

# Thunder Mountain Camera Club

## 2017 Annual Print Competition

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## Competition Notes

Judging photographs is a matter of perceptions. Perceptions are a way of interpreting something, a printed picture in this case, and are influenced by a combination of objective facts and subjective personal opinion. Perceptions don't mean that one print is necessarily better than another. It just means that my values and ways of looking at images might differ from someone else, and the reasons for placing one higher than another are my own. In deciding upon the top four prints, technical qualities are a must... sharpness, exposure and contrast have to be executed well, and abundant detail must be rendered in the print. After all, that's what separates photography from all other art forms.

Each one of the top pictures has confronted a difficult challenge in photography. Each of them peers into the subject a little deeper. They're more than just a pretty picture to hang on a wall, to be viewed from a distance. Quite the opposite, they are best examined closely. A lot of pictures are nice at first glance, but don't have the "staying power" of the top pictures. They haven't used the camera to produce a level of detail that would hold my interest. The best pictures keep bringing me back to explore a little more. Subject matter is irrelevant. Essentially, selecting the top four prints boils down to which images, in my opinion, demonstrate a higher level of skill in photography and printmaking.

Do not judge the prints by pictures in this document. Obviously these are just low-resolution images to give you the general idea of what each picture is about. Color, exposure, sharpness and all that good stuff can only be evaluated by looking at the real prints.

I've abandoned the traditional numerical scoring system for this competition and simply selected four winners. Conventional scoring is characteristically arbitrary – rarely are numbers assessed on a comparative basis. A judge might assess one picture's composition a six, another picture a five, twenty pictures later something gets a seven... but did he really think the picture that scored a seven was better than the one he looked at an hour ago which scored a six? In a perfect world, it should work that way, but it doesn't. There isn't any strict scoring criteria, so it never makes sense when trying to determine why one picture gets a higher score than another. Another issue with the traditional system is that with three judges, one of them invariably thinks there's too much contrast, and another one thinks there's not enough... or some other issue for which they totally disagree. That doesn't help a club member learn much.

I've posted these comments before the club meeting, instead of after which has been our tradition, in order to accelerate the discussion. I hope you read all of the comments... not just those regarding your own print. There's plenty of information here for anyone wanting to learn. I learned too by examining prints more closely, because the judging process calls for putting vague thoughts about what we see in a photograph into words. Which, in turn, clarifies my thinking and understanding of my own images. It's an exercise everyone who is serious about improving their pictures should try.

Bring your questions and comments on Tuesday night. You may never have another chance to respond directly to a competition judge, so feel free to make your opinions known... respectfully, of course. It's perfectly fine to disagree with something I've said. As far as which prints placed in the top four, you'll need to come to the club meeting to find out.

Thanks, everyone, for participating.

Ed Kunzelman

## Angela Classen



Technically speaking, this photograph is very well made. It's sharp from front to back. Exposure is good. The lighting is nice and soft which enables you to capture excellent highlight and shadow detail, although arguably lacking in exceptional drama. At most there's a tiny halo between the sky and rocks, and just a bit of softness in the sides of the image.

The clouds appear natural, as does the entire print. However, there's a lot of space allocated to the sky, and I'm not sure it strengthens the picture, given the character of what's there. We could have a whole discussion devoted to clouds, but it would lean toward being pretty subjective, so I feel like I'm venturing into a mine field here. I just don't see much in the way of defining shapes or patterns in this sky. The clouds are not ominous or threatening, or giving me the fear of getting drenched. There isn't the drama of, say, a big puffy cumulus cloud. It's not a memorable sky. A little more blue in the sky would increase overall contrast of colors, and make the scene a bit more lively. The nice thing about clouds is that if you wait a few minutes, they'll probably change, so it's relatively easy to manipulate their impact on a picture by just watching them drift in and out of the scene. The hard part is waiting and watching patiently.

The composition with its relationship between near and far elements invites the viewer to step into the scene. The dead tree anchors the image nicely, and provides a strong focal point with lots of interesting texture. There's wonderful depth to the image with the canyon floor winding from left to right, and then back to the left in the distance. But while I feel like I can step into the scene, I'm not feeling quite immersed in it. Not that that's necessarily better; it's just different. I'm maybe just a step or two, and a slightly different camera angle, away from feeling like I'm standing in the picture rather than looking toward it. A step forward may not be possible, but pointing the camera lower trades some sky for a tighter foreground... a trade I think is worth considering.

Also, there's an inherent busyness in the Monument and nearby landscape, so it's hard to find simple, uncluttered compositions. That's more of a general statement for everyone's benefit. I'm not saying your picture is cluttered, but I would encourage you to try shooting occasionally in some really miserable weather (rain, fog, or freshly fallen snow) and use those elements to simplify a picture... and possibly expand your somewhat predictable style of photography.

I like the slight texture in the paper. Honestly though, the impact of the paper for me is diminished by having it mounted to a heavy, rigid backing material. It loses that tactile experience... meaning sense of touch. It won't matter in the slightest after it's framed and hung on a wall, but I consider a response to the paper itself to be part of the distinction between print and digital competitions.

## Annette Collier



I always enjoy “reading” a picture... literally. In this case the words “Sealed Beam” are a great foundation for the book/picture. Great idea. I love the detail and texture of the glass headlight and metal surrounding it. The obvious question, in my mind, is why not show more of it? I’d love to explore more of what’s to the right of the headlight... the beginning of that rusted metal is gorgeous.

Since the headlight is placed so far off center, the eye of the viewer is naturally invited to move away from the subject and explore. But moving away from the headlight, in my opinion, was a big disappointment. Half the picture is blurred-out background, which makes it hard to identify what’s back there, and whether or not it’s connected to the headlight. It sort of looks like the front grill of a truck with its headlight in the foreground, but the angle and distance separating the two elements don’t make sense. Maybe the reason for the composition is for the viewer to think about that. Would the photographer purposely take the picture to confuse the viewer?

Most of the foreground light is blurred too, so the very shallow depth of field seems to defeat the purpose for which the picture appears to have been created... if the purpose was to show all of that luscious texture. But maybe I’m on the wrong track. What is the intent of this picture?

## Bob Peterson



I like the idea behind the image, as well as the composition. The trail of stones leads nicely from front to back, converging toward the center, and making a nice bend to the right. That's the sort of pattern to look for, as it creates movement and depth in an otherwise static landscape scene.

My first response though, given the fact that I'm a picky photographer, is that the image appears soft. That's by far the biggest issue for me with this print, because I suspect the reason you shot this picture is to reveal patterns and texture. But the impact of all that fascinating texture is diminished when the focus appears soft. I don't often speak in definitive terms, but if the texture and sharpness weren't important to you, they should be. From the viewer's perspective, it makes the difference between a passing glance at your picture, or a careful and enjoyable examination of what you saw.

So there are two things that you absolutely must master to perfect a print like this. The first is hyperfocal distance... in other words, mastering your aperture setting and focus point in the scene to provide the required amount of depth-of-field. The second is everything else related to sharpness. Books have been written about the subject. It starts with a tripod. No excuses for not using one for a picture like this. Undoubtedly you're shooting with a small aperture to capture greater depth-of-field... which lengthens your shutter time... which can easily blur a picture if the camera is hand-held. Even after you've done everything correctly to get the maximum amount of sharpness in the camera, it still requires some effort to carry that sharpness through post-processing and printing. Every time you resize an image for submission in competitions, or for printing on paper, your software is adding or throwing out pixels, and a certain amount of softness creeps into the picture. That's why I do all of my edits in Photoshop, but never sharpen the original image. I'll wait and apply specific sharpening to a duplicate image file, depending on its new size and purpose. Printing on paper can be assisted by greater amounts of sharpening than digital images submitted for competition because ink-jet printers print at a much higher resolution than monitor resolutions display. Learn a few different techniques for sharpening in post-processing... they are numerous.

A clear blue sky is a perfect showcase for dust spots. Whereas they can hide nicely in your foreground rocks, this type of sky needs a thorough examination to clone out those pesky spots. You've got three fairly prominent ones. Dust can be a real pain during the printing process too. Dust particles sitting on the paper are the most likely culprit that can leave you with white spots where ink hasn't been able to bond with the paper.

## Cheryl Sweers



This print exemplifies how the camera can be used in a unique way to produce art that no other art form can duplicate. The only way we can really appreciate the detail of the intricate veins of a leaf is with a camera. My philosophy is that the difference between art and an ordinary snap-shot picture is that art sees beyond the obvious, using the creative skills of the artist to select and arrange elements in an illuminating manner. This photograph does exactly that.

I like the simple layered composition... at least it appears simple. In reality it's fairly complex. The lines of the two leaves flow nicely together. Observe how the lines of the major veins in both leaves overlap each other. Some folks will complain that the image appears arranged rather than natural. After all, what are the chances of these two leaves lying together exactly like that in the great outdoors? It doesn't matter. In reality as photographers we maneuver ourselves all over the place in order to change the relationship between elements in our composition. In my mind, it's like a well crafted portrait of a person produced in a studio. It might not be perfectly natural, but it reveals the heart and essence of the subject. And that, in my opinion, is the challenge of photography.

The curl of the big leaf on the right is really interesting, and it's great that you were able to keep that in focus. Any macro photographer will tell you that depth-of-field is one of their biggest challenges. There are a few small random areas that look a little soft, the most noticeable being in the green leaf just above the gray leaf, but not enough to significantly detract from the impact of the image. The black background eliminates any potential distractions and really sets off the color of the green leaf. I like the neutral color of the dark leaf on top and contrast with the green leaf. The other thing that stands out to me are the decaying holes in the black leaf and their little rounded edges on the perimeter of each hole. Looks like a wound trying to heal... except these are dead leaves. All in all, it's the detail of the texture that captivates the viewer in this image... something that's typically overlooked in our digital competitions, but reaches out to be recognized in a print competition.

The lighting in this photograph is really interesting too. There appears to be some side light from the right. It also looks like it's been back lit to produce the luminous green leaf, but the green leaf appears to be sitting directly on top of a black surface. So how did she do that? Good images often raise that question.



## Dale Rostad



It took me several minutes looking at this picture to form a conscious thought. I see two things: color and lines. I suppose the saturated color jumped out visually at me first, but I tend to tune that out pretty quickly. In fact, super-saturated colors shout that there's nothing else worth looking at. I'm looking for something to stay interested: detail, texture, motion, or possibly an emotional connection to the subject. I want to see deeper into something. I'm looking for something to take me somewhere I've never been... and I don't mean some exotic foreign country.

So I'm looking at this image for awhile and wondering: What's the point... what are you trying to show me? What was it that stopped you long enough to make the picture? It doesn't have to be a bone-jarring, staggering beautiful scene screaming at us to take a picture, but it has to be something, especially if you want an audience to stick around long enough to explore your prints rather than just glance at them in passing.

If the thought behind the picture was to emphasize gritty textures in the train, the shadows block far too much of that detail to generate much interest in the subject. The lines and shapes are sort of interesting, but without much detail to support them, my interest in them fades quickly. The bright concrete at the bottom of the picture is like a barking dog.

I suspect the reason for the picture is the simple mirroring of train cars, or locomotives, or whatever they are, for some sort of "cool" factor. But that doesn't hold my attention. If there's a deeper meaning to the picture, I'm not recognizing it.

## Derrek Long



There are all kinds of fancy gadgets for capturing lightning, or many photographers simply leave the shutter open for 30 seconds at a time and wait for lightning to hit in the right place. Neither approach requires extraordinary skill, so lightning pictures have become fairly common. The question is: what elevates one picture over another?

How about we say that while the lightning is the lead actor, the supporting cast makes or breaks the picture. I've seen a gazillion pictures with nothing more than streaks of lightning filling a totally black sky. So it's the secondary elements that provide additional visual interest. In this case, converging lines of the canal create nice depth. And, of course, the reflection of lightning in the water is something you don't see every day. Power lines point undaunted toward the lightning. The color of the sky has that eerie sort of look, making it look like the whole city is on fire. So all in all, I think it's a well above average lightning shot.

The lightning looks awfully close. Too close for comfort in my book.... and that's likely to trigger an emotional response by the viewer. I can feel the hair standing up on the back of my neck, and the chill running down my spine from that crackle of lightning and boom of thunder. Seems like a slim difference between being in the right place at the right time, and being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Stay safe.

Areas of high contrast such as what you have in your lightning are likely to have color fringing (chromatic aberration), which is easily corrected in most post-processing software.

It's not really a complex picture... it's more a photograph with a "wow" factor for appeal. There's nothing wrong with that, but it's hard, given the context of a photo competition, to elevate it above others which tackle more technical difficulties. It's always nice to have a few of these shots to impress friends and family. My advice though to anyone trying to improve their pictures is to not become overly obsessed with cool things that make a picture, but try and make a great picture which expands your photographic skills.



## Donna Fullerton



A picture of a picture. How am I supposed to respond to that in the context of a photo competition? The case could be made that the watercolor painting deserves high marks for composition, color and details, but since the photograph itself is a pretty easy process of just placing the original on a stand, balancing the light, and clicking the shutter, well... the photograph is no big deal. Or is it? James over at Frame Depot is constantly challenged by rendering colors of original art faithfully in his printed reproductions. But I have no idea if you've accomplished that or not, since I haven't seen the original.

So how else can I judge the quality of a reproduction? I suppose one way is based on my initial confused reaction: "You're submitting a painting instead of a photograph?" That, in and of itself, indicates that the print has accomplished its purpose. And, after all, there was nothing in the rules that specifically required a photographic print vs. a fine-art print. Hmmmm....

However, the rules do prohibit mats, and I think for the purposes of a "print" competition, the piece would have more impact if I could see more of the paper instead of the mat. The paper is what sells the piece in my mind as an original watercolor. The mat can be valuable for the consumer in a gallery, and no doubt you have a better understanding than me of how to package something for sale in the retail market. But looking at this in the context of a competition, the few inches allocated on each side for the mat would be better served by seeing the paper. As someone looking for the impact of art, for art's sake, the large black mat overwhelms the delicacy of the print. It doesn't do much to show off the paper, and the texture of the paper is what makes it look like an original watercolor.



I like the concept of this picture. It's neatly organized into two parts, pretty well divided equally down the vertical center. The sparkle of highlights scattered throughout the purple plant certainly liven up an otherwise dark part of the picture. The colors green and purple are effective contrasting colors, and the connotation of the color purple can't be overlooked when considering its impact on the viewer... for the same reason marketing research carefully considers the color of packaging and product design:

“Purple combines the calm stability of blue and the fierce energy of red. The color purple is often associated with royalty, nobility, luxury, power, and ambition. Purple also represents meanings of wealth, extravagance, creativity, wisdom, dignity, grandeur, devotion, peace, pride, mystery, independence, and magic.”

- <http://www.bourncreative.com/meaning-of-the-color-purple/>

Not a bad choice of colors for creating a powerful emotional connection with your viewer.

This picture is sort of like Cheryl's picture of her two leaves, except I'm feeling like the two halves here are fighting for attention, rather than complementing each other. While the purple flowers are probably considered to be the main subject, (after all, a bunch of ordinary green leaves on their own probably would not have compelled you to take the picture), I notice that my eye keeps moving away from the purple flowers into the green leaves. Something keeps driving me over there. Why?

For one, the green leaves are the largest concentration of brightest parts of the picture. That seems to follow the general rule of photography... the eye instinctively moves toward the brightest areas of a picture. The purple plant is comprised of a lot of small relatively dark areas where detail is hard to discern. Kind of like a dark cave with limited light and awareness of detail, I want to get out of there and go where there's light.

But that's not the only reason I keep moving in that direction. The depth of field and focus in the purple flower seems to be fairly shallow, leaving several of the more prominent flowers toward the top of the plant closest to the photographer well out of focus. I consider that to be one of the more critical areas of a vertical picture, since it parallels eye level in the human equivalent. And that drives me off to hang out with the green leaves where my eye feels more comfortable... especially that large one with such great detail and exposure about a third of the way up from the bottom. Moving the viewer around through your picture is a good thing... you probably don't want them to get stuck in a single spot in the picture. But when you're moving them away from your primary subject, and they don't want to come back, well... something in the lighting or focus might be backwards.

## Jeff Stoddart



This picture really sings... pleasantly.

Several reasons: strong focal point, motion, depth, lighting, contrast and detail... to name a few.

Contrast is one of the most obvious elements that shape mood and response to a photograph. However, the various types of contrast may not be so obvious. There's wonderful tonal contrast in this image between light and dark shades. The brightest areas of snow, clouds and water are exposed perfectly, holding traces of color and detail. The dark shadowy areas have good detail too, and provide a nice frame for the rock. There's also good color contrast. So many mountain landscape images are dominated by blue and green... analogous colors that are considered serene and comfortable, but not very exciting. This picture has a stronger balance of contrasting colors... the pink flowers really liven up the picture without having to overcook the saturation slider. Contrast also comes in the form of texture. In this image, you have a gritty rock with all kinds of interesting texture, surrounded by silky smooth water. Contrast is a critical aspect of a good print, so for everyone reading this, be conscious of all its many forms.

Ansel Adams often used the analogy of music in talking about photography. Here's one: it's not a single note that makes music, it's the note that comes before, and the one after it, that make a song. What's that got to do with a picture? Clear separation of elements, but intrinsically related, as there is in Jeff's picture, is important for creating a well-structured composition. Think about that for awhile.

Extraordinary detail is a function of precise sharpness, so it's important for landscape photographs to be sharp. There's a huge technical challenge presented in this scene called depth-of-field. Depth-of-field describes the amount of sharpness from front to back. Most everyone is aware that a small aperture (high number... typically F/22) produces the greatest amount of sharpness. However, achieving good sharpness throughout all areas of this scene, given the rock and flower right at your feet combined with distant mountains, is not easy. It was either shot with a mastery of hyperfocal distance, or combining a series of images using focus stacking techniques. Either way, it doesn't matter to me... the result was a picture with precise sharpness from front to back. One unfortunate side-effect of sharpening though is the small halo at the right edge of the distant mountain peak. Where sky meets rock is a common place for them to hang out. It's barely perceptible at this size, but I'd suggest fixing that before making a much larger print.

Converging diagonal lines created by the path of the stream, a large foreground object, and slow shutter speed blurring the water, all contribute to giving the viewer a sense of depth and motion. It's certainly not easy with the slightest breeze to retain sharpness in flowers while using a slow shutter for smoothing the water. There are all kinds of challenges to deal with in creating this image. The image sparkles nicely printed on metallic paper.

## John Truzinski



Simplicity is often a desirable thing when it comes to how the viewer responds to your picture. This portrait of a bird tends to get a little busy with all of the branches and bright spots. One could argue that the branches provide a natural frame for the bird, and there's merit to that idea. It is sort of an interesting box that he's sitting in. It's just not my cup of tea. I prefer simple and uncluttered compositions. I think most people do, whether they're consciously aware of it or not. Either way, be aware of all the stuff in the picture besides just the main subject, and make your composition decisions accordingly.

I also think that the point of view from the bird's back side is less engaging with the viewer than looking into the bird's face. No matter whether it's a person or an animal, unless there's something of interest included in the picture that the subject is looking at, the picture is more engaging when captured from more around the front where you can look into his eyes. If you can bring out a little detail in the dark shadows, that would be nice too.

Warm colors vs. cool colors: Do they impact the way a viewer responds to a picture? Your picture is similar to the one presented by Randy Smith. But his colors are decidedly warm tones... red and yellow, and even the green leans toward the warm side. Your colors are predominantly cool... blue, and the green on the bird's back feathers tilts toward blue. Warm colors project excitement. Cool colors tend to have a calming influence, and can be interpreted as impersonal. Is the subject of color relevant? Only if you're hoping to elicit a subconscious emotional reaction to the image separate from the subject and composition.

This picture doesn't look quite as sharp as it could be. That could be for a number of reasons: camera movement shooting hand-held as most wildlife shots are, or it could simply be a matter of cropping and enlarging the print size beyond the native resolution of your camera.

## Lupe Herrera



I like this print a lot. I like it because I'd be happy to have the print if I were that person in the picture. How's that for a technical critique? Not very good, but a case can be made in portrait photography that the only opinion which matters is that expressed by the subject. Mike Brown wrote something to that effect in one of my blog posts, saying that all of the technical considerations in the world didn't matter if the young lady sitting for her senior portrait didn't like how her hair looked in the picture. With that in mind, I think the subject's hair in this photo is dynamic... there's motion, and no matter whether it's a landscape or a portrait photograph, motion translates into life and energy.

Additionally, I like the impact of the up-close-and-personal tight crop. I don't need to see the clothes she's wearing. I don't need the top of her head. I don't need to see her shoulders or arms. Don't need any of that. I think this person is revealed wonderfully through her face.

I understand that the eye closest to the camera is the one that needs to be in perfect focus, and it's generally acceptable if the opposite eye is not in focus. I'll buy into that concept if the subject's head were rotated so that one eye was noticeably further from the camera... but in this case, it's not. In this picture, the subject's face is perceived to be square to the camera, even though it's not precisely so, causing the difference in sharpness between eyes. So the fact that her left eye is really sharp and her right eye is a touch soft is a little disconcerting for me. The same idea with her lips.

I can't end this conversation without saying that I think portraits are far less forgiving with regard to technical problems than most other types of photography. People are gonna notice the slightest flaw or wrinkle in their skin, or a single hair out of place. Too much sharpening vs. not enough sharpening is like walking a tight-rope. The color of a sky in a landscape can be about anything, but the slightest unnatural tilt toward yellow, red or blue in skin tones can kill a portrait. The challenges are many.



## Marina Schultz



The greatest challenge in this photograph is not technical.... although keeping sharp focus with a moving subject is reasonably impressive. The greatest achievement in this photo is reflected in the persistence and patience of the photographer waiting for the decisive moment. After all, what are the odds of getting a picture like this? Maybe it's the luck of winning the lottery. Maybe Marina went out with her camera once this year and sat for five minutes by a lake and this bird happened to fly by with its meal. No, I don't think so. I'm pretty sure Marina waits patiently for hours, maybe days at a time, persistently looking for that exceptional photograph. And then when the bird appears with its food, she's got a matter of seconds, and no second chance, to get it right.

But while the subject is special, the technical aspects and processing are really good too. Focus throughout essential parts of the bird and fish is good and sharp. The detail in the hind legs is really good. The eyes of the fish and bird look like they're gonna pop out of the picture. It's hard enough for most amateur shutterbugs to get all that stuff right even while the bird is sitting perfectly still. I love the gradual transition of blue tones in layers throughout his feathers. Blacks still have some detail. The background complements the subject nicely... soft background focus and brown colors contrast wonderfully with blue colors in the bird. The bird has no problem standing out from his background.

Again, I can't emphasize it enough.... all that happens in the blink of an eye.

Great pictures are made by those with the greatest determination.



## Melanie Morris



This is the sort of magical lighting that landscape photographers hope for, but rarely experience. Light typically produces much of the drama in photography, and you've taken advantage of it nicely in this picture. The photo feels well balanced between all of your elements: sky, mountains, rocks and foreground. The smooth cloud structure doesn't fight for attention. Crystal clear blue skies can be boring, and skies with a lot of blotchy clouds can overwhelm the subject on the ground. This is a story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears... some skies are too busy, others are too boring... but the one for this particular picture is just right.

The contrast in lighting in this picture provides a lot of its drama and impact, but it's a double-edged sword since high contrast often results in a loss of detail at opposite ends of the spectrum. I'd like to see a little more detail in the area of brightest highlights in the right side portion of the picture (about a third of the way in from the right edge)... something closer in tonal values to the mountains just to their right. On the other hand, your shadows have lost detail. We call that "plugged" or "blocked" shadows. If you can lighten the shadows just a tidge in your post-processing software to bring out some detail there, that would be great. If by trying to do that, it just makes a muddy gray mess out of the shadows, then leave them as is. Dark black shadows aren't the worst thing to have in your picture. It's great when you can produce visual detail in the entire tonal range from dark shadows to bright highlights, but if one or the other has to be sacrificed, then let your shadows go black. The human eye isn't particularly adept at picking out details in those dark places anyway, so it looks pretty normal. But just as I said about Cheryl's picture, when you can produce something with your camera that transcends what the human eye typically sees, then you're on the path to making a great photograph.

You have excellent sharpness and detail in the background mountains. Seems just a little soft in the rocks though. At first glance I suspected you might have focused on the distant mountains, the logical place for many photographers since it's in the middle of the frame. But then upon closer examination, the foreground bushes and a few dead trees are pretty sharp. Can't tell why, but the rocks still seem a bit soft (not quite as sharp) as the foreground and the background.

## Ona Griffiths



This print definitely falls into the category of seeing things in a photograph that we've probably never seen before. I enjoy exploring all of the interesting details – the reflections in his eyes, the hair on his little body, the green thing where his mouth should be.

I understand that iridescent colors are common to insects, and that pigment, structure, and refracted light can combine to cause all of these strange colors. However, the colors in question are the tiny specks of red, green and blue running up and down the insect's skinny front legs, especially his left. To the eye of an entomologist, they may be the most natural looking colors on a bug in the world. But the mixture of red, green, and blue coincides precisely with colors commonly created by digital noise, and digital noise becomes progressively more noticeable as greater amounts of sharpening are applied. Those areas in question do appear slightly over sharpened to me. It's not all that likely though that a picture such as this, taken in broad daylight with presumably low ISO, would produce that much color noise to begin with. So I really have no answer. Either way, my eye goes straight to that place in the image; not being able to shake the question of whether the colors are real or a digital side-effect. To the ordinary viewer, no such dilemma would exist, although they might ask the same question I've been asked a thousand times: "Hey, are those colors real or did you Photoshop them?" Enough to drive me nuts... which is what I'm probably doing here to Ona.

The shallow depth of field nicely conceals any sort of distracting background elements and creates effective separation between the subject and background. Whatever the insect is perched on, it appears to follow up and off to the left at an angle into the background. I wonder what that is? You'd think it was some sort of fence, until remembering that this insect is probably about the size of a coin. The hind legs being out of focus certainly doesn't hurt anything... it creates a sense of depth. Blurring the foreground assists focusing attention on the bug too, although that area of the image is sort of interesting. It appears to have some crystal like characteristics. Observe what looks like a drop of water in the lower left. I wonder what that is? Maybe there's a tiny amount of water on the bug refracting those colors that puzzle me. Probably not. I think I'm asking too many questions.

## Randy Smith



My cousin used to tell me when we were kids that his Volkswagen Beetle could beat any car on the street in a 10-foot race. The strongest technical feature of this print is the luscious detail in the bird's right (viewer's left) leg/foot where it wraps around the tree limb. One blends almost imperceptibly into the other. It takes a minute to realize that his middle claw extends so much further than the two on the outside. It's a small area in the picture, but, wow, the detail is impressive. If that area of about four square inches were all that mattered for the top prize in this competition, you'd have the winner.

If only that degree of sharp detail could have been extended up through his head, but it's not. The depth of field is so shallow that there's a slight falloff of sharpness in his head and chest. Shallow depth-of-field is a bit of a problem in the bird, but it's used effectively to separate him nicely from the background. The nice simple, uncluttered background allows the viewer to stay focused on the subject. Like so many things in photography, drawing the line between too much and too little can be a complicated choice.

The colors are nice and warm throughout. Even the green background has a warm yellow cast to it, complementing the colors of the bird perfectly. The branch, with its slight hint of blue as the cooler tone, contrasts nicely with the bird and background. The color combination is clean and simple. I couldn't have picked them any better with a box of crayons.

Unfortunately in a competition, photos are evaluated in comparison to other photos. I'm not personally committed to that idea, but it is what it is. This picture is a competent portrait photo, but it's more static (the bird's just sitting there not doing anything) which becomes a competitive drawback. The picture really needs that extraordinary level of sharpness from head to toe to compete as a static picture of a bird.



This is the kind of print someone might like to display on a wall in their home. It's a little edgy, and "homey" appeals to a lot of people. But I'm not sure I like conundrums in the world of art. Is it a blurry photograph, or is it a reproduction of a sharp painting? I can't tell. I'm pretty sure that it's a photograph because there's still some rather striking detail, if the viewer hunts for it (like the Ford logo), but the image has a painterly feel, especially the surface and textures of the truck. I have no idea if that was your intent.

Maybe the soft focus is intentional. Maybe it was processed with a filter for artistic effect. Maybe there's some camera movement because you didn't feel like hauling a tripod around that day. Maybe it's just an issue of enlarging a relatively low resolution image beyond the point of preserving sharpness. Maybe it doesn't make any difference... appreciate the old truck for what it's worth and forget the whole issue of focus. But it's hard for me to disregard all of that when I'm trying to understand what the photographer was trying to communicate, and why she chose to process the image a certain way.

If we're shooting an old rusted truck because the texture and detail caught our eye, why not make the most of it by rendering the subject in sharp focus with good detail? Of course that's a rhetorical question. Saying that another way: If it's supposed to be art, then make it more artistic... if it's supposed to be a photograph, then make it a sharper photograph – so I don't have to guess.

## Robert Pratt



Since there probably aren't any additional surrounding elements which would add interest to your picture, one could argue that a tight crop such as this serves the purpose. After all, if it's not important, why include extra stuff? In fact, I like compositions where the subject runs off the edge (see Lupe's portrait). And I also like placing the subject within some sort of context. But this crop doesn't seem to recognize whether it should be one or the other. From nothing more than a gut feeling, I feel (literally) that the bird needs some breathing room in this picture. It feels claustrophobic to me.

I like that the bird is doing more than just showing himself perched on a log. The decisive moment is well captured... and that's a huge challenge by itself. The print is reasonably well sharpened... not great sharpening, but good enough.

White feathers are darn near impossible to make look pristine clean and white in a print... or as clean as they seem in reality. I think when the color white is sent to our head, our brain knows it's supposed to be white so it filters out color casts that are really there, but the camera definitely records them. If feathers were pure white, we wouldn't see any detail. However, as we darken the exposure to preserve highlight detail, the whole bird starts looking a little muddy. It's such a delicate balance between blown-out highlights and muddy whites. This print manages your whites pretty well, but I think it could be better. I suspect there's room in post-processing to lighten the darker parts of his feathers, assuming you can separate those, and leave the brightest highlights alone.

I also notice some blue ripples of water in stark contrast with all that brown water. I'm sure there's some good reason having to do with the angle which light hits water, but the overall color in this print doesn't impress me as something helping it much. I'm thinking black and white might be a good option. Or just forget the whole thing and go have fun out by the lake taking more pictures.





This is the kind of photograph that people love to hang on their wall, or buy for calendars, postcards, etc. It's an idyllic scene. It reminds people of where they'd like to be. The ducks performed nicely for you with their entrance into the picture, and the clear blue sky makes for a nice clean image. The mountains are majestic, but the ducks make the picture a lot more interesting. The choice of compositions here are endless, and some people prefer the broader field of view while others want a closer look at things within the big picture. I prefer the latter, mainly because it often presents a view of something that I've never seen or noticed before. And it gives the photographer an opportunity to put a different twist on a scene which otherwise looks virtually the same in its grand format as every other photographer's effort.

Part of the problem I have too with the grand view of photography is that the picture often gives me the feeling that I'm looking at the entire scene from a distance, as through a pair of binoculars. As a result, I feel a bit detached from it. In terms of technique, the focal length of the lens has a lot to do with how the foreground and background are related. Shorter focal lengths, such as used in wide angle lenses, appear to push the background further away by making it smaller relative to the foreground. So while wide-angles do what they're supposed to do – include more stuff – it effects the relationship between near and far elements. Longer focal length lenses do just the opposite: they have the effect of pulling the background closer and compressing the picture. The photographer needs to decide which is more important... wider angle of view or a more prominent background. I suspect you already knew that... I'm merely pointing out to whoever reads this that there are tradeoffs in lens focal lengths. That said, I tend to think a longer focal length would increase the impact of this picture... in other words, bring a portion of the distant mountains and ducks closer for a more intimate view. But that's just opinion.

Mid-day unfiltered sunlight makes it nearly impossible to retain any sort of color or detail in the highlights. Snow capped peaks are a real challenge. You really need some cloud cover or softer light to control the exposure here... but then you'd lose the pristine, sunny mood of the image.

The other technical consideration is that smoothness of tonal gradations in a clear blue sky can present some difficulties in printing. For whatever reason, it's hard to avoid some blotchy patches where blues shift abruptly from one shade to another. It could be in the JPG processing, since JPG files delete bits of color data. Or it could be a printing issue. I usually have to print at the highest resolution (2880) and 16-bit mode to achieve nice smooth gradations of color in a solid blue sky. Some folks claim that a print made by a lab, using digital c-print technology (as this print is), does not produce the color gamut, dynamic range, and sharpness of a high-end ink-jet printer. I have never had reason to verify that claim, but would if I were to use the services of a photo lab. Printing problems are always best solved by "knowing your printer."