

HOW TO WIN: AN INSIDER'S GUIDE



Welcome to Veolia Environnement Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2009. I'm delighted you are considering taking part this year and hope you do. My aim here is to introduce the competition and, with a few suggestions and insider tips, help you to win!

BY THE CHAIRMAN OF THE JUDGES **MARK CARWARDINE**



DON'T BE PUT OFF entering by the increasingly high standard of winning entries every year. It's not just professionals who are successful – amateurs of all ages have won awards in the competition numerous times in the past. In fact, in recent years, the judges have been particularly impressed by the standard of images being produced by many youngsters. There are some truly outstanding up-and-coming photographers who'll undoubtedly keep well-established pros and experienced adults on their toes for years to come.

Last year was another record-breaking year for the competition, with no fewer than 32,351 entries from a phenomenal 82 different countries. Ninety-six per cent of the entries were digital. The overall standard was

extremely high and the range of subjects, locations and styles astonishing, with a lot of photographers tackling increasingly difficult subjects or shooting familiar ones in more imaginative ways. With the bar being raised each year, and the revision of several category definitions, the 2009 competition promises to be even bigger and more inspiring than ever before.

SO HOW IS IT JUDGED?

Not surprisingly, the judges find the selection process more and more challenging. We often joke that we'd like to be able to award two or three times as many prizes to make our decisions a little easier. The core of the judging panel changes each year and consists of an assortment of ►

Steve Winter had no fewer than four amazing camera-trap images of wild snow leopards in the 2008 competition, and this one won him the title Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2008. Judge Mark Carwardine said, "Everything comes together in this striking picture - it has drama, mystery, a rare cat in a perfect pose and intriguing composition."



people from all over the world linked with wildlife and/or photography: professional photographers, photographic agents, magazine editors and designers among them (see box, p75).

Our challenge is to scrutinize every entry and select the best. We spend many days sitting in a darkened room, staring at a big screen, examining one picture after another. The no-hopers are removed fairly quickly, but high-quality shots are often discussed at great length.

Sometimes there are arguments, simply because judging a photographic competition isn't a precise science. If the decisive factor was merely technical perfection, it would be better judged by a computer. But it's much more than that. It is as much about art and, as such, is emotional and subjective. Fortunately, our disagreements are always in good spirit – it's just that everyone feels so passionately about the subject.

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It's the same when you visit one of the Wildlife Photographer of the Year exhibitions. Try eavesdropping on a few conversations. As people scrutinise the winning images, I bet they'll be bowled over by some and confused by others. Most of all, they will disagree about which ones are the best. But that's precisely what makes this competition so much fun.

Incidentally, the judges have no idea who took the pictures they are judging. That's a well-kept secret. Everyone on the panel signs a declaration of silence and has to wait with everyone else to find out who took the winning shots. It seems like a long wait – usually about five months before the winners are formally announced to the public.

SO HOW DO I WIN?

While there is no magic formula for winning and no hard and fast rules to explain why one photograph wins and another doesn't, there are ways of getting your pictures noticed.

The good news is that the vast majority of those 32,351 entries stand little chance of winning. The bad news is that your favourite pictures are probably among them. I'm not being horrible. I'm not saying your pictures are unsharp, badly exposed, poorly composed or just plain boring. No doubt they are perfectly respectable shots. But it's a fact that if you have been entering the competition and haven't yet won, you are among the many

HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR URBAN & GARDEN

Why not try entering the Urban and Garden category this year? Laurent Geslin explains how to do the subject justice.

MEET THE EXPERT...



LAURENT GESLIN

Originally from Brittany, Laurent is a professional wildlife photographer who now divides his time between London and Switzerland. He is renowned for urban wildlife images.

As a professional wildlife photographer I am always on the lookout for new and exciting subjects – and one area that doesn't seem to be much explored is urban nature photography.

Finding a wildlife image that has never been seen before is getting harder and harder. To take a really special photo, you need to work with the same subject for many weeks. Visitors to the Wildlife Photographer of the Year exhibition have come to expect thrilling action shots, beautiful rare species and spectacular remote wildernesses. Some of the best

images are often taken by professional photographers who can afford to spend months in the wilds waiting to witness that intriguing, never-before-seen behaviour and capture that extraordinary light.

But what if you live in a city? Well, you could quit your job, sell everything you own and fly to Nairobi... or you could take advantage of living in a lively urban environment and shoot species that live on your doorstep. Not only will you reduce your carbon footprint, you'll also start to notice that really special pictures of grey squirrels and blackbirds are rarer than awesome images of leopards and elephants.

Approach a walk around your garden in the same way you'd prepare for a game drive in Africa. Use your imagination to envision a shot that hasn't been done before, watch out for interesting behaviour and work with the light – aim for something really original. You'll soon realise that getting a great picture of local wildlife in an urban setting is not easy – but it will provide you with a fresh view of frantic city life.



1 TELL A STORY

A good photo always tells a story. The viewer has to understand instantly what it's about. It is important to visualise your picture and the story you want to tell before shooting. With your idea in mind you can then build your picture. Understanding your subject's behaviour is crucial. Foxes, for instance, are territorial and your garden is their turf. You can harness their natural curiosity to get the shot you want. Move or add something to your garden and your local fox will soon visit in order to investigate. As long as you don't disturb him, you can make him 'pose' for you. Use garden furniture to help tell your story – and bingo!

PHOTOGRAPHY...



2 LOOK FOR EASY SUBJECTS

Snails, toads, spiders and lots of other little creatures are easy to find in your garden and not too fast, so you'll have time to frame the background carefully and make the best use of the light. Take the opportunity to shoot with a slow shutter speed using a tripod and cable release. And why not invite a friend over to pose? It will only cost you the price of a drink, and having a human shape in the background will make the picture more real. You could ask your children or partner, too; just don't take too long or you could fall out.



4 TRAIN YOUR SUBJECT

Most shots are taken at eye-level, so try a different angle – pictures from below often look great. A useful trick is to accustom your subject to a specific route of your choosing. You can show it the way with food. Put a favourite snack at a special, safe place that can only be reached via one route. Place a sheet of glass there, or create a gap along the path that the animal, such as a hedgehog or squirrel, must cross. It will soon walk or jump directly to reach its goal. When it is comfortable, set up your camera, including part of your garden or house in the background. You shouldn't have to wait long for your shot.



3 AVOID DISTRACTING BACKGROUNDS

The main problem in urban areas is that there are too many distractions – electric cables, buildings, cars and so on. Including all of these in one shot will detract from your subject. You need to show the urban setting, but still maintain the aesthetic appeal of your photo; your shot should be easy to 'read'. Once you've realised that a bird is perching regularly in one place or a squirrel is taking the same route to your birdtable, look around and choose one iconic urban shape to include in your portrait. Frame both of them and the job is done.



5 TRY SOMETHING UNUSUAL

Some animals are just waking up when you are going to bed, so if you don't want to wait up all night for your subject and then fall asleep at your desk the next day, why not try a camera trap with an infrared beam, often used to photograph nocturnal species in forests? First, waterproof your camera – an old film model will do – then set up your flash and frame the shot you want. Set the focus manually and sprinkle some food to bring your subject to exactly the right spot. If you search around, you should find a mid-range infrared set-up that won't cost the Earth. And you can take special shots while you are fast asleep!



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entries that didn't jump out from the crowd and slap the judges in the face.

The trick is to include one key ingredient – something that is common to almost all the winning shots: originality. The judges are looking for something that stops them in their tracks. Imagine you are a judge looking at thousands upon thousands of photographs. Many of them are technically flawless - well exposed, perfectly sharp and pleasantly

composed – and, after a while, you take these key ingredients for granted. You become desperate for something really creative, fresh and surprising to leap out from the screen. The pictures that do leap out tend to be the ones that win.

Therefore, it's not what you photograph, it's (in the words of Ella Fitzgerald) the way that you do it. In other words, despite many people's fears, pictures of common and

familiar species close to home stand just as much chance of winning as pictures of more exotic, rare and unfamiliar ones. In fact, I would go so far as to argue that they stand a better chance, simply because common and familiar species tend to be taken for granted and are rarely photographed properly, so there is more opportunity to surprise.

Popular subjects, such as lions, polar bears and elephants, demand extra effort. That doesn't mean to say you can't come up with something new (just look at Polar Sunrise, the 2008 Creative Visions of Nature winner) but you do have to think laterally and use every ounce of your imagination. Anything too obvious or unoriginal will have been done before and probably by hordes of others.



▲ This ancient snow gum by Tom Putt was Highly Commended in the *In Praise of Plants* category, 2005. The tree's impressive girth and twisted trunk, and the contrasting colours of its bark, show that plantlife can be both mysterious and beautiful.

One mistake many people make is attempting to copy previous competition winners. That's a bad idea.

With this in mind, successful photographers work hard – they get down low, climb high, move backwards, crawl forwards, creep from side to side, think laterally, get up early and stay out late. They wait patiently for hours, days or even weeks for exactly the right light or for the right moment when the animal they are photographing yawns, stretches, sneezes, runs or jumps. They are passionate people, determined to get something different.

HOW TO AVOID MAKING A BIG MISTAKE

One mistake many people make is attempting to copy previous competition winners. That's a bad idea. There is a very good chance that your hard work will go straight in the 'seen it all before' file. It's just not original.

By all means look at past winners for inspiration. Every professional wildlife photographer I know delights in analysing other people's pictures in competitions, newspapers, magazines and books. I do it all the time. Flick through fairly quickly to see which pictures stand out – and then analyse why. Seek out pictures by the big names in wildlife photography and ask yourself what makes their work so special.

Analysing past winners can be frustrating as well as inspiring. You can look at the winning entries one year, examine them in great detail and think you've found the secret. Then next year's winners are announced and you despair because they are all completely different. The goalposts seem to have moved. But that's precisely the point. That's what the judges are looking for. They don't always succeed, of course, but 'different' is what catches their attention.

AND FINALLY...

This may seem like stating the obvious, but you really have got to be in it to win it. I know many people who never get round to entering or panic the night before the deadline and spend the early hours rummaging through their images trying to find the best. Plan enough time to do it properly.

And next time you wander round the exhibition of all the winning pictures and catch yourself proclaiming 'I could have taken a better picture than that' why don't you go out and do it? Even if you don't actually win, your photography will undoubtedly benefit from the process. Good luck!

Mark Carwardine

HOW TO ENTER & WHAT YOU COULD WIN

This year, we are proud to welcome Veolia Environnement as the competition's title sponsor. Veolia is a world leader in environmental services.

HOW TO CHOOSE YOUR IMAGES

One of the biggest challenges is choosing what images to enter and the right approach is crucial. Be honest with yourself and edit ruthlessly. It's all too easy to become emotionally attached to certain images and this is when people tend to enter 'almost' shots. Resist the temptation: mediocre shots won't win. Be critical of your work and only enter your very best. Make an initial selection – ideally two or three times as many as you are allowed to enter – and then get other people to comment and even make the final selection for you. They will find it easier to identify the really good ones.

HOW TO PROCESS YOUR IMAGES

When you have made your final selection, the images need to be processed ready to enter the competition. For many newcomers to digital photography this can be a bit of a stumbling block. A surprising number of imaginative and well-composed images do not make it into the finals simply because they have been badly processed. For some top tips visit www.nhm.ac.uk/wildphoto.

HOW TO CHOOSE A CATEGORY

You stand a better chance of winning in some categories than others. There are a phenomenal number of entries in categories such as Behaviour: Birds, Animals in their Environment and Animal Portraits, so the competition in these is intense. There are more opportunities to excel in categories with fewer entries (below) – all you need is some imagination.

▶ **Behaviour: All Other Animals.** This category has huge scope, but you must show genuinely interesting behaviour.

▶ **Urban and Garden Wildlife.** This is a surprisingly weak category with relatively few entries. Don't forget that it has to be an obviously urban or suburban setting.

▶ **Nature in Black and White.** Introduced in 2005, this category has huge potential. Enter any wild landscape, animal or plant and try turning some of your colour pictures into black and white.

▶ **One Earth Award.** Don't rely on shock value, but strive for genuine photographic merit. Winners explore our relationship with the natural world or our damaging influence symbolically or graphically.

▶ **In Praise of Plants.** Plants are everywhere but this is often a weak category because there's a tendency to take simple, unimaginative shots of them rather than truly creative works of art.

▶ **Gerald Durrell Award for Endangered Wildlife.** Images of well-known endangered species have to be truly exceptional to stand out. Check out the 2008 IUCN Red List of Threatened Species and try to photograph some of the more unusual subjects.

▶ If you're aged 18–26 and considering entering the **Eric Hosking Award**, there is one golden rule: critical editing. Make sure that all the pictures you enter are strong.

THE JUDGES

Mark Carwardine (Chair) Zoologist, writer and photographer

Laurent Geslin Photographer

Chris Gomersall Wildlife photographer

Orsolya Haarberg Nature photographer

Josef (Sepp) Hackhofer Nature photographer

Tim Harris Manager: Nature and Garden Collections, Photoshot.

Tony Heald Wildlife photographer

Rosamund Kidman Cox Editor and writer

Jan-Peter Lahall Photographer

Tor McIntosh Picture editor

Vincent Munier Nature photographer

Erik Sampers Photo Director, *Terre Sauvage*

Brian Skerry Marine photo journalist

Sophie Stafford Editor, *BBC Wildlife*

THE PRIZES

▶ The title *Veolia Environnement Wildlife Photographer of the Year* will be given to the single image judged to be the most striking and memorable of all the category winners.

▶ The winning photographer will be presented with £10,000 at an awards ceremony at the Natural History Museum, London, in October. Each category winner receives £500 and every runner-up £250. Special Award winners receive £1,000.

▶ All winning images are displayed in an exhibition at the Natural History Museum, London, and then toured around the UK and many countries overseas.

▶ The pictures will also be published in a free supplement with the November issue of *BBC Wildlife* and in a hardback book.

HOW TO ENTER YOUR IMAGES

▶ Many of the **rules** and **category definitions** have been carefully revised to make them clearer, so even if you've been entering the competition for years and think you know what we're looking for, visit www.nhm.ac.uk/wildphoto to check.

▶ **Translations** of the rules will be available online in Chinese, French, German, Italian and Spanish.

▶ **New for 2009.** The competition now accepts scans of transparencies (all formats) and digital images. Up to three pictures may be entered in each category. The original transparencies or original digital capture as it was recorded by the camera will be requested and must be supplied if an image reaches the final stage of judging.

▶ Enter online at www.nhm.ac.uk/wildphoto. Closing date for online entries: **Friday 27 March 2009.**

▶ Closing date for postal entries (CDs only): **Friday 20 March 2009.**

▶ **Fees:** £25 for online entry (£20 if entered by 28 February) or £27 for postal entries (CDs only, please).

▶ The Young Photographer competition is free to enter for photographers aged 17 and under. Read the full rules online.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Tel: 0207 942 5015

Email: wildphoto@nhm.ac.uk

Website: www.nhm.ac.uk/wildphoto