

# **NATURE PHOTOGRAPHY**

## **The new (2015) Definition**



**Roy Killen, MPSA, EFIAP, MAPS**

October 2014

# Definition of Nature Photography

From 1 January 2015 the International Federation of Photographic Art (FIAP), the Photographic Society of America (PSA) and the Royal Photographic Society (RPS) will all use the same definition for Nature and Wildlife categories in the competitions and exhibitions that they approve. That definition will also be used by the Australian Photographic Society (APS). The definition is:

*Nature photography is restricted to the use of the photographic process to depict all branches of natural history, except anthropology and archaeology, in such a fashion that a well-informed person will be able to identify the subject material and certify its honest presentation. The story telling value of a photograph must be weighed more than the pictorial quality while maintaining high technical quality. Human elements shall not be present, except where those human elements are integral parts of the nature story such as nature subjects, like barn owls or storks, adapted to an environment modified by humans, or where those human elements are in situations depicting natural forces, like hurricanes or tidal waves. Scientific bands, scientific tags or radio collars on wild animals are permissible. Photographs of human created hybrid plants, cultivated plants, feral animals, domestic animals, or mounted specimens are ineligible, as is any form of manipulation that alters the truth of the photographic statement.*

*No techniques that add, relocate, replace, or remove pictorial elements except by cropping are permitted. Techniques that enhance the presentation of the photograph without changing the nature story or the pictorial content, or without altering the content of the original scene, are permitted including HDR, focus stacking and dodging/burning. Techniques that remove elements added by the camera, such as dust spots, digital noise, and film scratches, are allowed. Stitched images are not permitted. All allowed adjustments must appear natural. Color images can be converted to grey-scale monochrome. Infrared images, either direct-captures or derivations, are not allowed.*

*Images used in Nature Photography competitions may be divided in two classes: Nature and Wildlife. Images entered in Nature sections meeting the Nature Photography Definition above can have landscapes, geologic formations, weather phenomena, and extant organisms as the primary subject matter. This includes images taken with the subjects in controlled conditions, such as zoos, game farms, botanical gardens, aquariums and any enclosure where the subjects are totally dependent on man for food.*

*Images entered in Wildlife sections meeting the Nature Photography Definition above are further defined as one or more extant zoological or botanical organisms free and unrestrained in a natural or adopted habitat. Landscapes, geologic formations, photographs of zoo or game farm animals, or of any extant*

*zoological or botanical species taken under controlled conditions are not eligible in Wildlife sections. Wildlife is not limited to animals, birds and insects. Marine subjects and botanical subjects (including fungi and algae) taken in the wild are suitable wildlife subjects, as are carcasses of extant species. Wildlife images may be entered in Nature sections of Exhibitions.*

One of the most significant differences between the new definition and the previous FIAP Nature definition is that the Nature sections of exhibitions may now have two classes – Nature and Wildlife. Wildlife images must satisfy the basic criteria for Nature images and also satisfy several additional criteria.

This document is an attempt to clarify the meaning of the new definition and provide guidelines to help photographers capture and edit images that meet the new requirements. The views expressed here are my own and they are not necessarily endorsed by APS or any other organisation.

It is important to acknowledge that there will be many circumstances in which a judge will not be able to tell whether or not a particular image complies with the Nature or Wildlife definition; for example, it may be impossible to tell whether or not an animal was in captivity when photographed. or whether or not some small element was cloned in or out. I believe that it is the photographer's responsibility to be honest and not to deliberately try to deceive the judge or stretch the rules. If there is any doubt about whether or not an image meets the Nature or Wildlife definition it should be entered in an open competition.

Note: Any reference in these notes to "animals" can be taken to include all zoological specimens (birds, insects, fish, etc) unless otherwise noted.

The FIAP/PSA/RPS Nature definition defines and limits three things:

1. The subject matter that is acceptable in Nature and Wildlife images.
2. The circumstances under which legitimate Nature and Wildlife images can be captured.
3. The extent to which Nature and Wildlife images can be modified after capture.



# WHAT SUBJECT MATTER IS ACCEPTABLE IN NATURE IMAGES?

The “primary subject matter” of acceptable Nature images can be divided into two broad categories—organisms (such as mammals, birds, reptiles, insects and plants) and inanimate things (such as geological features and natural phenomena). Some of these subjects are not acceptable in Wildlife images.

## **The definition limits the subject matter of Nature images to “natural history”.**

There is no universally accepted definition of “natural history”, although it is often considered to be the study of plants and animals in their natural environment. However, the Nature definition allows images from “all branches of natural history” so it permits images from fields such as botany, zoology, geology and astronomy. However, the Nature definition specifically excludes images from the fields of anthropology and archaeology.

Anthropology is the study of humankind (including culture, society and difference). Archaeology is the study of human activity in the past. So any image that is a study of humankind, past or present, is not acceptable in Nature competitions.

## **The definition requires organisms in Nature images to be “extant”.**

Extant means “still existing”. It is a term commonly used in biology to refer to groups of organisms (such as species or families) that are still alive as opposed to being extinct. For example, the Tasmanian devil is extant, the Tasmanian tiger is extinct.

Although most Nature images will depict living organisms, the definition does not require an individual organism in an image to be alive and the Wildlife definition specifically allows images of “carcasses of extant species”.





### **The definition requires the subject matter to be identifiable.**

The way in which and image is captured and presented must render the subject identifiable by a “well-informed” person (for example, someone familiar with the type of plant being photographed). It must also be possible for such a person to verify that the image is an “honest presentation” of the subject matter.

Although there is no requirement for Nature images to show a complete organism, extreme close-up images of parts of an organism may not be readily identifiable and, if so, would not be permitted.

### **The definition requires the subject matter to be presented honestly.**

Any photographic process that results in a dishonest presentation of the subject matter is unacceptable. It would, for example, be dishonest to deliberately change the colour of a bird in a nature image.

### **The definition excludes certain types of plants and animals.**

Broadly speaking, the definition excludes images of animals or plants that were created by humans (for example, hybrids that have not occurred naturally) or which exist in their present form because of human intervention (cultivated plants, domestic animals or mounted specimens).

**Hybrid plants** or animals are those created by humans from two or more different species.

Hybrid plants are not permitted.



**Cultivated plants** are those that exist because their ancestors were taken from the wild and grown under some form of controlled conditions (usually for the purpose of decoration or food) that may have included careful breeding and selection.

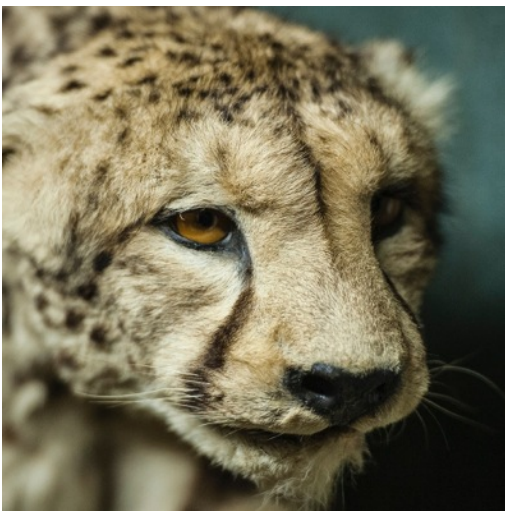


Cultivated plants are not permitted. However, wildflowers planted in botanical gardens are permitted.

**Domestic animals** are those that are kept by humans as a pet, work animal, food source, or source of fibre such as wool.



Domestic animals are not permitted.



Mounted specimens are not permitted.

### **The definition excludes feral animals.**

A **feral animal** is one that has escaped from a domestic situation and is living wild; or one that is descended from such animals. For example, in Australia there are feral dogs, cats, pigs, horses, cattle, donkeys, camels, goats, buffalo, deer, pigeons, and other species.

Zoologists make a distinction between feral animals and **introduced species**. Introduced species are those that were never domesticated but which now exist in locations other than where they originated, often because they were brought there by humans. Examples in Australia are foxes, rabbits and cane toads. It is quite common for many introduced species (such as rabbits and foxes) to be referred to as “feral” but, strictly speaking they are not feral if they are not descendant from domesticated ancestors. The Nature definition does not exclude images of introduced species.

## **The definition allows images of landscapes and geologic formations.**

Geology has many sub-fields of study and there is nothing in the definition to suggest that any areas of geology should be excluded.

Therefore, acceptable subjects include:

- Landscapes and seascapes (that do not contain any human elements unrelated to the nature story).
- Landforms resulting from natural weathering and erosion.
- Rivers, lakes and waterfalls.
- Rock structures.
- Volcanoes, various forms of lava, boiling mud pools and geysers.
- Minerals and naturally formed crystals.

Images of gemstones, crystals, rocks or other geological objects that have been reshaped by humans are not acceptable.





## **The definition allows images of natural forces and weather phenomena.**

The definition gives hurricanes and tidal waves as examples of natural forces. Other examples could include:

- Atmospheric and weather phenomena (including rainbows, lightning, cloud formations and auroras).
- Extreme weather events such as heavy seas, floods, storms, dust storms, cyclones, tornadoes and waterspouts.
- Earthquakes and tsunamis.
- Rain, snow or hail.



Images that show the aftermath of natural forces (such as a cyclone) should not be entered in Nature.

## **The definition limits the presence of human elements.**

The definition permits “human elements” in Nature images under just three circumstances:

- (a) When the human elements are “integral parts of the nature story”.
- (b) When the human elements are present in an image depicting natural forces.
- (c) Scientific banding, tagging and radio collars.



This image is acceptable because the brick wall is an integral part of the nature story. The image shows how the wasp has adapted its behaviour to utilise the human structure.



The scientific banding on the cranes is acceptable.

The extent to which a human element is considered an integral part of the nature story in an image is likely to be an issue of debate for images such as this:



# UNDER WHAT CIRCUMSTANCES CAN A NATURE IMAGE BE CAPTURED?

THIS DEPENDS ON WHETHER THE IMAGE IS BEING ENTERED IN A **NATURE** OR **WILDLIFE** COMPETITION.

**The Nature definition permits images taken with the subjects in “controlled conditions”.**

Such conditions include zoos, game farms, botanical gardens, aquariums and any enclosure where the subjects are totally dependent on man for food.



This image is acceptable in Nature even though the birds are in an aviary. It is not an acceptable Wildlife image.

**The Wildlife definition requires subjects to be “free and unrestrained in a natural or adopted habitat”.**

A **natural habitat** is any place where the subject of the image (zoological or botanical organism) lives or grows without being forced to do so by humans.

To be **living free** the organism must not be under the control of humans, nor should it be dependent upon humans for food. Natural influences must determine its life, behaviour and death.

This distinction between Nature and Wildlife photography is important, it means that:

- Environments such as aquariums, traditional zoos, open-range zoos, game farms or other areas in which animals are enclosed or confined are not considered natural environments for the purpose of Wildlife photography. However, images taken in these environments are acceptable as Nature images.
- Animals in Wildlife images should be free to come and go from the location in which they are photographed.



- National parks are considered natural environments because the plants and animals there are not considered to be in “controlled conditions”.
- Areas such as regenerated forests or parks in urban areas are considered natural environments for the animals and plants that occur in them without human intervention.
- It is unacceptable to temporarily relocate or restrict the freedom of animals (including insects and reptiles) for the purpose of Wildlife photography.
- It is unacceptable to relocate plants for the purpose of Wildlife photography as the relocation would mean they were no longer in their natural habitat.
- It is unacceptable to use techniques such as cooling or the application of chemicals to temporarily restrict the movement of animals (including reptiles and insects) for Nature or Wildlife photography

Of course, it may be difficult to tell whether or not an image has been taken in “controlled conditions” as illustrated with these two images:



One of these images qualifies as a Wildlife image, the other does not. Which is it? The photographer will know and should be honest about it.

### **The Nature definition places no restrictions on image capture techniques.**

The definition makes no mention of camera techniques (such as the deliberate use of slow shutter speed to blur movement) or the use of remotely or automatically triggered cameras. Therefore, it can be assumed that it is acceptable to use such techniques.

The definition makes no mention of the use of artificial lighting, such as flash. However, the overall requirement that nature images should appear “natural” means that artificial lighting should be subtle and should not alter the natural colours of the scene.



An image taken with flash is acceptable, but ethical practice limits its use to situations where it is unlikely to cause any harm to the organism being photographed.

## WHAT POST-CAPTURE ALTERATIONS ARE PERMITTED IN NATURE IMAGES?

One of the most controversial aspects of Nature photography is the extent to which images (particularly digital images) can be altered after capture. Alterations to images can be grouped into two basic categories:

- (a) adjustments that optimise image quality without altering the pictorial content of the image, and
- (b) modifications that alter the content of the original scene, other than by cropping.

Broadly speaking, adjustments of type (a) are permitted and modifications of type (b), other than cropping, are not.

Put simply:

**Any form of manipulation that alters the truth of the photographic statement is **not** permitted.**

**The following image editing techniques are permitted:**

1. Cropping.





2. Adjustments that improve image quality without altering the content of the original scene - e.g. exposure, contrast, saturation, sharpening and noise reduction.



3. Dodging and burning.



4. Editing that removes small elements that were not part of the original scene (such as spots caused by dust on a digital sensor or scratches on a scanned image).
5. High dynamic range (HDR) techniques are permitted because the pictorial content of the individual images and the combined image is the same.
6. Focus stacking of images with the same pictorial content is permitted because although this involves the combining of several images the pictorial content is not being changed.
7. Adjustments that compensate for lens deficiencies such as distortion or chromatic aberration are permitted because they do not change the pictorial content.



## **The definition requires all adjustments to appear natural.**

The permitted adjustments to Nature images must leave the image looking “natural” rather than manipulated. Therefore:

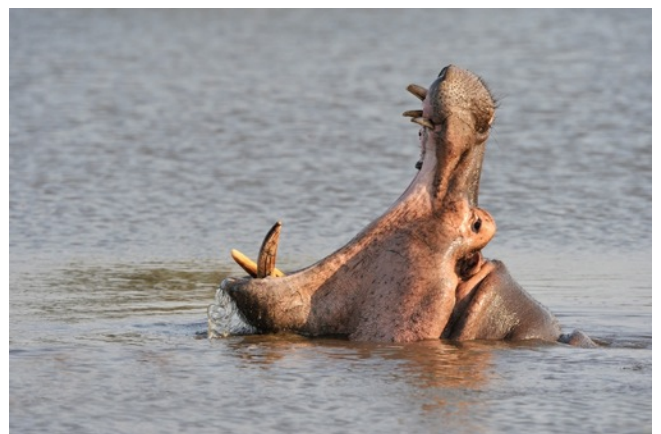
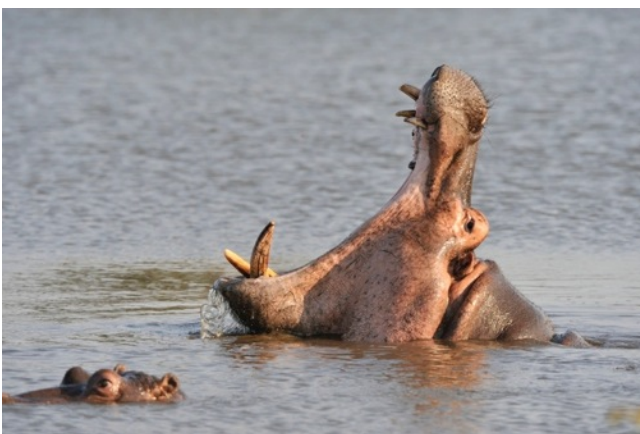
- Adjustments such as contrast, saturation and sharpening must not be excessive.
- The application of filters that produce images that appear unnatural is not permitted.



In this image the adjustments are excessive and the image no longer looks natural.

## **The definition prohibits the use of any editing techniques that remove, move, add or replace pictorial elements in an image.**

Basically this means that whatever is in the captured image must be shown in the edited Nature image, unless the image has been cropped. It does not matter whether the element you are tempted to remove is large or small - if you change the content of the scene the image is no longer eligible as a Nature image.



Cloning to remove unwanted elements is not permitted.



Removing elements with a “healing brush” is not permitted.



Adding elements by cloning is not permitted.







Duplicating elements in an image is not permitted.



Replacing image elements is not permitted.



Combining images by stitching is not permitted.





**The definition allows only one type of monochrome image.**



Grey-scale monochrome images are permitted.



Toned monochrome images are not permitted.



Infrared images, either direct captures or conversions, are not permitted.

## NATURE IMAGES MUST TELL A STORY

The Nature definition specifies that the “story telling value of a photograph must be weighed more than the pictorial quality while maintaining high technical quality”.

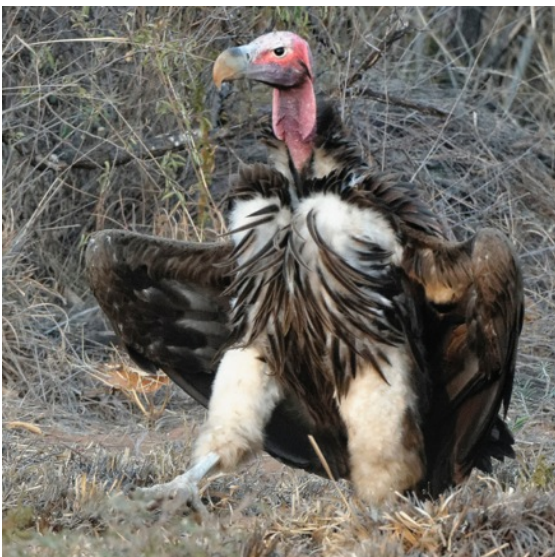
The term “pictorial quality” usually refers to the result of the photographer using techniques (of capture or processing) that transform an image from a straight documentary record to something more expressive. Therefore, it is expected that nature images will be well composed, have appropriate lighting and show the subject to best advantage.

To be of “high technical quality” the image should be correctly exposed, in focus, suitably sharp, have correct colour reproduction, and not suffer any major technical deficiencies such as excessive noise.

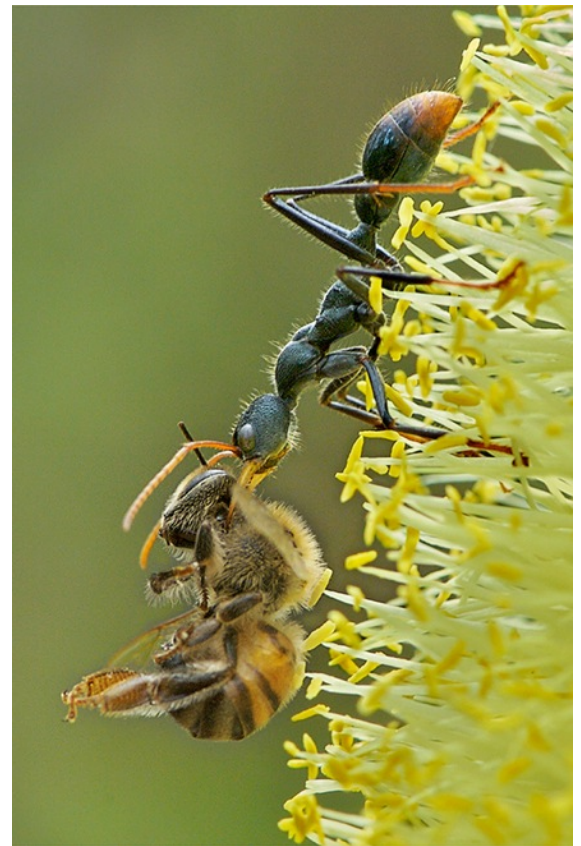
When the subject of the Nature image is a living organism (particularly a zoological one rather than a botanical one), there are several obvious possibilities for telling a story. All creatures eat, reproduce, interact with others, and engage in typical activities (such as birds flying). Capturing such activities tells part of their life story and has the potential to produce more engaging images than those that simply record the characteristics of the creature.

Here are some examples. Each image conveys a story, but in each pair of images the one on the right has a much stronger or more obvious story than the one on the left.















Capturing a strong nature story requires more than just being in the right place at the right time. It requires you to think about the possibilities and deliberately try to emphasise the story. For example, consider the situation in which I was photographing the great migration of wildebeest in Kenya. I captured many images of the wildebeest entering the Mara River and there was some story evident in images such as this:



However, there was a stronger story in the efforts of the wildebeest to survive the attacks from the crocodiles, as shown in this image:





But perhaps the strongest story of all was in the lucky escapes of some of the wildebeest as shown in this image:



**All images in this document are copyrighted by Roy Killen.**

**[roykillen@mac.com](mailto:roykillen@mac.com)**    **[www.roykillen.com](http://www.roykillen.com)**

This document was last updated on 12th October 2014. Please email me if you find any errors or wish to make any suggestions for improvement.

# SUMMARY CHECKLIST

## GENERAL SUBJECT MATTER

	ALLOWED	NOT ALLOWED
NATURE	Anything to do with natural history (the study and description of organisms and natural objects) except anthropology and archaeology. The subject matter must be identifiable.	Anything that is classified as anthropology (the study of humans) or archaeology (the study of historic or prehistoric peoples and their culture).
WILDLIFE	Same as Nature.	Same as Nature.

## SPECIFIC SUBJECT MATTER

	ALLOWED	NOT ALLOWED
NATURE	All extant (not extinct) organisms, landscapes, geological formations and weather phenomena.	Hybrid plants and animals, cultivated plants, feral animals, domestic animals, mounted specimens.
WILDLIFE	Organisms that are free and unrestrained in a natural or adopted habitat. Carcasses of extant species.	Landscapes and geological formations. Animals or plants that are under controlled conditions.

## HUMAN ELEMENTS

	ALLOWED	NOT ALLOWED
NATURE	Human elements that are an integral part of the nature story, or present in images depicting natural forces. Scientific bands and colours.	Any other human elements.
WILDLIFE	Same as Nature.	Same as Nature.

## IMAGE ADJUSTMENTS AND MODIFICATIONS

	ALLOWED	NOT ALLOWED
NATURE	Cropping. Techniques that enhance the image without changing the nature story or altering the pictorial content. Focus stacking. HDR techniques. Removal of dust spots or digital noise.	Anything that alters the content of the original scene by adding, removing or moving image elements. Adjustments that change the nature story. Stitching of multiple images. Replacing image elements (such as sky).
WILDLIFE	Same as Nature.	Same as Nature.

## MONOCHROME

	ALLOWED	NOT ALLOWED
NATURE	Grey-scale images.	Toned images. Infrared images.
WILDLIFE	Same as Nature.	Same as Nature.