

JUDGING NATURAL HISTORY PHOTOGRAPHY

EVALUATING YOUR OWN (AND OTHER PEOPLE'S) NATURAL HISTORY PICTURES

by Tony Wharton FRPS AFIAP and reproduced here with his permission

I live in hopes of one day taking a perfect Natural History (NH) picture. If the opportunity to do so ever presents itself, will I be able to take the maximum possible photographic advantage of it? I doubt it very much, but if I do manage to, these will be the criteria which will have to apply:-

1. The subject matter will be relevant and will be shown in a natural, rather than a contrived or artificial situation. The relevant subject areas are those which embrace any of the various branches of natural history, including botany, zoology, physics, chemistry, geology, palaeontology, anthropology, meteorology and astronomy. The chosen subject will be seen to be free and unrestricted, in a natural or adopted habitat, and will be photographed without any kind of manipulation that alters the truth of the photographic statement. Those solarized cats are out!
2. The picture will be more than a straightforward portrait of the subject. There is nothing at all wrong with a straightforward portrait of a bird, insect, plant, or any other NH subject, but, all else being equal, a picture which depicts some aspect of the subject's behaviour or life cycle is more informative, and therefore better, unless, of course, the aim is simply to show what the subject looks like.
3. The image size and shape will be well suited to the size and shape of the picture space. The optimum image size is probably about two thirds of the picture space in a transparency, although in a print a smaller image size (about half, or even a third of the picture space) often looks better. With some subjects it may be desirable to show more of the habitat, in which case the image size of the main subject may justifiably be smaller. A format should be chosen which suits the subject being shown. For example, many, but by no means all, botanical subjects look better in a vertical format. It's really all a matter of common sense. Don't be afraid to mask transparencies down to a suitable format.
4. The main aspect, or aspects, of the subject will be critically sharp. Generally speaking, if the subject is shown in its entirety, it should be critically sharp from front to back. When the photographer is concentrating on only part of the subject, other parts rendered less sharply behind the main plane of sharp focus are often perfectly acceptable. Only occasionally are out-of-focus foreground areas acceptable in natural history pictures.
5. The exposure will be beyond reproach. What more need be said?
6. The lighting will look natural, even if it isn't, and it will give more than an adequate rendering of the shape and texture of the subject. If natural lighting can be used to give a good picture - fine! I'm all for it. If artificial lighting, e.g. electronic flash, has to be used - and sometimes there is no other way - the aim should be to give the effect of good natural lighting, even if it is obvious that the

picture could not have been taken other than with artificial lighting. Pictures which 'shout' flash at you are clearly not entirely successful.

7. The background will be compatible with the subject. A background which complements the main subject in a positive way is often very effective, e.g. an out-of-focus but undistracting background of mountain scenery can be used to make a picture of an alpine plant more informative. Obviously the degree of unsharpness has to be just right. When this technique can't be used, a pleasantly diffused background with some subtle variation of colour and tone is usually more pleasing than either an absolutely plain one or a critically sharp one. It follows therefore that the taking aperture has to be very carefully selected to give sufficient depth of field without bringing the background into too sharp focus. As always, it's a matter of thought and common sense, tempered with experience. You will naturally avoid distracting background highlights like the plague!

8. The colour rendering (and the perfect NH shot will need to be in colour!) will be accurate. Whereas, in pictorial photography, the acceptability of a given colour rendering is a very subjective matter, in NH work there is an absolute criterion - the colour of the original subject. Herein lies something of a problem, as the subject is rarely available for direct comparison.

9. There will be an overlay of pictorialism which will give the picture aesthetic appeal, even to the non-NH enthusiast. A degree of pictorialism always gives a NH photograph more impact, but it must not detract from the informative content of the picture. For example, back-lighting can 'lift' a nature picture, so long as it doesn't kill any of the main subject detail. With thought and care it is even possible, by using pictorial techniques such as back-lighting or differential focusing, to bring out more detail in the main subject. Obviously, thoughtful composition plays an important part in successful NH work, just as it does in any other kind of photography.

10. The picture will be fully and accurately titled. It is vital to supplement the visual content of your picture with full and accurate titling. A butterfly is not just a butterfly! It has a common name, as a rule, together with a scientific name defining genus and species. It also has a gender -and it could be taking advantage of this when it's photographed. If you photograph butterflies mating, say precisely what species they are and what they are doing! There may be some people who don't know! Ten points, well worth remembering when you need to evaluate a natural history picture, or are setting out to take one. Apply as many of the ten as you can in your own picture-taking and your percentage of successful shots will rocket. These criteria apply whether your interest is in prints or transparencies.

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