

## Nature Story Value

Virtually every image we see submitted in the Nature Study Group or in a PSA recognized nature section has a nature story to it. For the moment let's leave out issues of the presence of the hand of man and whether it may be incidental and still subject to disqualification or actually indicative of adaptive behavior and therefore a valid part of an image.

The "nature" story in an image should be telling the viewer something about the subject or about natural history. For animate subjects even a basic portrait conveys information about the characteristics of the subject and in doing so it conveys a nature story. Sometimes it is harder to see in non-animate subjects. Botanical images will often convey similar information about the characteristics of the subject. Similarly, even images of geographic features and natural landscapes depict a story in the sculpting of the landscape over time through the forces of wind and water and how plant life can alter the face of the land or how small organisms can create complex structures such as our underwater corals.

With the acceptance that the vast majority of the images we see contain a nature story comes the question of how does one assess the "strength" or "Value" of that story. That assessment takes a bit of thinking about what the maker has shown us as viewers. From a grading perspective we will work with the idea that a "weak" story value would warrant a rating of 1, an "average" story value would warrant a rating of 2, and a "strong" story value would warrant a rating of 3.

Let's start with the typical animate subject portrait both tight and environmental. We will generally see a good amount of information about the subject, its form, features, and possibly even a state that is less commonly observed. This is what I will propose as being an "average" story value. That same portrait label can apply to straightforward depictions of botanical and even geological / landscape / seascape images. We just need to take the time to appreciate all of the information that the maker has conveyed. The second factor is that we need to detach ourselves from how often we have seen that subject or whether we have seen that subject portrayed more effectively in our opinion. These latter elements should not have any bearing on the rating we assign. That "average" story should rate a 2 whether it is the first time we have seen a subject or the millionth time we have seen it.

Are there degrees of "strength" within a rating? YES! Technical quality and lighting quality will play a significant role in the impact and interest that an image has. In so doing they impact the relative strength of the story. Less than optimal lighting or technical execution may make the image a "weak" 2 while superior technical execution or perfect lighting may make it a "strong" 2. However, the story has not changed. It is still an average story. The impact of the technical execution belongs in the technical rating and the impact of the lighting belongs in the pictorial rating. Along somewhat similar lines, showing a subject in bland non-breeding plumage (non-flowering) or condition is weaker than showing the same subject in peak breeding (flowering) condition. Both are still conveying an average story, albeit a different one, about the characteristics of the subject.

With some context set around what an average story is, let's consider a "weak" story value. Images in this category will typically not provide significant information about a subject. They may be overly general sacrificing information about the subject for a more pictorial presentation. They may be taken in a manner that is highly artistic and potentially effective from a pictorial perspective, but where the manner in which the principal subject is rendered does not convey significant information about the subject to the viewer.

For example, a close-up of a rock wall may show evidence of erosion or how the rock was formed, but it will not provide as much information as a more expansive shot placing the wall or formation in context. Similarly, a back-lit shot of a subject which is shown either in deep shadow or with little detail may be effective pictorially, but fails to convey meaningful information about the subject itself. It is also possible for technical issues, such as major over or under exposure, to limit the information conveyed to a viewer about the subject to the point where that technical flaw has a derivative impact on the nature story. In such instances a rating of 1 is appropriate. There are always situations which might be exceptions. A shot from Bosque Del Apache (or any migratory flyway refuge) may show masses of birds without any one or group being a dominant element. The story is not about the singular but rather the masses and in that it could easily rate as a 2 or, if dramatic enough even a 3. That same setting but with a single bird isolated and small within the context of the scene still has a story but far weaker and much more likely warrants a rating of only 1.

The key here is to keep an open mind on what the maker is showing you as a viewer. A scene depicting a rain storm and associated cloud structures at a distance will still be conveying a fair amount of information about weather and other natural history aspects even if you might prefer a portrait of a bird you have not seen before. Avoid scoring the rain storm as a 1 just because the subject is not as interesting to you personally. It may still warrant a rating of 2 based on the story being depicted.

So, what types of images would be rated as “strong” (3)? Typically, these images will involve animate subjects and depict some aspect of the subject’s behavior so that the viewer is informed not only about the physical characteristics of the subject but about how that subject interacts with its habitat, other members of the same species or other species. The assessment you will need to make is whether that additional information raises the image above the average level to a strong level. For example, a bird preening shows behavior, but is it truly adding sufficient information about the subject to move it beyond being a strong 2 but still fundamentally a portrait, to one that is conveying information that adds an additional dimension to your understanding of the subject?

We often associate feeding, breeding, fighting, and the rearing of offspring as the true evidence of behavior that warrants a 3 rating. However, if the maker plans the image well, they may show a feature or state of the subject that is often not seen or commonly overlooked. Think of a fungi shot showing the dispersion of the spores, or an image that captures multiple states (bud, blossom, and seed) of a flower or plant. Such images convey substantial information beyond the typical portrait and warrant the “strong” 3 story rating. Again, keep an open mind relative to what the maker is showing you about the subject they are depicting. Detach yourself from whether you find the subject attractive or interesting and evaluate it on the information you are being shown.