

# Working With the PSA Nature and Wildlife Definitions

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The *PSA Journal* in conjunction with the **Nature Division** presents a three-part series on Nature. Whether a member is new to Nature photography or experienced, the articles will offer much information. Beginning with this issue and continuing in June and July, the articles will cover: nature and wildlife definitions; digital editing of nature images; the ethics of nature photography and the subject's well being and protection. The PSA International Conference in Yellowstone National Park will offer many opportunities for photographers to capture nature images. **John Davis Jr., APSA, PPSA**, authored the three articles and various members of the Nature Division have supplied the pictures that accompany the series.

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The Nature Division of the Photographic Society of America (PSA) has long employed definitions of "nature image" and "wildlife image" for PSA-recognized nature exhibitions and competitions. The purpose of this article is to discuss and illustrate the PSA nature and wildlife definitions, especially for newer members of PSA, or for members who are new to nature photography. The definitions are in bold print, and broken down by phrase or section for discussion and illustration.

***"Nature photography is restricted to the use of the photographic process to depict observations from all branches of natural history, except anthropology and archaeology..."***

Image capture on a light-sensitive surface (the photographic process) is the first requirement. Natural history branches include, but are not limited to botany, zoology, geology, mineralogy, astronomy, ecology, and meteorology. Anthropology (the study of humanity and modern humans), and Archaeology (the study of past

human life and culture) obviously deal with the "human element," which has long been excluded from the PSA nature definition. Plants and animals are the most frequently photographed nature subjects, but there are many other excellent subjects. (See *Figures 1 and 2*)

***"...in such a fashion that a well informed person will be able to identify the subject material and certify as to its honest presentation...."***

Does the main subject belong in the habitat shown in the image? Would the subjects be found



*Fig. 1 – Physical phenomena caused by solar wind, magnetism and the collision of charged particles (aurora borealis) are exciting and tell a dramatic nature story. © John Fuller, FPSA, Aurora Borealis*



*Fig. 2 – Geology subjects provide many photo opportunities and excellent stories of earth's history and geologic processes. © John M. Davis Jr, APSA, PPSA, Coyote Butte Reflection 4*

together in the wild? A close-up shot, or one without background, might prevent identification. (See Fig. 3) Ask whether there is anything in an image that might create doubt in the mind of a judge making a quick decision about a nature image. Does the honesty come through? It is acceptable to take a photo in such a way as to obscure the human element, but by doing so might hurt the image, such as in a wildlife competition, if the background or habitat would have been an important clue that a subject is wild and not taken under controlled situations.

***“The story telling value of the photograph must be weighed more than the pictorial quality....”***

*(See Figures 4, 5 and 6)*



Fig. 4—This is a good portrait of the Black-bellied Plover, but tells a limited nature story. © Rick Cloran, FPSA, EPSA, Black-bellied Plover at Surf 2



Fig. 5—This is less of a portrait, but tells more of a nature story of the Plover feeding. © Rick Cloran, FPSA, EPSA, Black-bellied Plover Feeding



Fig. 6—Here there is good pictorial quality plus the story of the Plover taking the meal to eat. © Rick Cloran, FPSA, EPSA, Black-bellied Plover with Meal 1



Fig. 3 - A close up shot might cause a well informed judge to be unable to distinguish between a naturally occurring variety and a horticultural variety of poppy, creating a risk of a mark down or disqualification. This Poppy is cultivated, not natural. © John M. Davis Jr, APSA, PPSA, Poppy Core

***“Human elements shall not be present, except on the rare occasion when those human elements enhance the nature story....”*** (See Figures 7, 8, and 9)



Fig. 7 – The superstructure (round, lower left) and cable bit (upper right) of the ship present a high risk of disqualification unless judges agree that the sunken ship, which often creates an entire ecosystem for marine plants and animals, enhances the nature story. Particles suspended in water lit by strobe lights would do not disqualify, but scuba exhaust bubbles would. © Steven Fisher, APSA, Helmut Wreck-Palau



Fig. 8 – The presence of humans even when a part of the natural environment at Havasu Falls, disqualifies this image as “nature.”  
© John M. Davis Jr, APSA, PPSA, Soaking their Feet

**“The presence of scientific bands are acceptable.”** (See Fig. 10)



Fig. 10 - The band on the left leg of the Painted Bunting is a human element but will not disqualify the image. © Bob Griffith, FPSA, Painted Bunting

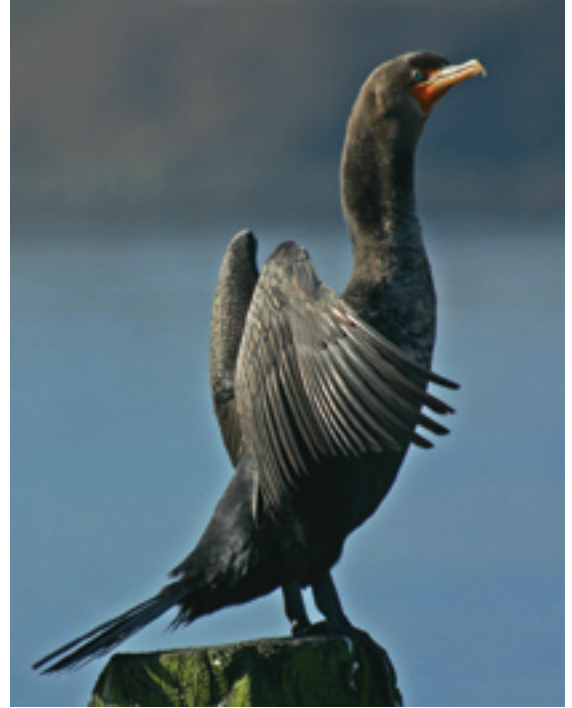


Fig. 9– In the Pacific Northwest of the US, the Double Crested Cormorant regularly uses a piling to dry its wings after diving for fish. Like the Osprey that uses a power pole for a nest, or the barn owl adopting a barn habitat, the human element is used to enhance the nature story. Many adaptations showing a human element will not be seen by judges as falling within this human element exception.  
© John M. Davis Jr, APSA, PPSA, Cormorant Drying Wings

**“Photographs of artificially produced hybrid plants or animals, mounted specimens, or obviously set arrangements are ineligible....”** (See Fig. 11)



Fig. 11 - If the arrangement appears to a judge to have been set up by the photographer, there is a risk of disqualification or markdown. Jack provided this to demonstrate a “set up” image. © Jack Templeton, Bat and Scorpion

**“...as is any form of manipulation that alters the truth of the photographic statement.” Digital editing will be covered in another Journal article. The image must be truthful, from capture to presentation, whether film or digital. If an image does not appear “natural” to a judge, it risks being scored down or disqualified.** (See Figures 12, 13, and 14)



Fig. 12 – Supplemental light should appear natural. Reflection back underneath the mushroom should be done without the appearance of a second, unnatural light source.  
© John M. Davis Jr APSA, PPSA, Golden Chantrelle



Fig. 13 – A polarizing, enhancement or warming filter, or the wrong film, can cause a shift to unnatural or over saturated colors. Excessive polarization of the sky (enhanced digitally here) can create an unnatural look. © John M. Davis Jr, APSA, PPSA, Yucca On Mound



Fig. 14 – Use of artificial light is both acceptable and helpful to many images, but care should be taken not to create shadows or highlights that are too strong or create an unnatural look. Multiple catch lights in the eyes are distracting, and may cause judges to mark down an image like this.  
© Rick Cloran, FPSA, EPSA, Owl



Fig. 15 – Plants can also be shown as “wildlife,” as long as they are “free and unrestrained in a natural or adopted habitat,” as is the case for these barrel cactus blossoms. However, hybrid or cultivated plants are disqualified because of human intervention.  
© John M. Davis Jr, APSA, PPSA, Barrel Cactus Blossoms

**WILDLIFE DEFINITION:**

“Wildlife is defined as one or more organisms living free and unrestrained in a natural or adopted habitat. Therefore, photographs of zoo or game farm animals are not eligible for entry in Wildlife competitions.” (See Figures 15, 16, 17 and 18)

**DIFFERENCES OF OPINION.** There are differences of opinion among photographers and others, as to what a nature or wildlife image is, or is not. For example, the *Federation Internationale De L’Art* (FIAP), like PSA, provides nature and wildlife definitions (similar to the PSA definitions) for FIAP recognized exhibitions and competitions, but the North American Nature Photography Association (NANPA) has no nature or wildlife definition. Even with definitions, there is plenty of room for disagreement, and often lively debate among nature photographers who may choose strict or liberal interpretation of the definitions.

**IT’S UP TO THE JUDGES.** The PSA definitions provide general guidelines about “nature” or “wildlife” images for photographers and for those who are the final arbiters—the nature exhibition judges. Judges use between 5 and 10 seconds to score an image, and score hundreds of images from all parts of the globe in nature exhibitions. That means quick judgments on a wide variety of subjects. We ask a lot of our judges: To be well informed about nature and wildlife subjects and their environment to identify



Fig. 16– The restraint on the legs disqualifies this image as “wildlife.” In addition, it is not a “nature” image because the restraint shows the hand of man. There is no rule against the use of black and white in a “nature” or “wildlife” image. © John M. Davis Jr, APSA, PPSA, Barn Owl

the subject matter and its honest presentation; to recognize the nature story and weigh it more than the pictorial quality of the image; to discern human elements if present; to decide about the truth of the photographic statement and the “naturalness” of the presentation; to understand and make judgments about the exceptions to the rules; and to determine whether the photographer went beyond the limits on editing or manipulation. A judge may give an image the benefit of the doubt, mark it down, or disqualify it.

**SUMMARY.** Nature and wildlife photography is a passion for so many photographers. For those who wish to enter PSA-recognized nature and wildlife exhibitions, a good working understanding of the definitions is important. The definitions are helpful guides, but it is finally up to exhibition judges to decide whether images fit the definitions. As new PSA members and those new to nature photography gain experience with the definitions, success in the exhibitions will follow. For those who just want to photograph nature and wildlife subjects, an understanding of definition material should be helpful. PSA holds its annual conference at Yellowstone National Park this year, and plans call for plenty of outdoor photography activities and many opportunities to find nature and wildlife subjects! ■



*Fig. 17- After human intervention, if a plant or animal becomes “naturalized” over a significant period of time (established on its own, as if native), it may be accepted by a nature exhibition judge as native. If a subject is commonly known to have been naturalized, like these wild horses in the United States, chances of acceptance in a nature exhibition are good. The judges might find clues in the manes and hooves of the horses. Descriptive titles (instead of “cute” titles) are encouraged to help judges identify nature images. © Anthony Mistretta, Wild Foal Nursing*



*Fig. 18- The Polar Bear is free and unrestrained in a natural habitat, and the image shows a strong nature story, of survival of the Polar Bear at the expense of the Harp Seal. © Bob Griffith, FPSA, Polar Bear with Harp Seal*