



The Contest

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In 2002, I entered my first, and last, photo contest. It was a rather small affair – one sponsored and promoted by South Carolina Wildlife as a way, I suppose, of ginning up free images for the pages of their publicly funded magazine and some cheap publicity too. With the cutthroat, rights-grabbing Internet contests being churned out regularly these days, their motives seem rather benign now by comparison.

I must admit that my motives were far from pure. Still grinding my way through a soulless corporate job, I was selling photos and articles part-time to magazines at a pretty steady clip and I was hoping to gain some publicity myself, as well as a little local fame. Monetary rewards are satisfying enough and I was indeed thrilled with the growing licensing fees I was earning, but they're no match to a little praise and ego stroking from complete strangers.

Contestants submitted 8x10-inch prints (this was, after all, almost 9 years ago) and after several months of deliberation by the magazine's editors and staff photographers, a public event and exhibition was held to announce the winners at the State Fairgrounds in Columbia. All submitted work was displayed on portable partitions under a big top tent, right across from the dairy goat exhibit and livestock show.

Like the others, I dutifully stood near my matted photograph and fielded questions from passersby while others openly and shamelessly lobbied on behalf of their entries. Children with their parents in tow ran from station to station.

"This one is the best!"

"No, this one over here is better."

"I wouldn't hang that in my closet!"

The two contest rules were as follows: the subject of the photo must be of wildlife or nature only and it must have been taken in the host state. An underground smear campaign soon commenced against one of the contestants as his beautiful twilight beach photo was rumored to be of some place in Florida. A staffer for the magazine, whom I happened to know, asked what I thought. I didn't know and really didn't care.

"I have to take him at his word," I said with a shrug. He knowingly smiled and walked away as if we shared a dirty little secret.

After thirty minutes of this, I began to feel very small and part of something very cheap. I walked away from my photo and sat in one of the many folding chairs that were hastily arranged for folks arriving to hear the big announcement. I actually began hoping I wouldn't win. More than anything, I really wanted to leave without anyone noticing me. It's then I decided that it would be my last photo contest.

Competition, whether we like it or not, is a big part of our lives – some would say a necessary part. Academics, sports, business, politics, and mating all have a competitive element. Even though nature photography is now my business, the act of creating is my refuge from competition. Nature photography, at least to me, is a contemplative, often solitary, pursuit of self-expression that's free from any competitive urges or judgments from peers. If anything, competition trivializes nature photography and art in general.

How can photography or art be judged in any practical manner anyway? What resonates with one judge may very well fall flat with another. I know that to be true because I've had my arm twisted more times than I care to remember to perform as a judge in these contests. What I remember afterward is how the winner acts unjustifiably superior while the non-

winners look and feel unjustifiably inadequate. Photography is too subjective, too personal, to score like a ping pong match with winners and losers. On technical merit, yes, perhaps some objective scoring system could eventually be devised, but photography is about so much more than mere technical proficiency. I think we can all agree on that.

I'm not naïve enough to believe that competition is not a motive for some. I am only speaking for myself and everyone should make up their own mind on these things and do what simply makes them happy.

As it turned out, I won first prize in that photo contest and I have to admit to feeling a tinge of pride and smug satisfaction at the time as well. I got over that – and myself – which is why I've never entered a contest since.



The winning image was pretty underwhelming anyway: a static portrait of a northern bobwhite quail that probably won over the judges with its bold Velvia colors and that it happened to be in focus. It was a pretty weak field, I must confess, but I can't pretend that I wasn't a part of that field either.

I did receive a handsome blue ribbon, an official-looking certificate, and the legitimate right to insert "award-winning photographer" in front of my name from that point forward for the rest of my career. All in all, not a bad deal, I suppose, but a deal that I, for one, won't be repeating.

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NPN Editor-in-Chief, **Richard Bernabe** has been a full-time professional nature photographer and writer since 2003. He's had thousands of publishing credits over the past 20 years and he regularly leads photography tours and workshops across the United States and the world. Richard is a general partner with Mountain Trail Press and also offers regular [Online Classes with NPN](#).

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