

Making, not just taking, winning photographs

By Terry Plowman

Successful photographers follow the advice of legendary nature photographer Ansel Adams that “You don’t take a photograph, you make it.”

The judges in the first *Delaware Beach Life* photo contest (winners of which are featured on the previous pages) noticed that many entries had promise, but for one reason or another, fell a little short of prizewinner status.

So, here — with comments from the judges and permission from the photographers who let us use their entries as examples — we offer some tips on how to *make* a great photograph. (See the images on the following pages for more examples.)

One of the most common suggestions the judges offered was that photographers should consider cropping their raw images to improve composition. Judge Kevin Fleming, *Delaware Beach Life*’s main photographer, often said, “There’s a picture in that picture,” meaning that the subject that would have been engaging was lost amid a lot of “dead space” or uninteresting content, or was placed dead-center in a picture. Such cropping could be accomplished simply by getting out the scissors and cutting off the unimportant visual content, but it can also be achieved with digital photo-editing software that so many photographers are now using.

Such software can also provide a number of basic editing tools that

the judges said would have elevated the quality of some of the contest entries. They suggested that photographers learn how to adjust the light and dark areas of an image, as well as how to sharpen it (because digital images are inherently soft). Photographers can also improve their images by tweaking the color saturation and color balance — for example, reducing excess blue in a picture taken on an overcast day.

Of course, it’s very easy to go overboard with digital effects, causing the image to go from one extreme (a raw, unedited snapshot) to the other (a highly altered fake-looking image). The judges’ advice was to use digital software carefully, and “with good taste,” as judge Al Danegger said.

Danegger, a photographer who retired after teaching photojournalism at the University of Maryland for 37 years, also suggested that photographers take the time to shoot *a lot* of images of an appealing subject, and from more than one angle. “Professional photographers will take many, many rolls of film for just one picture. This is not a matter of dumb luck as some people think, but picking the best out of many very good pictures,” he said.

And those best pictures overcome another hurdle that faces every photographer: avoiding the cliché. This is a common problem in beautiful coastal Delaware, where stunning sunsets, eye-catching lighthouses and gorgeous beach scenes are diffi-

cult to resist. But if the goal is to create prizewinning images, not just snapshots for the vacation album, the photographer has to try to capture those common scenes in an uncommon way. As Danegger said about the winner in the nature category on page 53 (a picture of a World War II tower), “There’s been a thousand pictures of the towers, but not one like this.”

Because fully automatic high-quality cameras are the norm today, people looking at prizewinning photographs sometimes say, “Gee, I could have taken that.” But it’s not as easy as it may seem — as Danegger said, echoing Ansel Adams’ advice, “You have to *make* the picture.”

But all these tips aside, Adams had another principle that suggests that there must be something less technical and more mysterious about the art: “There are no rules for good photographs, only good photographs.”

The *Delaware Beach Life* staff and contest judges thank the photographers who allowed us to use their images as examples here and on the following pages, and we hope these suggestions help you capture the beauty of coastal Delaware that we celebrate in every issue of *Delaware Beach Life*. We look forward to seeing the results in our 2008 photo contest! ■

Terry Plowman, publisher of Delaware Beach Life, was a judge in the photo contest.

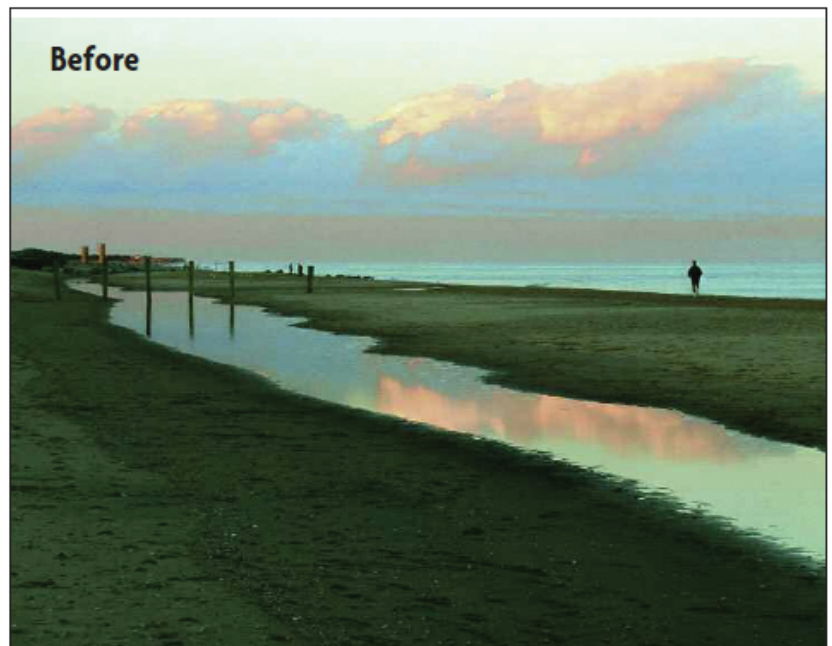
After



Photograph by Shirley G. Whelan

Many submissions could have been improved by judicious cropping. By removing uninteresting elements in the frame, such as the beach foreground at right, the viewer is drawn into the more interesting part of the image: the reflection of the sky in the long puddle. In addition, adjusting the lightness and darkness levels help to improve and saturate the pleasant colors.

Before



See next page for additional tips

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Photograph by Jennifer Popiel

The submission at right was one of those that prompted judge Kevin Fleming to say, "There's a picture in that picture." The exciting subject is obviously the boat, but to capture it the photographer would need a telephoto lens. We cropped in to show how such a telephoto image might look, but doing so reduces the sharpness and overall quality of the image. It would be better to "crop in the camera" by using a telephoto lens.



Photograph by Patrick Ireland

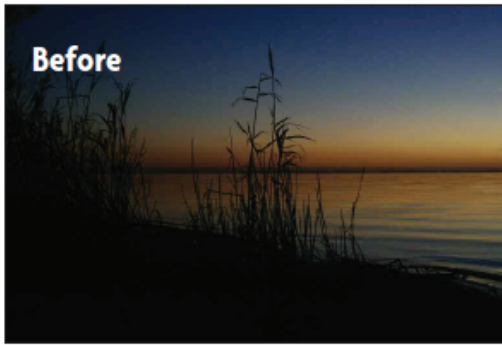
This wildlife image had the potential to be a winner in the action category if it were in sharp focus and if the composition were improved. The judges suggested that most of the plain blue sky be cropped out to bring attention to the osprey and its catch. Out-of-focus images can't be corrected by digital editing, so that problem has to be corrected during shooting, by the use of a faster shutter speed and tack-sharp focusing.

After



Photograph by J. Stuart Griffin

Before



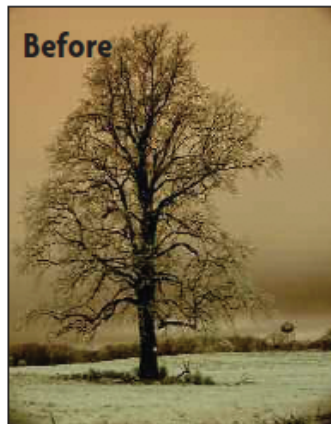
The judges liked this photograph, but suggested cropping some of the foreground to move down the dead-center horizon line, and adjusting the lightness and darkness levels with digital photo-editing software to enhance the colors and bring out more detail. Although viewers might see the calm image as soothing, the judges suggested that a little bit of action, such as a seagull flying by, might have added some life to the photograph.

After



Photograph by Chester Poslusny

Before



Simply removing a distracting element can elevate an image from "snapshot" to "photograph." The water tower in the original above, though just a small element of the picture, detracted from the austere beauty of the sepia-toned tree. Distracting elements can be cropped out later, but the judges suggest that it's better to notice them, and eliminate them, when shooting. ■

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