

# Manipulated images in nature photography competitions

## Pure Nature or Pixel Pushing?

The following article is more or less identical with the original article as published in the November issue of the German magazine "Naturfoto" by Tecklenborg publishing house.

For a few years trouble has been brewing behind the scenes of many international wildlife photography competitions. The reason for this is the increasing number of submitted photographs that are manipulated - some of them to quite an extent. In some cases the organisers refrained from making this issue public causing a feeling of uncertainty among many in the photography scene.

The Society of German Nature Photographers (GDT) is the organiser of the annual contest "European Wildlife Photographer of the Year" (EWPY) and in this context also awards the Fritz Pölking Award and Fritz Pölking Junior Award in cooperation with Tecklenborg publishing house. We would like to give you an insight into the judging procedure for these contests and point to the consequences we are facing as a result of the introduction of digital photography. Some members of the 2009 jury will also address the issue here.

### A boom in manipulations

In 2005 the amount of digital entries for the EWPY was at 42.7 % and has increased since to 94.6 % in 2009. The speed in which this development took place was hardly predictable five years ago. While digital manipulation of image data was pretty rare in the early years of the "digital revolution" and was also quite easy to identify, in recent years we have experienced a sharp increase of images which showed obvious violations of the competitions rules and therefore had to be disqualified. Reasons for this development are complex and varied. In past years there were some cases of deliberate manipulation so substantial that the judges were stunned with disbelief. For example whole

animals were copied into the photograph or erased from it. However, clearly more violations of the rules are a result of careless handling of image data on the part of the photographer. Often images are digitally edited for special purposes or for photo agencies and thus manipulated in a way that may be acceptable for whatever individual purpose, but at the same time proves to be in violation of competition rules.

### Deliberately or accidentally?

The introduction of the possibility to alter images selectively using raw converters, especially stamp tools, even furthered this development. So a typical scenario would look like this: after taking the photograph the photographer edits his raw data using the stamp tool generously to remove elements that may otherwise spoil the image. Months later in preparation for a competition he reworks the data as JPGs. When now on opening the file he fails to double-check consciously whether or not he has already changed the raw data in a previous session (for example by checking the protocol in Photoshop Lightroom), a JPG is accidentally created that does not comply with the competition rules. This kind of breach can be found with amateurs and well-known professionals alike, and very often the manipulators are "habitual offenders". But we also would like to emphasize that the vast number of photographers keep to the competition rules.

### Artificial eye-catchers

It is amazing and at the same time alarming that among the photographs selected by the jury as prospect winners *before* the images are checked for manipulations, often

quite a number of these have to be disqualified later in the process, because they do not comply with the rules. In this respect it seems that altered images often do have indeed better chances with the panel of judges.

### Close examination

Subsequently, close examination in terms of possible manipulation on the part of the organiser is essential to ensure a level playing field for all entrants. To be clear: who consciously breaches the rules by sending in manipulated images, deceives all other entrants who keep to honesty, the panel of judges and the public! Comparisons with drug taking in the sports industry spring almost naturally to mind. But this is also about the reputation of wildlife photography in general. The GDT has a reputation for genuine wildlife photography. Digital alterations may be the order of the day in many other fields of photography, but we certainly do not want this to be true for wildlife photography any time soon. We explicitly pronounce in favour of mandatory labelling as promoted by Fritz Pölking in case of significant manipulations during or after the shot have been carried out.

### What is manipulation?

Digital manipulation is, however, a fairly loose concept. In the context of photo competitions it depends on the rules of particular competitions which may differ slightly from each other and which also have to be constantly developed further as a result of technical progress. There are some basic rules as common ground that all respectable organisers agree to, one of which is, before everything else, the ban to add or remove elements in a photograph.

## Two examples

The two examples shown here to explain the problem are modelled after actual entries. The real examples can be found in the original article in the November issue of the German magazine "Naturfoto" published by Tecklenborg publishing house. These manipulated entries for the EWPY 2009 were initially pre-selected by the jury as possible winning images, but had to be qualified when their manipulation emerged as a fact. A favourite for digital manipulations are photographs with a monochrome, often white background. In quite a number of cases the entire background was erased or larger objects removed. If you have ever tried to achieve a result like this by solely using photographic means, you know how difficult this is.

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Unwanted objects in the background removed (manipulation reproduced). In monochrome photographs unwanted objects are often removed. This kind of altering can usually be detected even without comparing the raw file.



Selective colouring, changing tonal values. Only this significant change turned the image into a photograph that would appeal to a jury.

## **Fraud detection**

In past years the GDT has already developed methods to examine photographs for digital manipulation before awards are assigned to them. In accordance with the state of the art at that point in time final proof could only be established by checking the original raw file of a photograph. Implemented for the 2008 competition photographers were requested to provide these files where suspicion arose. Since 2009 it is mandatory for all GDT-run competitions as well as for many other events to include the corresponding raw files. With advancing technology and a growing sense for the problematic nature of digital manipulation in the context of journalism and criminalistics, there are now reliable forensic tools available to detect manipulation even in JPG files without the need to check raw data. In the future these methods will have an increasingly significant meaning for wildlife photography events. We appeal to all photographers in the interest of fair competitions to make sure their entries comply with the specific regulations for digital image editing and to support genuine wildlife photography.

*GDT board of management*

## **Statements of some of the members of the jury (European Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2009”**

### **Theo Bosboom (Netherlands):**

Judging the GDT European Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2009 contest was a memorable experience.

The first day was very pleasant and exciting: not often did I see so many wonderful pictures in such a short time! It was a very tough job to bring the selection of the pre-jury down to 20 pictures per category; many great images were deleted with pain in our hearts.

The second day was still pleasant, but brought also a lot of frustration. After viewing the raw-files, we had to eliminate many selected pictures, because the competition rules had been breached by the photographers. Sometimes this decision was easy, for example when all kind of objects had been removed from a picture, or when the picture turned out to be only a small crop of the original (while only 30 % cropping is allowed). In other cases, the decision was less obvious and required extensive discussions between the jury members. It is for example hard to determine whether the contrast and colour temperature of a picture have been changed so much that also “the message of the photograph” has been changed.

The discussions showed that it is absolutely not easy to make clear and unambiguous rules for photography contests these days and that there will always be room for discussion and different opinions. On the other hand, I think it is very good that there are some strict rules and limitations. Of course the GDT will have to evaluate regularly if changes are necessary, but in my opinion the present rules are not bad at all and give fair chances for all photographers.

Furthermore, I think photographers should be critical of themselves and try to be a bit more careful with the changes they make to a picture. Sometimes it seems that many photographers automatically clone away all unwanted items and pump up the contrast and saturation to unrealistic levels without asking themselves if it really improves the picture. Illustrative in this respect is that we had to eliminate a couple of pictures that would have won a price if they had been sent in without manipulations.

### **Maurizio Biancarelli (Italy):**

Quite recently we experienced a remarkable revolution in photography; from analogue to digital cameras. Digital cameras give photographers enormous flexibility and very

good quality in comparison to their analogue counterparts. This translates to numerous advantages when taking pictures in the field as well as complete control over the entire process; from image capture to the final processed picture.

Unfortunately great flexibility in image capturing and image processing also greatly enhances the possibility to alter or distort the photographic “reality” to the extent that the genuine representation of what took place in front of the photographer's eye can be completely distorted.

This is not acceptable in nature photography, which is based on the foundation that the picture is a true representation of nature. However, the temptation to embellish nature seems to be difficult to avoid for some (as we as members of the jury have experienced).

In some cases, the manipulations were rather easy to detect. In other cases, said manipulations required additional effort and supplemental technical support, making the work of the jury much more demanding and time-consuming.

In overall retrospect, the jury did a commendable job, and the results were excellent. The good mood and spirit among my fellow members was greatly appreciated and was both useful and necessary in allowing us to achieve satisfying results in reasonable time. However, it must be acknowledged that judging in nature photography competitions has become an increasingly complex and difficult task.

Not only do you have to identify fresh and original pictures (by far the most pleasant component of the process), but you also have to become an expert at identifying manipulated images (clearly the least enjoyable task).

Fraud detection in photography requires an in-depth knowledge of relevant software and processing tools (and/or reliance on a good technical support). Consequently, a jury and/or tech support will waste substantial time just finding and checking raw files taking time away

from the jury's artistic expertise and true enjoyment of the process.

We all agree that nature photographers should be honest in their craft and avoid any heavy manipulation or altering of the essence of what is truly represented in the original picture. Difficulties arise because rules and their limits are difficult to establish and monitoring can be tricky. However, I do not think we have any other possibility in order to insure that nature photography maintains its integrity in the eyes of the general public.

The problem is real and the change is palpable. In recent exhibitions I have personally heard more and more viewers ask if the image was a 'trick' - a digital manipulation. This 'crisis in confidence' was not happening just a few years ago.

**Dr. Siegmur Bergfeld  
(Germany):**

While judging this competition I was once again struck how the intensity of the images had amplified through the use of digital photography. There were a lot of great eye-catchers which were in many cases later identified as a breach of the competition rules. It was a painful task to exclude otherwise great photographs because of unduly manipulations. I came to ask myself the following: should we make the creators of these photographs the centre of our criticism or our competition rules?

Back in the analogue era of photography we - as genuine wildlife photographers - accepted the numerous feeding places that we consciously did not incorporate into the photograph, the "manipulations" using graduated filters, ultra zoom lenses, flashes, blurring, a little twig removed and much more...not to mention the work in the dark room.

Now with digital photography at our hands our possibilities to improve images have been increasing magnificently. It is my opinion that we should utilize this openly rather than making it a taboo (a much straighter approach would be for example to hang a small copy of the original raw file with the corresponding photograph). To avoid any misunderstanding: copying additional objects into an image, distorting the essential meaning and also any kind of composing if not stated, turns wildlife photography into an untrustworthy and interchangeable matter. But great photographs are often not created by adding something but by the art of reduction.

*by Thomas Block*

*German to English translations by  
Alexandra Korte*

*English to German translations by  
Martin Eisenhawer*