

HOW TO WIN PHOTO CONTESTS:

Tips From An Award-Winning Wildlife
Photographer and Contest Judge



Photo by Ruth Hoyt

JQWP
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So, you want to win a photo contest, eh?

Well, good luck!

You may wonder why I said that, but because art is subjective, luck plays at least some part in winning a photo contest. As a novice photographer 30-some years ago, I was a highly competitive shutterbug who constantly sought pleasing compositions wherever I was, whatever I was doing.

As a teen and then young adult, I enjoyed drawing and painting, mostly animals. At that time, I believed that artists must use their skills and experience to create their results, while photographers could merely aim their cameras at a subject, press the shutter, and capture what they saw. I had a long way to go and many mistakes to make before I would understand exactly how wrong I was!

Fortunately, I met a mature and patient portrait photographer who took me under his wing and became my most revered mentor. I learned to listen, rather than argue when he told me I had missed the mark on an attempt. He set the tone for me to listen, learn, and produce creative, competition-worthy photographs.

Although I wasn't particularly interested in photographing people, I soon discovered that what he taught me about portraiture applied to everything else! You may have heard the proverb, "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear." After spending a year entering weekly photo competitions, I earned the "Rookie of the Year" award in the renowned St. Louis (Missouri) Camera Club.

I do not have all the answers, but I have spent time with different instructors and mentors, not necessarily for photography, and have won my share of different competitions over the years.

You see, it isn't just about the technical aspects of whatever you are doing, from writing to drawing, performing, or photographing. It involves vision, style, creativity, voice, and examining it until you are exhausted. Breaking the rules comes into play in the technical arena. Wildlife photographer Georgina Steytler of Albany, Australia, says, "Learn the rules like a pro; break them like an artist."

Choosing which photo contests to enter might be compared to entering your dog in a small local dog show with a handful of competitors versus taking a deep dive into entering a larger, regional show with dozens of competitors.

When you are starting out, you may be comfortable in a small venue, but to learn and excel, you must step out of your comfort zone and leap into the big, real world.

Ask yourself why you should enter a photo contest. You may be interested in simply honing your techniques, challenging your skills, or learning to critique your efforts. However, you may have a competitive streak in your blood that drives you to compete against others for prize money or to gain recognition among peers or from agencies looking for new talent. In any case, there are many opportunities to test the waters.

The Journal of Wildlife Photography, the magazine that I write for, hosts monthly contests with cash prizes with different skill categories for members only, is a great place to start. Learn more here: <https://journalofwildlifephotography.com/wildlife-photography-contest/>

Let's get down to the business of how to win photo contests as you venture into the world of competition, starting with some technical, somewhat obvious tips.

Technical Tips

Enter only your best work. Learn to work ruthlessly to cull weak images.

Note: Award-winning wildlife photographer, Brad Hill did an amazing two hour free training just on culling for the Journal of Wildlife Photography members.

I have heard people say, “I can’t believe that photo of mine won. It’s not nearly as good as the other photos I entered!” Whaaat?? Why would you enter an inferior photo in a contest? The photo you did NOT think would win often does win. Enter only what you would be proud to see as one of the winners.

Yet, here I am to tell you that I am guilty of doing this years ago, at least once. My partner John Pickles and I entered the south Texas ranch wildlife photo contest called “Wildlife In Focus,” formerly known as the Coastal Bend Wildlife Photo Contest. I chose the portfolio of our images to enter in the contest and included John’s favorite photo of a coyote we photographed together. The coyote approached where we were hiding, was surprised to notice us, and stared into the camera, which made for a captivating photo. I hated the fact that his legs were cut off in the grass, and his tail was perilously close to the edge of the frame.

However, knowing it was John's favorite photo in our portfolio of images, I entered it anyway. What happened? The photo won First Place in the Coyotes Class, First Place in the Mammals Division, and Best of Contest, which aided us in winning our First Grand Prize! Was I happy?

Of course! Do I regret entering it? Absolutely not! But every time I look at this photo, I think of the difficult decision I made whether to enter it.



When selecting images for submission, look for work that has impact. The images should be sharp, exposed properly, composed well, and tell a story.

Aim to find and submit photos with the “Wow!” factor, unique ones with impact that grab the judges’ attention and keep them from moving on to the next photo.

As I photographed birds one afternoon in 2020, a northern mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottos*) flew in to check out the cactus near the waterhole. Technically, the photo is acceptable—the lighting was soft, and the bird approached in a pleasing pose, but the photo is lackluster and has no color, energy, or excitement going for it. The bird’s eye has no catchlight, and the bird looks dull and even bored!

Compare the mockingbird photo with the honeybee and pink pitaya cactus blossoms I entered in a photo contest about 15 years ago, you will see a world of difference. The bee is acceptably exposed and sharp, especially at a slow-ish 1/500 second shutter speed, and is positioned well within the composition. The color is vibrant, and the photo tells a story. The judging panel liked the photo well enough to award it first place in its class. Technology has advanced in giant leaps during the past 15 years, so the mockingbird photo should be better than the bee photo, but the camera only records what you tell it to. Look for dynamic photos with impact, impact, impact.

Images on next page...



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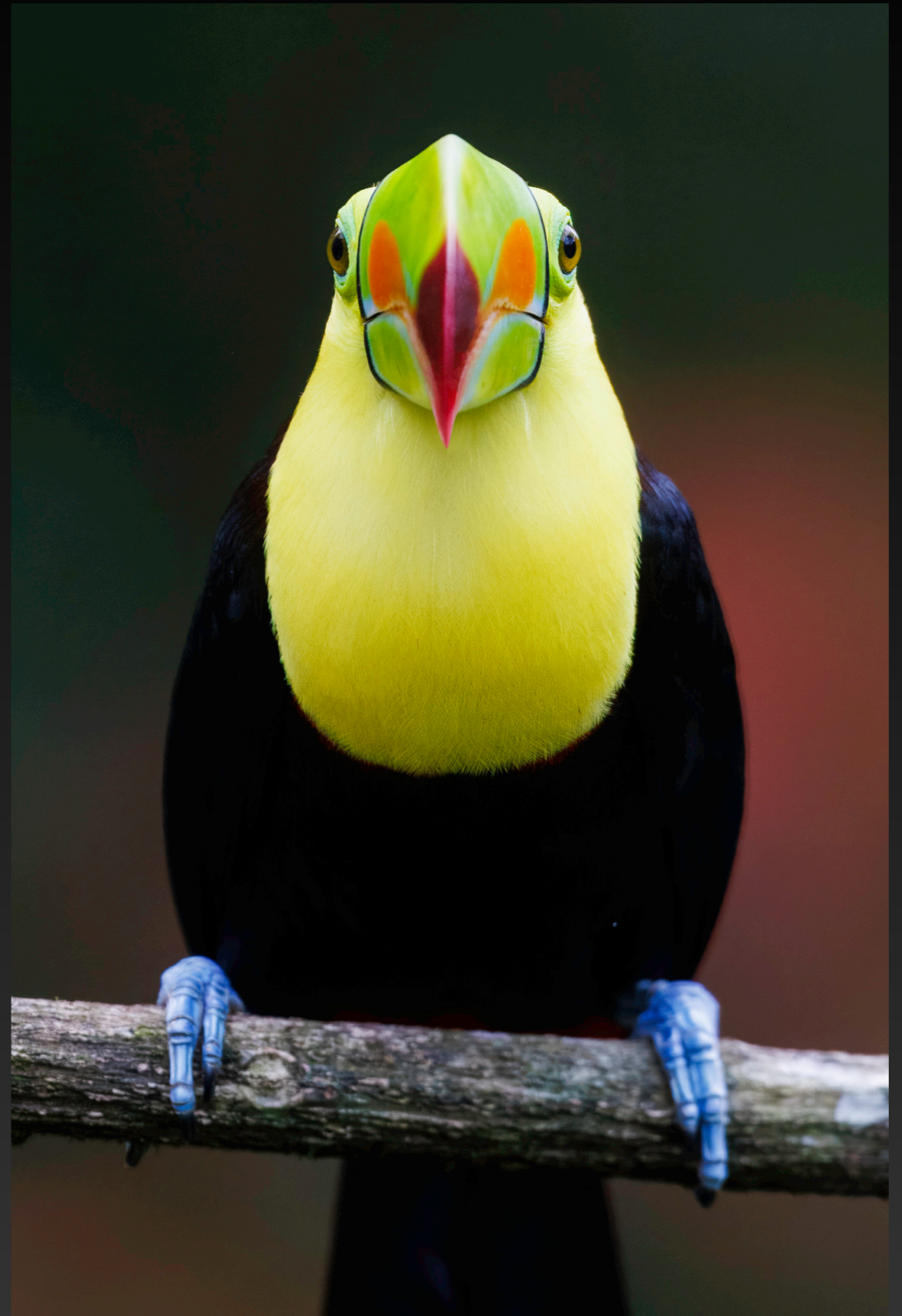
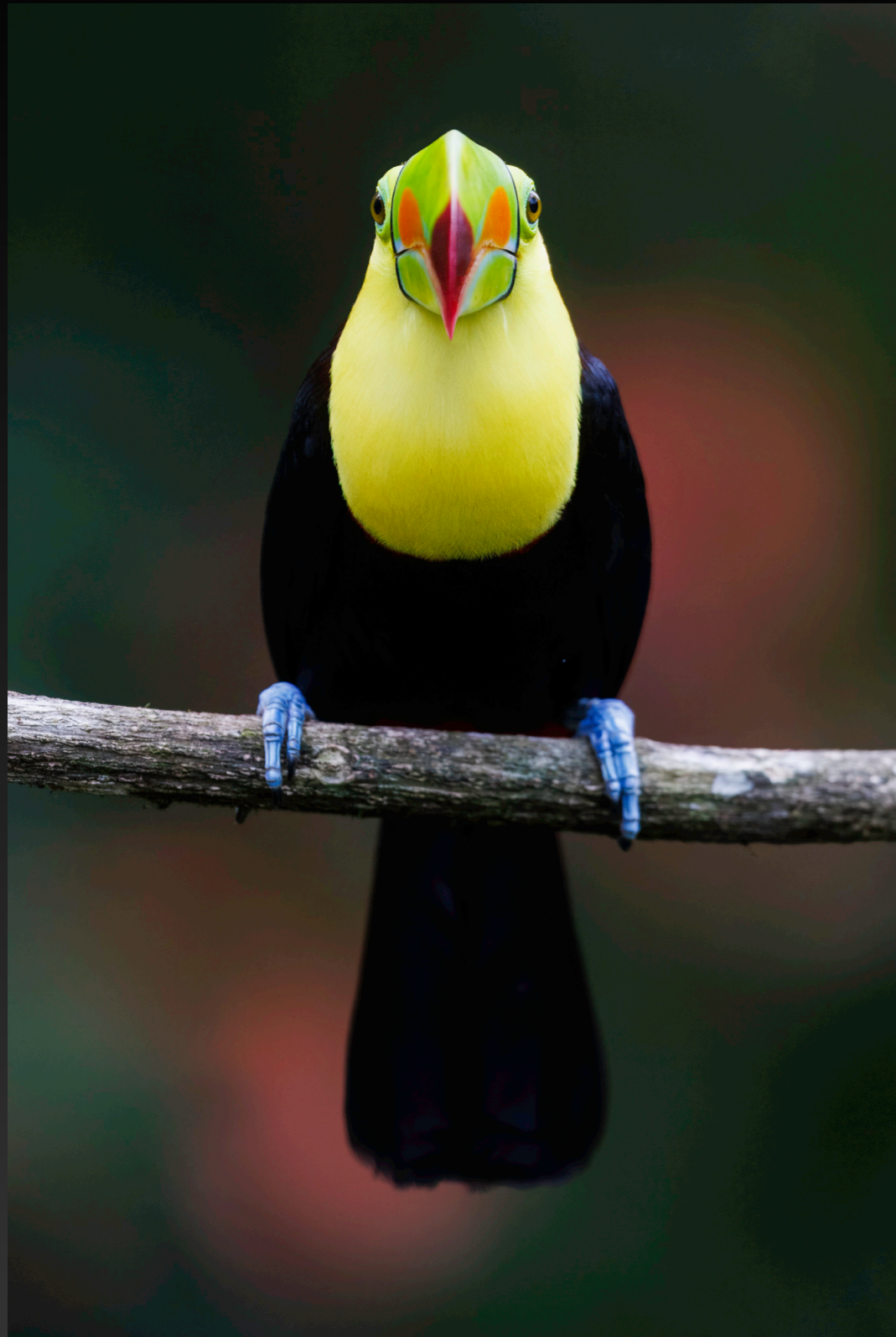
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Maintain simple compositions and clarity of the idea for a clean look to your work. Check the corners and borders of your photos; nothing should stick into or out of your photos' corners and along the edges; they draw the viewer's attention away from the subject. The same goes for objects such as leaves, grass, and sticks between the subject and the camera.

Crop carefully and try different amounts of crops; do not over-crop.

I have included four crop samples on the next 2 pages of a keel-billed toucan (*Ramphastos sulfuratus*) ranging from a full-body portrait to a tight head shot. You must choose how tightly to crop, but remember: you do not need to completely fill the frame with your subject to win a contest. I suggest leaving room for the subject to breathe.





Check your backgrounds to ensure they don't compete with the main subjects. Learn to use only as much aperture or depth of field/focus that is necessary so that your subject remains sharp and distinct from the background.

Seek original, unique subjects to make your photographs stand out from the rest of the pack. Judges like surprises and take delight in seeing something new and unusual. Along the same train of thought, do not copy photographs that have won previous photo contests. The judges may recognize them as copycats and discredit them or pass them over.

Enter photographs that are relative to the contest. If the contest has a theme, make sure your photographs fit the theme. Read and re-read the rules and theme description, study them thoroughly, and become intimately familiar with them. If there is a place on the submission form to include a caption, take advantage of this opportunity to add information about your photos. Judges or contest moderators may refer to captions to answer questions about entries, and this is a way to possibly help your cause.

Follow the submission instructions precisely. Every contest is different than the next. If the submission instructions state a minimum and maximum size, save your photographs as large as possible without going beyond the upper size limit. Refer to the instructions for specifications on the resolution (how many pixels per inch), size (measurement in pixels, centimeters, or inches on the long side), format (jpg, png, etc.), and total file size (how many megapixels). If you need help, ask. Most contest staff is willing to answer questions, but find your own resources as well. A graphic artist can help you with the technical aspects of saving images.

Proof your work, literally, and submit your entry well before the deadline. Open the photos on a separate computer to make sure they open properly, and the specifications match the submission rules and guidelines. Look for errors in the submission form. If you have a problem with uploading an entry at the last minute, the contest may close before your entry goes through, which would lead to disappointment.

Tips For Photographing

Capture multiple versions of subjects you may enter in a competition. Each photograph is different from the previous one, and one will undoubtedly be better. A couple of years ago, I coordinated a South Texas night sky photography workshop on a dark-sky ranch near my home. One of the subjects our leader selected was a historic stone water tower, which we photographed with the Milky Way appearing to spew like smoke out of the top of the water tower. The idea was clever, but we had to keep adjusting our gear so that the Milky Way lined up with the water tower. In addition, each time we made an exposure, the lighting on the water tower was slightly different.

Images on next page...



Photograph all year long to help you become a fluid, comfortable photographer and improve your skills and techniques. Enter contests regularly. Choose which ones to enter, based on your particular areas of interest. As you do, your unique style will emerge, and you will become comfortable photographing your subject matter.

Know and understand the rules (guidelines) of photography. However, learn when to break them to catch your viewers' attention in a positive way. A good example of this is the rule of thirds. Break the rule by offsetting the subject if it improves the flow of the way your eyes move through your photograph. In particular, if you photograph something that reflects, such as mountains in front of a body of water, photograph it more than one way. Center it perfectly and photograph it, but next take it off-center to change the balance of the resulting photograph. You can decide which version you like afterward.

Use subjective techniques that add impact to your images such as color, lighting, shadows, form, feel, technique, and presentation. However, when you do so, make sure the viewers can see and understand what you did and why. Judges may not have the time or patience to figure out what they are viewing.

Consider yourself a journalist. Think "who, what, why, when, where, and how?" as you compose your photographs.

The results should tell a story without the viewer having to read a caption. If the story isn't strong, the resulting photograph will be weak.

Use the burst feature on your camera to capture photos in a series. This is particularly useful when photographing wildlife in action. As the animals move, you may press the shutter just at the moment when they blink, move in an awkward way, or turn away from the camera. Later, you can select the best photo(s) from the series and eliminate the others.

The photo of these brown-hooded parrots (*Pyrilia haematotis*) on the next page are not competitive, but the two consecutive shots demonstrate how quickly a composition can change. In the first, the perched bird's eye is half-closed, and the wings of the bird entering the scene are out of the photo. In the second, the perched bird's eye is wide open, and the second bird is completely in the photograph.





Administration Tips

Keep accurate records of the photos you enter in competitions. You will notice trends of not only what judges choose but what YOU like. If your photograph doesn't win or take a placement, enter it somewhere else. There is normally no benefit to entering a non-winning photo repeatedly with the hope of obtaining a different result. The photo may be one that you print and simply enjoy seeing on your wall. However, if you truly believe your photograph was overlooked in a contest, enter it under another judge in a different competition to get a second opinion from the judges, but then carry on with your life and photography. Creating new and exciting work that you enter will take your photography to the next level, with the bonus of boosting your confidence.

My friend and colleague Dave Welling photographed a wild western diamondback rattlesnake (*Crotalus atrox*) after it struck a green jay (*Cyanocorax yncas*) during the South Texas Shootout, a wildlife photo contest based in South Texas years ago. Briefly, as Dave sat in a photo blind and was photographing two perched green jays, one flew to the other side of the waterhole, so he concentrated on the remaining jay.

Suddenly, the other jay called violently, and Dave looked over to see the bird had been struck right behind the head by the rattlesnake. Stunned by what he saw, Dave managed to swing his camera around, quickly compose, and capture several images of the life-and-death drama before him.

Excited about his series of photographs, he entered what he considered the best one in the photo contest, and it won nothing. Nothing! Last year, he entered the same photograph in the National Wildlife Federation's "Pulse of the Planet" photo contest, where it was awarded Grand Prize!



Maintain a rolling inventory of your best work. Store your top-rated photographs on your computer in collections of various general subject categories such as Birds, Mammals, Reptiles, etc., and sub-categories such as Deer. As you add improved photographs in a category, remove older, less desirable photos so that your collection remains current and fresh. This can be compared to what many photographers did in the film days—they maintained and kept handy a page of 20 transparencies that contained their best, current work. Medium- and large-format photographers kept several pages of single images. Upon request, the photographers could instantly show a potential client or photo buyer a sample of their work.

I have included two examples of deer photographs. The first is a sample of a mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*), a documentary portrait photo that I captured years ago while traveling in the Grand Tetons National Park. As I accumulated better deer photos, I removed the older deer photos with new and better ones.

Images on next page...





Study Tips

Study as many photographs as you can stand, to the point of becoming tired of looking at photographs. You can subscribe to various magazines, but viewing photos online is more cost-effective. There are numerous places to study photographs, but one example of where you can see mesmerizing nature and wildlife images online is at Nature's Best Photography (naturesbestphotography.org). By putting this habit into practice on a regular basis, you will start recognizing when a photo truly has impact and stands out from the rest. You will also begin to notice that as you view the same subjects many times but in different ways and by different photographers, some photographs are simply not exciting or unusual. On the other hand, you may pick up techniques or methods to achieve what will aid you in developing your trademark or style.

Seek contests that allow you to enter multiple images to increase your odds of winning. Many contests provide a discount for submitting multiple entries. However, don't simply fill slots; enter only the best photos from your files. The saying, "the cream floats to the top," is certainly relevant in this case. Be sure to watch the live critique from the Journal's monthly photo contest, or watch the replay later. During the critique, I share some of the behind-the-scenes activities that take place during judging...

Each month's critique has been progressively more in-depth than the previous one.

Resist the temptation of sharing your potential contest entries online. Social media has a way of coming back to bite you if you are careless. Some images become viral while others are hardly noticed. What you do NOT want to happen is for a judge to possibly see your images by chance and then again as entries in a photo contest. First, you have other photographs that are equally worthy of sharing on social media, but, more importantly, "showing your cards" takes away the surprise and delight of judges and other folks seeing your best, fresh work.

Preparation Tips

Determine how many photos you want to enter. Just because you can submit 20 photographs does not mean you should enter 20, especially if you must put weaker photos in the collection to fill the entry. If you experience challenges in culling down your collection, select the best photo from the same series of an event. Otherwise, you risk competing with your own work. The judges will not choose two similar photographs as contenders—they will pick one and eliminate the other, so do the job for them and eliminate the guesswork.

Process the photos with utmost care and do NOT over-process your work. You are responsible for following the specifications provided in the contest submission guidelines. There is nothing worse than an excellent capture ruined in post-process. Even with the monthly photo contests I conduct for the Journal, we receive several over-processed images with an almost garish appearance, highly cropped images, watermarked images, and vignettes.

Separate contender photographs from your inventory. Assuming they are digital photos, place them in a folder on your desktop and refer to them often. Once you have accumulated the desired number of photographs to submit, decide if you want to add other, better ones. If so, continue the process of culling weaker photos from the folder to maintain the appropriate number of photos.

Seek wise counsel. Realistically, your family members and friends love your photos more than any photo contest judge will. Find a professional consultant, mentor, or coach who consults with photographers on a regular basis, someone who will be candid with you about your work. Pay for a portfolio review by someone who is knowledgeable about your area of concentration. A landscape, portrait, or product photographer will not provide a useful critique of your wildlife photography.

When you meet with your consultant, have the photos organized in a folder that will be easy to view. In a separate folder, include some backup photos that you may share. Be quiet and allow the pro to view your photos and ask you questions about them.

I have shared perhaps a snippet of what I have learned about competitions over many decades, most of it as a result of personal experience. It doesn't matter if the competition is about a photograph you captured, a piece you played on the piano, or a dog you trained. People have competed since the beginning of their time on Earth, I believe as a way to impress others as well as themselves. They want to prove they have the best dog in the hunt, literally and figuratively. I encourage you to compete because you want to share something that you love and find passion in doing.

If you glean nothing but this final note from my article, remember to pay attention to what you enter in a competition and ensure that it is relevant to the contest. If and when it wins an award, retire the photograph and push yourself to create new, unique, compelling images.

I'm one of the judges for the *Journal of Wildlife Photography* monthly photo contests and I do a live Zoom critique every month of the winners and runners-up which is a very good way to get better. Check it out here: <https://journalofwildlifephotography.com/wildlife-photography-contest/>