

# Photographic Society of America

## A GUIDE FOR NATURE PHOTOGRAPHY JUDGES



## Definition of Nature Photography

From 1 January 2015 the Photographic Society of America (PSA), the International Federation of Photographic Art (FIAP) and the Royal Photographic Society (RPS) have used the following definition for Nature and Wildlife categories in the competitions and exhibitions that they approve.

### Nature Definition

*Nature photography is restricted to the use of the photographic process to depict all branches of natural history, except anthropology and archaeology, in such a fashion that a well-informed person will be able to identify the subject material and certify its honest presentation.*

- *The story telling value of a photograph must be weighed more than the pictorial quality while maintaining high technical quality.*
- *Human elements shall not be present, except where those human elements are integral parts of the nature story such as nature subjects, like barn owls or storks, adapted to an environment modified by humans, or where those human elements are in situations depicting natural forces, like hurricanes or tidal waves.*
- *Scientific bands, scientific tags or radio collars on wild animals are permissible.*
- *Photographs of human created hybrid plants, cultivated plants, feral animals, domestic animals, or mounted specimens are ineligible, as is any form of manipulation that alters the truth of the photographic statement.*
- *No techniques that add, relocate, replace, or remove pictorial elements except by cropping are permitted.*
- *Techniques that enhance the presentation of the photograph without changing the nature story or the pictorial content, or without altering the content of the original scene, are permitted including HDR, focus stacking and dodging/burning.*
- *Techniques that remove elements added by the camera, such as dust spots, digital noise, and film scratches, are permitted.*
- *Stitched images are not permitted.*
- *All allowed adjustments must appear natural.*
- *Color images can be converted to grey-scale monochrome.*
- *Infrared images, either direct-captures or derivations, are not allowed.*

*Images entered in Nature sections meeting the Nature Photography Definition above can have landscapes, geologic formations, weather phenomena, and extant organisms as the*

*primary subject matter. This includes images taken with the subjects in controlled conditions, such as zoos, game farms, botanical gardens, aquariums and any enclosure where the subjects are totally dependent on man for food.*

### **Additional PSA rules**

In 2019 PSA added the following statement as a preamble to the Nature definition:

*There is one hard and fast rule, whose spirit must be observed at all times: **The welfare of the subject is more important than the photograph.** This means that practices such as baiting of subjects with a living creature and removal of birds from nests, for the purpose of obtaining a photograph, are highly unethical, and such photographs are not allowed in Nature competitions. Judges are warned not to reward them.*

The above statement requires Nature photographers to follow the PSA Nature Division Code of Practice <https://psa-photo.org/index.php?nature-code-of-practice>. A photographer should not endorse or photograph the sacrifice of one living creature as prey or food for a subject solely for the purpose of photographing the event or its outcome, regardless of whether the subject is in captivity or in the wild. The only exception to this principle is for certain subjects that require live food when held in captivity or they will not eat. Photographs made while caring for such subjects (e.g., spiders, mantids, some snakes, etc.) are acceptable. This is not the case for mammals or birds because live food is not essential for mammals or birds.

**Judges of all PSA recognized exhibitions are urged to score down any image they feel was captured in a situation that does not follow the PSA Nature Division Code of Practice.**

The PSA policy on **aerial photography** was amended in 2020 to include the following statements:

- *PSA Members may not fly drones for the purpose of photographing animals or birds in any circumstances.*
- *PSA members may not fly a drone in any designated wilderness area.*
- *While complying with the restrictions listed above, PSA Members may photograph scenery/landscapes from a drone provided no laws or regulations are broken in the country where the drone is used.*

**Judges should mark down any images in Nature competitions that have obviously been taken from a drone and which include any animals or birds.**

When assessing Nature images judges have to take into account:

1. **The subject matter.** Does the image contain anything that is not allowed by the Nature definition?
2. **The nature story.** Does the image illustrate a strong nature story?
3. **The technical qualities.** Is the image of “high technical quality”?
4. **The editing/processing of the image.** Is there any evidence that the image has been modified in ways that are not allowed by the Nature definition?

When assessing Wildlife images, the judges also have to look for evidence that the subject of the image was “free and unrestrained in a natural or adopted habitat” and that the subject was there of its own free will.

## What Subject Matter is Acceptable in Nature Images?

The Nature definition limits the subject matter of Nature images to “**all branches of natural history**” and that includes images from the fields of invertebrate and vertebrate zoology, botany, geology and astronomy. However, the Nature definition specifically excludes images from the fields of anthropology and archaeology. **Any image that is a study of humankind, past or present, is not allowed in Nature competitions.**

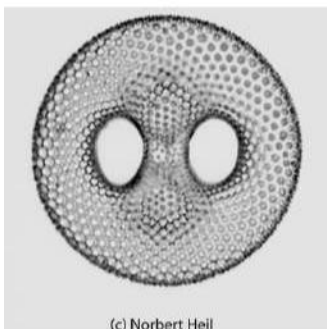
The Nature definition requires organisms in Nature images to be “extant”. This is a term commonly used in biology to refer to groups of organisms (such as species or families) that are still alive as opposed to being extinct. For example, the Tasmanian devil is extant (it still exists) but the Tasmanian tiger is extinct.

Although most Nature images will depict living organisms, the definition does not require an individual organism in an image to be alive and the Wildlife definition specifically allows images of “carcasses of extant species”.

The Nature definition requires the subject matter to be **identifiable** by a “well-informed” person. Some situations in which the subject may not be identifiable include:

- Extreme close-up images of parts of an organism.
- Images that have been deliberately blurred during capture or processing to create an artistic effect.
- Images in which the subject is shown as a very dark silhouette.

There is a limit to the specialised knowledge that can be expected of judges but **if the subject cannot be identified the images should not be given a high score.** For example:



The Nature definition requires the subject matter to be presented honestly so that judges can verify that the image is an “**honest presentation**”.

Any photographic process that results in a dishonest presentation of the subject matter is not allowed. It would, for example, be dishonest to deliberately change the color of a bird in a nature image, as in this example:



## The Nature definition excludes some types of plants and animals.

The definition excludes images of animals or plants that were created by humans (hybrids that have not occurred naturally) or which exist in their present form because of human intervention (cultivated plants, domestic animals or mounted specimens).

- Images of **domestic animals**, including those that have gone feral, are not allowed. Domestic animals are animals such as horses, cats, dogs, poultry, cattle, goats and sheep that have been tamed and kept by humans as work animals, food sources, or pets, especially members of those species that have become notably different from their wild ancestors through selective breeding.
- A **feral animal** is one that has escaped from domestication (or was deliberately released) and is living wild. The descendants of such animals are also regarded as feral. For example, in many countries there are feral dogs, cats, pigs, horses, donkeys, camels, goats, water buffalo, deer and various bird species.
- This particular restriction does eliminate just about all the “wild” horses in the world since those in the Americas, Europe and Western Asia are **feral** domestic horses, not true wild horses. The only true eligible horse is the rare Przewalski’s Horse also known as the Mongolian Wild Horse. Zebras, kiangs and onagers (wild asses) are also members of the horse family that are allowed in Nature.
- Llamas and alpacas are considered as domestic or feral as they have no ancestors that were never domesticated.
- The Nature definition does not exclude images of introduced species that have never been domesticated but which now exist in locations other than where their ancestors occurred naturally. For example, brush-tailed possums (which are native to Australia) were released into the wild in New Zealand in the 19th century. They were not domesticated animals so they are not regarded as feral for purposes of the Nature definition.
- **Cultivated plants** are those that are grown specifically in decorative gardens or for food.
- **Wildflowers** (that are not hybrids) planted in botanical gardens are allowed subjects in Nature (not Wildlife) in the same manner that wild animals in zoos are allowed subjects.
- Where a plant species is known to occur in the wild and the image is taken in a manner that gives no indication of the involvement of humans in its placement or growing, judges should give the image the benefit of the doubt and score it on the basis of it being a valid Nature subject.
- Animals or plants that are hybridised by humans (the offspring of two different species or varieties) are not allowed. For example, all koi and goldfish are **hybrids** and are not allowed.
- **Hybrids** that occur naturally in the wild without human intervention are allowed.
- **Mounted** specimens (taxidermy and display specimens) are not allowed.

**Domestic animals** such as dogs, cats, horses, cattle, camels, sheep and goats are not allowed.



**Cultivated plants** such as this canola crop are not allowed.



**Hybrid plants** such as this rose are not allowed. It would also be excluded because it is a cultivated plant.



Images of wild horses are not allowed because their ancestors were domesticated - they are regarded as **feral**.



**Mounted specimens of animals, birds or insects** are not allowed.



**The Nature definition allows images of landscapes and geologic formations.**

Acceptable subjects include: landscapes; rock structures and landforms resulting from natural weathering and erosion; seascapes, icebergs and waves; rivers, lakes and waterfalls; volcanoes, lava, boiling mud pools and geysers; minerals and naturally formed crystals. For example:



Images of gemstones, crystals, rocks or other geological objects that have been reshaped by humans are not allowed. For example:



## The Nature definition allows images of natural forces and weather phenomena.

The definition gives hurricanes and tidal waves as examples of natural forces. Other examples could include:

- Atmospheric and weather phenomena (including rainbows, lightning, cloud formations and auroras).
- Extreme weather events such as heavy seas, floods, storms, dust storms, cyclones, tornadoes and waterspouts.
- Earthquakes and tsunamis.
- Rain, snow or hail.



Images that show the aftermath of natural forces (such as a cyclone) should not be entered in Nature and would be more suitable in Photojournalism. For example:



## The Nature definition limits the presence of human elements.

The view that any evidence of “the hand of man” should disqualify an image in a Nature competition is not appropriate. Judges must follow the Nature definition and take into account that the definition allows “human elements” in Nature images under three circumstances:

- (a) *Scientific banding, tagging and radio collars* on wild animals.
- (b) When the human elements are present in *an image depicting natural forces*.
- (c) When the human elements are *“integral parts of the nature story”*.

The scientific tag on the vulture is allowed.



The radio collar on the wild dog is allowed.



This image is allowed because the brick wall is *an integral part of the nature story*. The image shows how the wasp has adapted its behaviour to utilise the human structure.



**Human elements** are not limited to people in the image; they include any things made by humans. *Human elements that can cause images to be disqualified*, or at best scored low, include but are not limited to:

- Roads, paths, vehicle tracks, or trails
- Fences and fence posts
- Signs
- Power poles and wires
- Vehicles
- Buildings (or parts of buildings)
- Walls or parts of walls
- Mowing and plowing patterns in fields
- Cut tree stumps, cut-off limbs, branches or stems
- Jesses and thongs on legs of raptors and other birds (these are *not* scientific banding).



The definition does include some examples of human elements that **are** *integral parts of the nature story*. Other examples of allowable human elements include:

- Birds nesting or feeding young on or in man-made objects.
- Insects depositing eggs or egg sacs in man-made objects.
- Animals eating fresh kills on fence posts, pilings, in roadways, etc.
- A flood with raging water with a house or other human element floating in the flood.
- A tornado ripping apart buildings or throwing around human elements.

***The important point is whether the judge considers the human element integral to the story, the habitat to be adopted, and the nature story to be strong.***

In this image the bird is using the wire as a high point from which to make its mating call. It has “adapted to an environment modified by humans”. The fence can be considered an integral part of the nature story because without the fence the bird would not be there (it would not have a place from which to make its mating call). Images such as this are allowed. If the bird was simply sitting on the fence the story would not be as strong and the image should not score highly.



Frogs may adapt to areas where artificial lighting at night makes for a productive hunting ground. Because of this adaptation to the human-made environment the human elements are integral to the nature story. Images such as this are allowed in Nature. If the reason for the frog being in the human made environment was not obvious to the judge the story would not be as strong and the image should not score highly.



Many birds, especially ospreys, make use of high structures provided by humans for nesting sites - not only platforms such as in this image but power poles and the like. The human elements in these images are integral to the nature story. Images such as this are allowed.

Osprey and other birds may also use human elements they choose themselves for building their nests. It is not unusual to see objects such as this sandal, rope and other human-made objects in nests. These human elements are integral to the nature story. Images such as this are allowed.



In many parts of the world, birds take advantage of crops planted by humans. Bosque del Apache (in the USA) is an example of a location where cornfields planted by humans provide birds with winter forage. The cornfield is an integral part of the story of why the snow geese and sandhill cranes come to Bosque del Apache, so images such as this are allowed in Nature.



If the “human element” is not part of the nature story, as in this example, the image is not allowed in Nature and should be disqualified.



Landscape images should not include any human elements such as roads or buildings because those human elements are not part of the nature story. Images containing these elements should be disqualified.



Many locations have traps for photographers who do not pay attention to the background and accidentally include power lines, towers or other structures in their image. The towers in this image do not add anything to the nature story - they are not part of the reason the Sandhill Cranes are in the area. They are purely incidental and images such as this should be disqualified in Nature.



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Common human elements that judges need to be aware of are fences and similar structures. These elements are not part of the nature story. Images containing these elements should be disqualified.



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One of the most frequently overlooked ‘human elements’ are vehicle tracks. Not all are as obvious as these. The tracks are not part of the nature story. Images with vehicle tracks should be disqualified.



## NATURE IMAGES MUST TELL A STORY

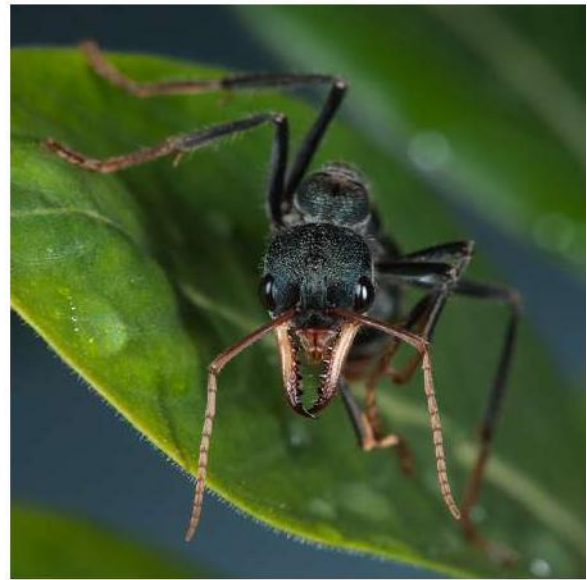
The Nature definition specifies that *“the story telling value of a photograph must be weighed more than the pictorial quality while maintaining high technical quality”*. This is the fundamental issue that judges must consider. It is not appropriate to give high scores to images that have good pictorial qualities if the judge cannot see that the images tell strong nature stories.

The following guidelines suggest one way of evaluating the strength of nature stories when the subject of the image is a living creature.

**Level 1 - Descriptive stories.** These are images that provide little more than descriptive information about the creature - shape, color, size and so on - as in these examples:



Images such as these tell a very limited natural story and should



Id not be given the highest scores in a Nature competition.

**Level 2 - Behaviour and life cycle stories.** These are images that illustrate typical behaviour of the creature or tell a story about part of its life cycle - as in these examples:



Typical behaviour (flying) but still not a strong nature story.



Typical behaviour (flying) plus gathering nest material - a stronger story.

Several stages of the life cycle of the wasp are illustrated in this image, giving a strong nature story.



**Level 3 - Same species interactions.** These images illustrate how creatures of the same species (mates, parents/offspring, group members) interact - as in these examples:



The interaction is about fighting for food and dominance.



The interaction is about bonding between parent and offspring.



The interaction is about courting behaviour.

**Level 4 - Different species interactions.** These images illustrate how creatures of different species interact in various ways, such as in these examples.



The story in images of this type is often about predator-prey interactions.



The story here is about the different species of eagles fighting over food.



This story is about the symbiotic relationship between the oxpecker and the buffalo.

*The Levels of story telling described above are intended only as a guide to help judges distinguish between weak and strong nature stories. Judges should not assume that each level is equivalent to a score (for example, 5 for a Level 4 image, 4 for a Level 3 image, and so on).*

Nature images (at all of the above levels) usually tell a stronger story if the image includes an appropriate amount of the environment - as in this example:



## TECHNICAL ASPECTS OF NATURE IMAGES

The Nature definition requires images to be of “high technical quality”. Therefore, it is a fundamental requirement of all Nature judges that they are capable of identifying technical problems in images. Judges should not give high scores to images that have obvious technical problems. Judges should be satisfied that awarded images are correctly exposed, in focus, suitably sharp, have correct color reproduction (unless they are greyscale monochrome), and do not suffer any serious technical deficiencies such as excessive noise.

### Monochrome images

The Nature definition allows only one type of monochrome image. *Complete greyscale conversion is allowed but partial conversion and any form of toning of monochrome images is not allowed.*

In this example, the original color capture and the greyscale conversion are allowed. The greyscale image with a spot of color and the sepia toned monochrome image are not allowed.







Infrared images, either direct captures or software conversions, are not allowed.

## POST-CAPTURE ALTERATIONS TO NATURE IMAGES

The Nature definition prohibits the use of any editing techniques (other than cropping) that remove, move, add or replace pictorial elements in an image.

The following image editing techniques *are* allowed:

- **Cropping.**
- **Adjustments that enhance the image without changing the content of the original scene**, including: exposure (globally and selectively), color balance, contrast, dodging and burning, sharpening (globally and selectively), noise reduction, conversion to greyscale monochrome (with no color added), straightening and resizing.
- **Editing that removes small elements that were not part of the original scene** (such as spots caused by dust on a digital sensor or scratches on a scanned image).
- **High dynamic range (HDR) techniques** - because the pictorial content of the individual images and the combined image is the same.
- **Focus stacking** of images - because although this involves the combining of several images the pictorial content is not being changed.
- **Adjustments that compensate for lens deficiencies** such as distortion, chromatic aberration and lens flare - because they do not change the pictorial content.

The overriding requirement for any of the allowed adjustments is that the results must appear natural to the viewer (the maker is not the viewer – the viewer is the judge!) Judges should not give high scores to images in which the allowed adjustments are excessive.

*The following image editing techniques are NOT allowed:*

- Any form of manipulation that alters the truth of the photographic statement.
- Cloning.
- Blurring the background to obscure elements in the original scene.
- Darkening the background to remove elements in the original scene.
- Adding a vignette not originally produced by the camera.
- Adding textures or artistic filters.
- Replacing image elements (such as the sky).
- Combining images by stitching.



es (and particularly awarded images) to identify  
ave removed image elements.

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**Distribution of this guide has been approved by the Chair of PSA's Nature Division,  
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Notes:

- a) For more information about this guide or about the judging of Nature competitions please contact PSA's Nature Division Exhibition Standards Director, Norbert Heil, by email at [pid\\_esd@germanphotocup.de](mailto:pid_esd@germanphotocup.de).
- b) All images in this guide are copyright. Unless otherwise indicated they are copyrighted by Roy Killen who may be contacted at [roykillen@mac.com](mailto:roykillen@mac.com).
- c) If this guide is printed it should be printed in colour to preserve the information in the monochrome examples.