very big reason why this contest is held is what I call the Audubon's hidden agenda. It is simply to get folks outdoors, enjoying Nature, observing Nature, and by way of photography sharing Nature. The act of photography makes one slow down, spend time & observe.

Even if the contest got your interest up and you went out & got some shots but didn't enter the contest, this hidden agenda was successful. Gotcha!

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How our 2013 judge judges ... from the Judge

Initially, something must grab you to look further. I assess this initial grab with less weight than subject & composition but about as much weight as the background does in supporting the subject.

Impact / Distant Impressions

You enter a gallery / coffeehouse and something draws you to particular photos/artworks first -- that is impact & distant impressions. ***If you can't get the viewer's attention, they won't look deeper into your image.*** Shapes, lines, color, and originality draw one in. I generally include exposure here too. A loud image isn't what I mean; such an image may catch the eye but in a flash you may think "Ow" and turn away. Composition is evident after a few seconds and takes over to bring the viewer in.

The Subject Treatment/ Composition

This is given the most weight in scoring. ***Once you get the viewer's attention, now you have to keep them captive.*** Folks view images that have a riveting subject whose surroundings support the subject, The elements of good composition come into play here: balance, use of space, cropping, camera vantage point and so on. How light is used and created/enhanced in the darkroom can be a big factor. Crop to eliminate what doesn't support/add to the subject; but don't get too tight as the subject needs to breathe. Think what makes you view an image again & again.

Then in decreasing weight I factor in the following.

The Background

How one handles & uses the background can make or break many images. It must support the subject yet not attract attention away for long. Many wildlife shots put the subject in their environment and they interact with it. Depth-of-field, framing & novel use all play a role in the background. Moving a bit up/down & left/right can hide an obnoxious bright or colorful background spot behind the subject or other image element. Folks do look at the background but do return to the subject in better images. If the background is more interesting ... then what is the subject. Pay attention to the background!

Image Focus

Focus is one of the drivers that directs the viewer's attention. In wildlife, landscapes and flower photography IF it should be sharp - it better be sharp. Generally if a face is prominent, the eyes better be sharp as they have

so much emotional content. Moody images often have a lot of softness but something is sharp compared to the rest.

I look for the proper focus point and appropriate sharpness and often sharpening functions are run over all an image when just sharpening parts of an image is better. If the focus is off, the viewers wonders why they are drawn to these sharp elements when they think they should be looking elsewhere. Likewise selective softening & blurring areas can help direct attention, but too much and it can look fake.

Macro shots are particularly difficult as where one puts the focus. Auto-focus is often a disadvantage as one almost always wants to manually tweak the focus to other than the auto-focus choice.

Digital Darkroom Processing

Nowadays, it is going to take an outstanding image right out of the camera (in subject, composition, cropping) to hold its own against a lesser composition that has been adjusted to grab and direct a viewer's attention.

One is not just competing in a contest by composition alone. The digital darkroom can truly enhance an image not only to draw in the viewer but to keep them looking. Overall exposure, contrast, color snap as well as local control of those all enhance the image. Today, one's ability to use these tools is part of the competition. Back in the wet darkroom days, paper choices allowed overall color punch choices and local burning/dodging were about it to darken/lighten areas to draw attention to where the photographer wants the viewer to go. So much more is available now, but don't go overboard on it!

Filters & HDR

Whatever digital darkroom techniques one uses, they MUST enhance & support the subject and NOT become the subject, at least in this kind of contest. DeviantART runs contests where graphic design & effects are much more a part; Nature/wildlife contests like this one expect a rendition closer to reality. HDR can be run to enhance local contrast & color vibrance yet maintain a quite realistic look & appeal.

Looking at the EXIF info that is embedded in the images, over a third of the photographers used FULL Photoshop CS4-6 and half more used later versions of Elements, Lightroom & Aperture. While the potential for image tweaking is there, not all took advantage of those tools.

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Previewer - the #1 way to improve compositions

Cropping is such a big way to improve images, but the crop tool in all digital darkroom programs involves so much mousing around that folks don't use it as much as they should, especially during the image evaluation stage. It is time-consuming and, frankly, a pain & a lot of work.

So here's one thing I use that puts the crop tool to shame: a good old analog thing I call a previewer. It is simply a piece of card stock, mat board or flat cardboard with a rectangular hole cut in it. Size the hole to proportions you normally use. I have one for standard rectangles and another for panoramas. I can hold them together so one edge trims the larger hole down.

I think it is the single #1 way to improve your composition. It acts as a separator from what your subject is and its surroundings - just like the mats & frames do for hanging artwork.

When viewing images, zoom in/out by holding it closer or farther from the monitor. You can flip from horizontal to vertical and rotate so much faster than the crop tool. Being between you and the monitor it seems to separate the selected part of the image from the original full image so much better. I used it on almost every image in this contest.

Use it outdoors

Outdoors you can use it when shooting landscapes, streams and such to help you find better vantage points. By not holding the camera you are less prone to shoot too quickly and so you look more.

Easier cropping on-screen

Use a previewer!

Pocket-size, cut out of mat board

Super quick to rotate

Zoom by moving it closer/farther from the eye

Doesn't hide the image like the cropping tool

Being between you & the screen it makes a 3-D look as if the image is in a frame

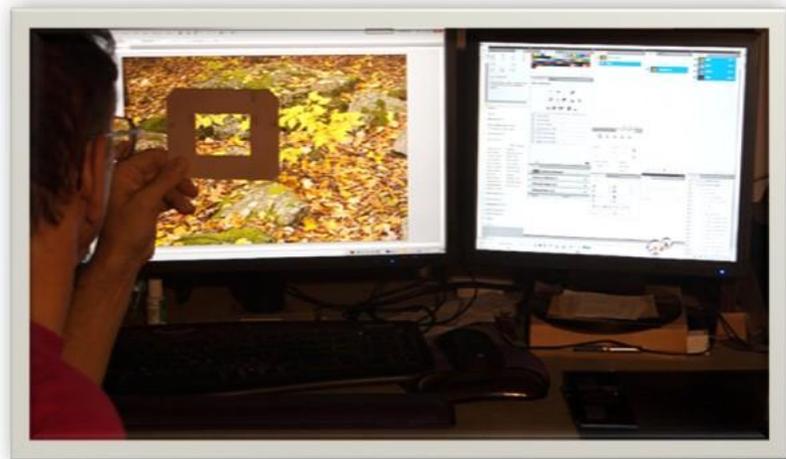
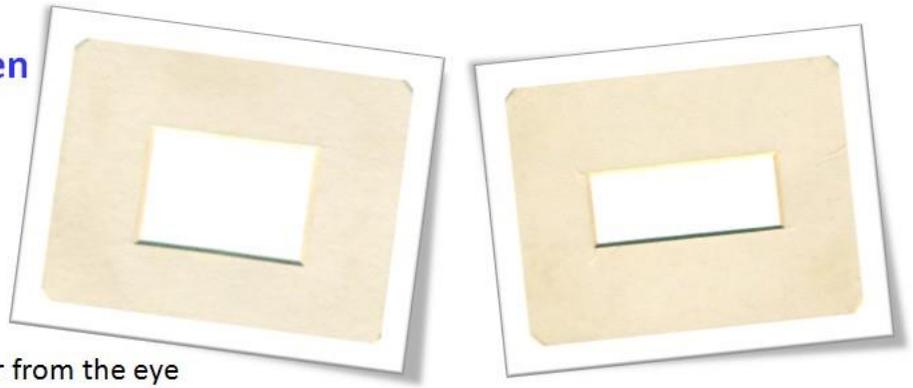
Truly isolates the cropped area

Can partly cover the hole with small mat scrap to do in-between crops

Make one for common rectangular crop (I use .68 ratio) and typical panorama crop (I use 1:2.65 ratio)

Hold in place & use crop tool to draw the crop

Use them in the field too!



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Issues with many images that cost them points

CROP, CROP, CROP

"If you want your image to cut the mustard, trim the fat." I read that in Peterson's Photographic magazine back in the 70's. It is still true.

Hot or bright colored spots, blank areas, contrasty background areas, lines that draw one attention away from the subject or even out of the image have got to go. They detract and pull attention from the subject. How much background to show is a critical decision.

Sometimes little clips off a bird's wing, butterfly or flower create lines that lead the viewer away. Shot too close? Maybe make a tight crop look deliberate by clipping even more off.

Images with small foregrounds are easy to crop too far. The subject needs some room. Be careful and take time with final cropping.

Slow down, you're shooting too fast

You have a camera in your hand, you are looking for a good subject and getting antsy. Stop, slow down and take your time. Try using a previewer as described elsewhere (card with a rectangular hole in it). It's a lot lighter than a camera and makes you study your composition. Less stressful too.

As the sun moves between clouds, observe how the lighting changes. You may like the overcast vs the shadow-creating lighting of full sun for your subject.

Watch that background

Sometimes moving a few inches or feet can make a big difference in hiding an obnoxious background element, Depth-of-field, lens focal length and camera vantage point all work to affect the rendering of the background.

Garish, contrasty lighting

Harsh lighting is tough to work with. Flowers rarely look good with strong shadows and blown out background spots. Shoot subjects that look good with the lighting that exists. You can always use those contrasty days for practicing techniques and experimenting. Return when the lighting is right.

Too much contrast in a shot can sometimes be corrected by using the camera's image menu settings to lower contrast prior to shooting during harsh lighting. This only applies if you shoot JPEGS; RAW files have added advantages. Don't forget to reset this setting back to normal!

Over-processing

When the viewer sees the processing more than the subject, then it is over-processed and hurts the image. Living with the final image a few days often reveals over-processing. Yes, maybe it was too saturated, had too much HDR, too much vignette.

Off-color, color casts, odd tones, impossible colors & over-saturation

Images with these - when they shouldn't - are going to lose points. When correcting for these, don't just stop moving a slider until it look good - go beyond so you know you have gone too far. If you don't, perhaps you didn't go far enough.

Some color casts (such as sunsets, after sunset) should be there and some can be for creative purposes but for this contest they should generally be corrected. It may be that the submitter's monitor is off color so what looks right there won't on another monitor or a calibrated one as used in judging.

Too much saturation in a flower/bird can sometimes be corrected by using the camera's image menu settings to lower contrast or saturation prior to shooting. Don't forget to reset this setting back to normal!

Eliminate foreign details

Dust & sensor spots draw attention to themselves so retouch them out. Likewise, retouch errant hairs, flotsam in water, odd hot spots, holes in leaves etc.

During shooting, if you see bright spots that you can hide by moving a few inches, then move. If you see a shadow from something falling on your subject, move the culprit away. Clip that odd blade of grass sticking up into your composition. Doing this helps you to see what surrounds your subject and, in time, you'll subconsciously move your camera position to yield better backgrounds for your subjects.

Tilted horizons without a reason

There are a few images that look proper with a tilted horizon - most images don't so straighten them before sending.

Flipping an image left-to-right is ok

Sometimes an image reads better if it is flipped. Perhaps your eye is led to a dead spot; flipping the image may prevent that.

Sharp in the wrong spot

Focus is critical in bird, wildlife & macro photography. If the focus is a bit off, it may make a great shot for a wall in your home but will probably not cut it in a contest.

Subject too centered

Centering can create a static subject that doesn't entice continued interest.

Centering often works well for very symmetric subjects, when it creates interesting patterns or mainly singular subjects. Centering can draw attention to the subject as well as a sense of space & size. Parts of a centered subject may follow the so-called rule of thirds which makes an image work. In a busy scene, a more centered object gains more attention.

Centering is a bad idea if it is done by default and not for specific reasons.

Not enough blur, motion,

If you're going to use blur as a creative effect then it has to look deliberate and not looking like a shaky exposure.

Use better specimens

Not every flower makes a good composition. If it is a bit tattered, has holes, chomp marks or getting wrinkly then it is going to take an incredible composition to beat a lesser rendition of a perfect specimen. Also watch for shadows from leaves, grasses & branches falling over your flowers. Picking good specimens is part of the contest.

Live with your selections before sending

A contest is not a quick Facebook post. You are going up against some folks who have lavished time and effort on their work, tweaking lighting and composition. Live with your picks for a while, you may find you like some better after a few days. Others with initial intrigue may not have longevity. Your final picks will be stronger.

Here's two great photography sites

These cover a huge variety of topics, all aimed to improve your *seeing & shooting*

www.digitalphotoschool.com

www.digital-photo-secrets.com

OK, here's a couple more with great articles

www.picturecorrect.com

www.clickinmoms.com has a great blog area full of down-to-earth how-tos

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Simple things to check

Size your images to the listed size. Small images are at a severe disadvantage. Over-sized ones will be resized to the contest specs.

Don't send duplicate images. Double-check your submissions including image rotation.

Check images and the category so they match. We have had obvious wildlife shots entered in the landscape category. We judge images as submitted.

No framing or added edge bling. These will be trimmed off.

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For the website – examples to help folks take better pix.

[This can be an intro into the 70-odd images in the "400 px images for website" directory and the separate Word file "Comments to go with the selected image for contest website.doc" that describes them.

A PDF file "Selected images for the contest website.pdf" is included that shows the correct order to match up with the image descriptions.

The actual order for the website may certainly be different – I haven't organized it that way as the files are essentially in alphabetical order (as in the categories listed below).

Perhaps use the category descriptions as a separator between sections of a 2 column list of images on the left and descriptions from the other Word file on the right.]

Take better nature pictures

Let's expound, by example, on the issues that I saw in many of the submissions in this year's contest and use that to improve everyone's images. Cropping is the biggest issue that I see and I have included many examples with my suggestions for cropping. I am not the wizard of cropping and these are my opinions, everyone has their own likes and preferences. So let's get going.

Categories are:

Background – what shows in the background and how it is depicted really affects one's view of the subject.

Better specimens – bugs, birds and wildlife must be of quality specimens.

Color, contrast & saturation – the user has a lot of control over these using choice of lighting, in-camera controls and digital darkroom treatments.

Cropping – this really makes or breaks a submission. All the winners & finalists are very nicely cropped.

Eliminating non-essential details that attract attention from the subject. These include sensor spots, flotsam on water, hot spots or errant things in a scene that take attention from the subject. Better images reflect the work folks lavish on their images.

Focus – if something should be sharp, it better be sharp is a rule that's hard to break. Along with this is what is the exact focus plane and appropriate depth-of-field for the subject & background rendering.

Over-processing in the digital darkroom – for this type of contest – needs to be avoided. Proper processing needs to just enhance the subject and not become the subject. As an example, some images with a high level of vignetting are quite outstanding while the same vignetting on another scene just doesn't fit.

Tilted horizons – these should be straight that when tilted, they become a distraction. Titling must be done for a reason.