



## Photo Contest Tips

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Whether you're a beginner or advanced level nature photographer, submitting your work to the scrutiny of others can be a little scary. All your hard work may pay off with selection for an award or you may feel the sting of rejection by having your work returned to you without any recognition. Just remember that win or lose, the photography itself will provide you with limitless hours of outdoor enjoyment and anything you may or may not get from a photo contest is just icing on the cake. I had the honor of being a *WildBird* magazine contest judge for five years and I learned a lot during that time about successfully entering a photography contest. In this brief article I'd like to share some of what I learned about photography contests and hopefully inspire you to enter some of your best photos in a contest in the near future.

### How to Enter

Entering your photos in a contest is fun, exciting and a little nerve-racking. Remember that once you have submitted your hard earned work to the contest, you are then at the mercy of a panel of judges. At this point, you have no control over what will happen. However, I would like to help you before you get to this point with the part you do have control over-the entry.

The absolute, number one tip for successfully entering a photography contest that I can offer is follow all the contest rules!! Every contest I have ever judged or entered myself has had a different set of very specific rules. As an experienced contest judge, I can tell you that the contest guidelines are not arbitrary. Some rules may not make sense to you when you enter, but I can guarantee you they are important to the judges and are in place for a reason. Follow them to the letter and you will already be one step ahead of some of your competition.

Next, you will find that almost every photography contest has a variety of different categories to enter. I think a great way to be successful is to consider all the categories closely. Try to anticipate which ones will have the most entries and which will have the fewest. If you have the material for a given category and your photos are good enough, you will certainly have a better chance at winning the category with only 50 entries rather than the one with 500. A category with 500 entries may have 10 finalists that are equally good enough to win and the judges are then faced with very tough final choices. However, the category with 50 entries may only have one entry worthy of first place and the judges have but one easy choice.

A great way to get ideas for entering any photography contest is to do a little research ahead of your entry. Look at the winners from previous years' contests and see what types of images have been successful. Many national nature photography contests are done by magazines or conservation organizations and it is easy to look at back issues or websites to see what type of photographs have won previously. This will give you a rough idea of the level of quality and what subject matter it might take to win. If you want to enter a smaller contest at your local nature center, Audubon chapter or camera club, they too will often keep prints of the photos that have won in previous years. Take a look at the winners and you just may find the inspiration you need to go out and make next year's winning photographs.

Another important tip I can offer is that you may find in some contests that "less is more". What I mean is that you should not feel compelled to enter the maximum number of photos allowed in every category. Your work will stand out from the rest if you only send your very best. If you truly feel that you have three equally good photos for a category that allows three entries, then by all means submit them. But if you submit two mediocre images along with one excellent one, the lesser quality work may weigh down the best image you've submitted. I just want you to understand the positive impression a well-edited entry can have with the judges. Remember you are very often trying to impress and sway a judging panel of experienced photographers and if they only see your absolute best photography you will have a better chance at winning.

One common mistake I have run across concerns the return of your precious original photographs. First, be sure to place all your transparencies between two pieces of cardboard for safe shipping. If you are going to enter slides, many contests require that you only send the original transparencies. This is where following the rules exactly as stated becomes very important. Be sure to include proper postage for the return and have it already applied to a pre-addressed return envelope. Do not expect the contest organizers to return your images at their expense and don't send loose stamps or a few dollars and hope the judges will make a trip to the post office for you. If you want your original work returned, you have to take the responsibility for it and do what is asked so the contest

can get it back to you. Just make it easy for them to return your images and it should not be a problem to get your entries back safely.

## What to Enter

First and foremost, remember that you don't have to be an advanced or professional photographer to enter or even win a photo contest. In fact, many contests specifically encourage beginners to enter. Judges in any photography contest are often looking for something unique. They search the entries for photographs that catch their eye and that clearly separate themselves from the field. I firmly believe that any level of photographer is capable of making contest-winning photos if they use good photographic technique.

As I mentioned before, follow the rules precisely when you are selecting which photographs to enter. Each category may have simple yet specific requirements about what will be judged in that particular category. If you don't follow this basic guideline, your photo may be returned without ever being considered for the category it was entered in. For example, I know that the *WildBird* "backyard" category requires a feeder, water feature, nest box or similar item included in the photograph. You would be amazed by how many entries for the backyard category neglected this simple request every year.

Next, I suggest that you follow my recommendation about being selective in your entry and remember my motto: "less is more". Try to enter only those photographs that are technically well done. Look for sharp focus, good composition, excellent color and contrast, beautiful lighting, a pleasing background and an interesting subject in your entry. Remember, these are the basic elements of a photograph and are very often the first things the judges will look for.

A great way to impress any photo contest judge is with a photograph that depicts action! If you can, try to submit photographs that show your subject doing something--anything. Remember that action photos can be simple. The action does not have to be an incredible mating display, or fight sequence to get noticed. For the *WildBird* contest, something as simple as an innocent wing stretch, a raised crest or perhaps a bird singing would be enough to catch a judge's eye. Believe it or not, even a sleeping bird is in action because it is doing something more than standing still. Now this is not to say that beautiful portrait photographs of interesting subjects in gorgeous light will be overlooked. It's just that by showing some simple action in your images you may help to separate your entry from the rest.

If the contest rules permit multiple entries per category, I would also suggest that you try to enter a variety of subjects in that category. It will not do you much good to enter three different poses of the same individual subject in the same category. If you want to send multiple entries to one category, why not submit three different and unique photographs. This way, each one will get individual notice as opposed to three similar photos that compete with and diminish attention from one another.

The excitement and anticipation of seeing the results from entering a photography contest can be wonderful. The thrill of being notified that you have won is even better. But when you do enter, keep in mind that many other people have entered the same contest and that the judges are only allowed to pick a very small number of winners. To avoid disappointment, be realistic about your expectations when entering and remember that you are really doing it for fun. Most importantly, enjoy your time in the outdoors making the images you want to submit for a contest because photographing all that nature has to offer is the real prize.

Brian Small - NPN 128

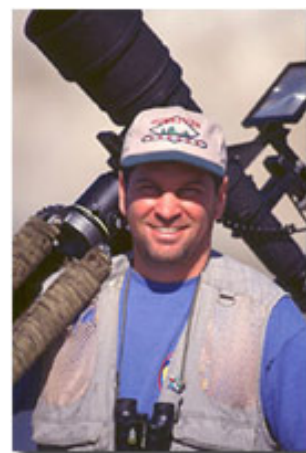
*Editor's note* - Brian E. Small has been a full-time professional bird photographer for more than 10 years. He started birding and photographing at the tender age of four with the encouragement of his ornithologist father Arnold Small.

Brian has been a regular columnist for *WildBird* magazine for the past seven years writing articles on both birding and bird photography. Also, he is currently the Photo Editor for the American Birding Association's *Birding* magazine.

Just some of Brian's photo credits include: *Time*, *The New York Times*, *Audubon*, *Birder's World*, *Birding*, *WildBird*, *Bird Watcher's Digest*, *North American Birds*, *Birder's Journal*, *Western Birds*, *Nature Conservancy*, *Wildlife Conservation*, *Outdoor California* and *Arizona Wildlife Views*.

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