

HOW TO WIN Wildlife Photographer of the Year Competition



It's the competition every wildlife photographer wants to win, but what is the secret of success? Chairman of the Judges in 2005 and 2006, **Mark Carwardine** takes a behind-the-scenes look at the Wildlife Photographer of the Year Competition and reveals how you could improve your chances of victory.

With as many as 20,000 entries from more than 50 countries, the Wildlife Photographer of the Year Competition is huge, high-profile and very daunting. It attracts the world's top professional photographers and features some of the best wildlife pictures ever taken.

But don't be put off. There is no magic formula for winning, but there are ways of getting your pictures noticed. The aim of this article is to improve your chances of getting into the elite 0.5 per cent that leap from the crowd, slap the judges in the face and make it into *BBC Wildlife*, the book and the exhibition.

I am writing this from a judge's perspective and should point out that judges are only human. Judging photography isn't a precise science. If the decisive factor was merely technical perfection, it would be better judged by a computer. But it's as much about art and, as such, it is emotional and subjective.

Try visiting a *Wildlife Photographer of the Year* exhibition and, without getting into trouble, eavesdrop 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, I'm sure they'll disagree about which ones are the best. And that's precisely what makes this competition so much fun.

How important is good equipment?

The best way to irritate a professional photographer is to ask what equipment he uses to take his prize-winning shots. It's a bit like asking a writer what computer he uses to write a bestselling novel. Even the world's

most expensive camera doesn't actually go out on its own and take pictures.

You don't need expensive equipment to take great wildlife photographs. A photographer with a £5,000 camera and a clutch of top-of-the-range accessories may have a head-start, but falling prices and recent advances in digital capture, auto focus systems, lens technology and motor drives have brought high-quality cameras within reach of almost everyone.

Use equipment properly

However, even with every technical advantage, it's surprising how many pictures entered in the competition aren't technically perfect. The reason, in many cases, is because the cameras aren't being used properly. A professional photographer's camera is like an extension of his arms and hands: he uses it instinctively and understands every button and switch intimately. Yet I've forgotten how many times I've seen people miss fabulous photo opportunities because they're still trying to work out which button to press when.

It doesn't matter whether you use Nikon or Canon, Pentax, Olympus or Minolta. You can still take a great picture. But you do have to know exactly how the camera works in the first place – it has to be second nature. And the only way to achieve that is to get out there and practise, practise, practise.

What makes a competition-winning photograph?

There are no hard and fast rules that mean one photograph wins a competition and another doesn't, but there is one key

All these images are basically good shots. They're not special enough to win the competition, but they do illustrate useful points to remember when you're out with your camera.



TOP TIP

A change of lens, such as this wide angle, can give a straightforward portrait more dramatic effect. A change of viewpoint, especially if you get down low, can also create a more intimate quality.

10 TOP TIPS TO IMPROVE YOUR WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY

1 Light up Make the most of the special light at the beginning and end of the day. Move around for different effects and try shooting into the sun for dramatic backlighting or to give your subject a 'mythical' appearance.

2 Fill-flash Don't be afraid of flash. While there's no substitute for delicate natural light, subtle fill-flash can fill shadows and add colour and punch. A well-lit subject against a dark or subdued background can look stunning.

3 Shoot tight Wildlife snapshots are often trapped in a 'no-man's land' where the subject is fairly big but not big enough. Grab the viewer's attention by getting in really close to show expression or fine detail.

4 Shoot wide If you can't get close, pull back and put the animal or plant in the context of its environment. Good composition is critical if a shot like this is going to work – especially if the subject is very small in the frame.

5 Simplify it The simpler the image, the greater its impact. Compose your shot to remove as much clutter as possible and check all around the viewfinder for distracting branches, twigs and leaves.

6 Be patient Wait for the defining moment. Transform an ordinary animal portrait into an eye-catching one, for example, by waiting for your subject to do something interesting. You need quick reflexes to get the shot.

7 Hold steady More wildlife pictures are ruined by a lack of sharpness than by anything else. Work hard to hold the camera steady with a tripod or monopod, or even by resting your elbows on a fence post.

8 Get down Looking down on animals from human height gives them lesser importance, so treat your subjects as equals by getting down to their eye level, or even lower. Your pictures will have a much more intimate quality.

9 Get out The best way to improve your photography is to practise. Whatever the weather, get out and take pictures. Set yourself projects and take inspiration from stimulating pictures in magazines and books.

10 Wildlife first Put the welfare of the animals and plants you are photographing above everything else. Be aware of how your presence might be affecting them and back off if they appear stressed.



TOP TIP

Be original. We've all seen pictures of breaching dolphins before, so try a different view or context.



TOP TIP

A moving subject often creates a sense of drama – it doesn't have to be pin sharp. It also scores you points for opportunism, dedication and technique.

● WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHER OF THE YEAR

ingredient – originality. The judges are looking for something that stops them in their tracks, something really creative, fresh and surprising.

One mistake many people make is attempting to copy previous winners. That's a bad idea, and simply increases the chances of your hard work being put straight into the 'seen it all before' file.

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. 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 special.

Incidentally, there are no special tricks to get your pictures noticed. Some photographers try mounting their 35mm transparencies in extra-large mounts that won't fit in a projector, in the hope that they'll face less competition on the lightbox. Honestly, this does not work. If a picture is good enough, it will be noticed, and if it isn't, it won't.

What are the best subjects?

It's not what you photograph – it's the way that you do it. Pictures of common and familiar species stand just as much chance of winning as pictures of rare and unfamiliar ones. In fact, I'd argue that they stand a better chance because familiar species tend to be taken for granted and so there is more opportunity to surprise.

Popular subjects, such as lions, tigers and elephants, demand extra effort. Anything too obvious will have been done before and probably by hordes of others. In the 2005 competition, for instance, there were hundreds of pictures of Japanese macaques (at least, there seemed to be hundreds because they were all remarkably similar). The vast majority were sitting in steaming baths with bright red faces and, sometimes, with snow on their heads. They were perfectly good pictures, but nothing special. Then, suddenly, there was a beautiful image of a Japanese macaque eating cherry blossom (*BBC Wildlife*, October 2005). It was undeniably different – the photographer had taken an alternative approach to a popular subject, and it worked.

With this in mind, experienced photographers work hard at their photography.

They get down low, climb high, move backwards and forwards and 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 moment when the animal they're photographing yawns, stretches, sneezes, runs or jumps.

Making the final selection

One of the biggest challenges in entering *Wildlife Photographer of the Year* is choosing what to send in. It's almost as important as taking the pictures in the first place.

You have to 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. Just because a picture shows an endangered species and was taken on a once-in-a-lifetime holiday at 4am while you were waist-deep in mud doesn't mean it's any good.

There's an old joke that the difference between a professional photographer and an amateur is the size of the waste bin next to the lightbox (or on the screen). In other words, professionals tend to be more critical of their own work and keep or enter only their very best shots.

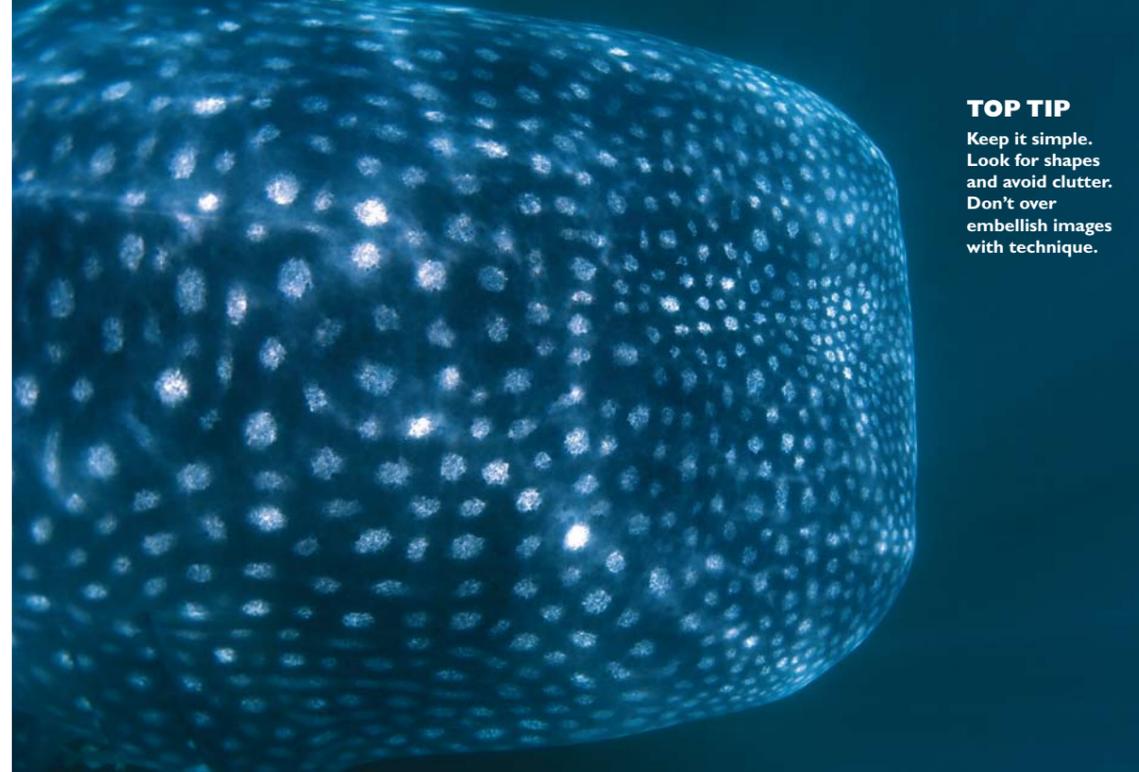
The trick is to make an initial selection – ideally two or three times as many as you are allowed to enter – and then get other people to have a look, comment and even make the final selection for you. They don't have the emotional attachment that makes it so hard for you to separate the fun and challenging shots from the really good ones.

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 around to entering, or panic the night before the competition deadline and spend the early hours knee-deep in pictures. Plan enough time to do it properly.

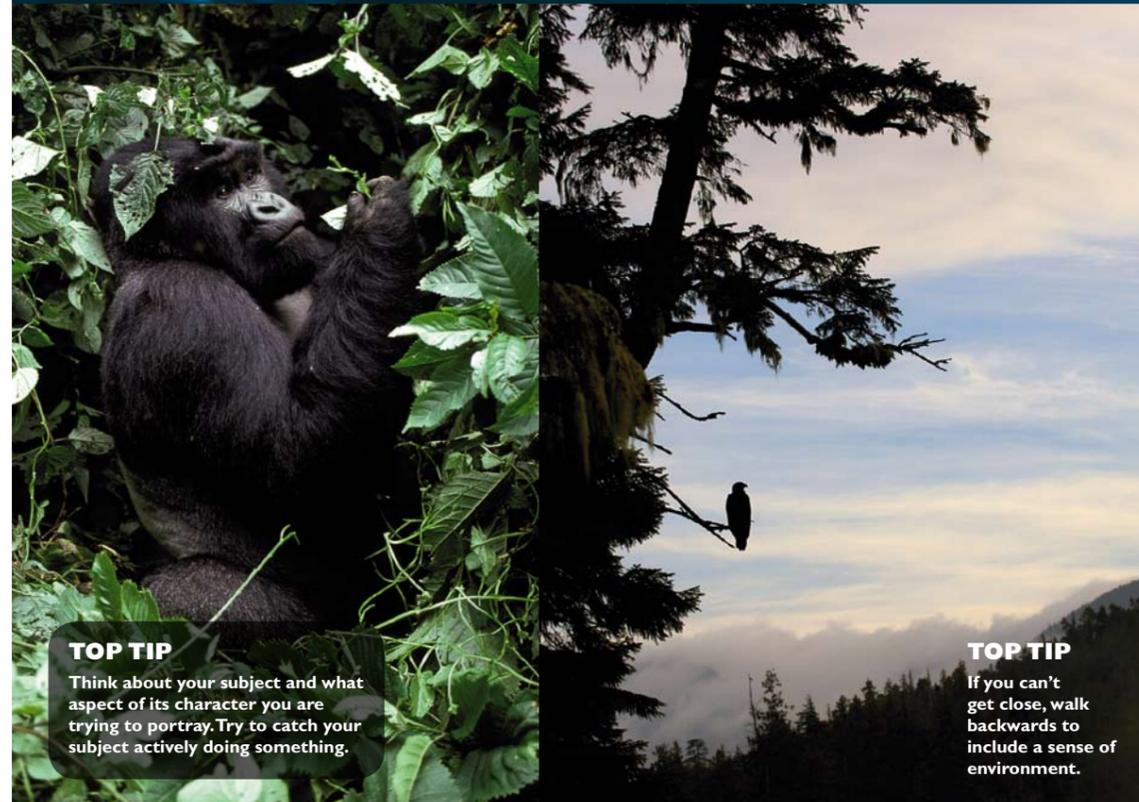
And next time you wander round the *Wildlife Photographer of the Year* exhibition and catch yourself proclaiming: "I could have done better than that," why don't you go out and do it? Even if you don't actually win, your photography will benefit from the entire process and will improve as a result.

Good luck!



TOP TIP

Keep it simple. Look for shapes and avoid clutter. Don't over-embellish images with technique.



TOP TIP

Think about your subject and what aspect of its character you are trying to portray. Try to catch your subject actively doing something.

TOP TIP

If you can't get close, walk backwards to include a sense of environment.



TOP TIP

Background colour, light and pattern can all transform an ordinary portrait into something special.

TOP TIP

Creative cropping can work wonders on an otherwise ordinary portrait.

WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHER OF THE YEAR CATEGORIES: HELPFUL HINTS

Eric Hosking Award

Designed to encourage young photographers aged 18 to 26 and requiring a portfolio of six pictures, this category needs critical editing. Don't let one weak shot ruin your chances, and remember to demonstrate a range of styles and techniques.

Gerald Durrell Award for Endangered Wildlife

So many people enter pictures of well-known endangered species, such as tigers and polar bears, that they have to be truly exceptional to get noticed. Check the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species and try some more unusual subjects.

Animals in Their Environment

The habitat is as important as the wildlife in this category. Don't just keep your subject small in the picture and hope for the best – try to convey a sense of place and show how it fits into its natural home.

Animal Behaviour: Birds

This is a popular category. The standard is usually high and the winning entries show genuinely interesting behaviour with aesthetic appeal.

Animal Behaviour: Mammals

Another popular category. It is crucial to show genuine behaviour (just 'looking' or 'sitting' isn't good enough), and the pictures must have both interest value and aesthetic appeal. It really doesn't matter whether the subject is familiar or not.

Behaviour: All Other Animals

With relatively few entries, there are more opportunities to excel in this category than in almost any other. The scope covers most animals on the planet – reptiles, amphibians, invertebrates and fish – and lots of unusual behaviour.

The Underwater World

Fewer people photograph wildlife underwater than on land, so the competition in this category is less intense. The overall standard is generally higher, though, so a combination of interest value and aesthetic appeal is really important.

Animal Portraits

Probably the most popular category in the competition. Don't just enter pictures that don't fit neatly into any of the other categories, and remember that a really good portrait must capture the character or the spirit of the subject.

In Praise of Plants

Plants are everywhere and yet surprisingly few people seem to be photographing them.

This is usually quite a weak category, though the opportunities for showing the beauty and importance for flowering and non-flowering plants are overwhelming.

Urban and Garden Wildlife

This is a surprisingly overlooked category, with relatively few entries, considering how accessible urban and garden wildlife is. Many entries fail by ignoring the fact that it has to include an obviously urban or suburban setting. So many possibilities!

Nature in Black and White

Introduced for the first time in 2005, this is a category with huge potential. You can enter any wild landscape, animal or plant. Remember that this year we will be accepting digital black and white images as well as high-quality traditional prints.

NEW: Creative Visions of Nature

Realism takes a back seat in this challenging category, new for 2006, which demands a truly artistic eye. Judges will be looking for unusual, imaginative and thought-provoking ways of looking at the natural world. Let your imagination run wild.

Wild Places

This is a hotly contested category, and one which it's not as easy to be successful in as you might imagine. There's much more to it than a breathtaking scene. Beautiful light is essential and the picture must convey a true feeling of wilderness and a sense of awe.

The World in Our Hands

Many people rely on the shock value of their subject in this category, rather than genuine photographic merit. But the winning shots are more symbolic or graphic. Don't forget to focus on positive messages as well as negative ones.

Shell Young Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2006

This award is given to the photographer whose single image is judged to be the most striking and memorable of all the pictures entered by young photographers (17 or under). It must be technically competent and aesthetically pleasing.

Next month

Mark Carwardine launches our exclusive 13-part Photography Masterclass. Each tutorial is packed with tips and advice from the world's top photographers, plus golden rules and tricks of the trade for amateurs and professionals alike. Each month focuses on a different category from the Wildlife Photographer of the Year Competition and shows you how to improve this aspect of your photography.