

# A tearful walk on the wildlife side

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Marsel van Oosten, Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2018

One photo of climate change should be more persuasive than a thousand words of political bias. How about 100 pictures?

Nature lovers — as well as open-minded residents of planet earth — should mark their calendars for the annual Wildlife Photographer of the Year exhibition as it makes its way from Natural History Museum of London (its current location) to various European capitals. Many of the mammals, reptiles, insects, invertebrates, and environments portrayed in these 100 stunning photographs are in danger, threatened directly by man or indirectly by climate change, or both.

Since I live in Milan, Italy, not London, I caught the tail end of the 2018 exhibition . . . and it was plenty distressing. Emblematic was *The Golden Couple*, the overall prizewinner of the 2018 competition, showing two

snub-nosed monkeys from the Qinling Mountains of China. Dutch photographer Marsel van Oosten took this shot, which earned him the title of Wildlife Photographer of the Year for 2018 and also earned him £10,000.

He captured the blue-faced primates with glowing golden fur — an endangered species — as they watched a fight between two males in their troop, but their troubled expressions could just as easily have been a reaction to the continuing destruction of their environment, the only habitat in which they can exist.

Many of the pictures on display featured animals with similar anxiety, though not all for the same reasons. *Witness* by Emily Garthwaite portrays a caged sun bear in Indonesia, reacting in fear to the sight of its zookeeper. Endangered sun bears are exploited for their bile, and are kept in dirty enclosures with catheters permanently attached to their bodies. The fear and misery of this creature are palpable, and the image is upsetting to any animal lover.



Emily Garthwaite, Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition 2018

In contrast (thank goodness for the levity of some images), *Looking for love* shows an Asian sheephead wrasse from the waters around Sado Island, Japan. Photographer Tony Wu wanted to capture “the unique expression and burning desire of a male in love.” Arguably he succeeded, but with a very curious subject: the wrasse is an hermaphroditic fish — it can be born female but transform into a male if no suitable male fish are in its school. So this male in search of love may have already experienced love as a female. No wonder his expression is “unique.”



Tony Wu, Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition 2018

*Ahead in the game* illustrated the joy of two African wild dogs playing in Zimbabwe, but it has an undercurrent of menace. The two pups are playing with a baboon head, the remains of their presumed breakfast, but their long-term food supply is threatened because of the encroachment of man on their natural habitat. African baboons are not officially a “threatened” species, but they are “of concern” for similar reasons. Nicholas Dyer was torn by mixed emotions when he shot the picture.



Nicholas Dyer, Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition 2018

Similarly double-edged was *Eye to eye*, a portrait of an iguana peering through the eye socket of a rotting sea lion carcass on a beach in Peru. Illness and climate change have brought down a disproportionate number of sea lions here, and local iguanas take advantage, attracted by the insects that gravitate to their putrid bodies. Emanuele Biggi braved the horrific stench to take his picture.



Emanuele Biggi, Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition 2018

Biggi is one of six Italian photographers recognized in the 2018 competition. The others were Marco Colombo, Valter Bernardeschi, Lorenzo Shoubridge, Stefano Baglioni, and Georg Kantioler. Colombo took top honors in the category of Urban Wildlife, one of 16 categories in the overall event, with *Crossing paths*, a picture that arose spontaneously as the photographer was driving through a town in Abruzzo. He saw a rare Marsican brown bear crossing the street and managed to capture the moment before the animal disappeared. These bears have become bolder in their contact with human environments as their own habitat has become fragmented and threatened.



Marco Colombo, Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition 2018

The other categories are: Animals in their environment, Animal portraits, Behavior: amphibians and reptiles, Behavior: birds, Behavior: invertebrates, Behavior: mammals, Plants and Fungi, Under water, Earth's environments, Black and white, Creative visions, Wildlife photojournalism, Wildlife photojournalism story award, Rising star portfolio award (ages 18–26), Wildlife photographer portfolio award (age 27+), and Young wildlife photographers in three sub-categories: 10 years and under, 11–14 years, 15–17 years.

The bravura of the youngest photographers is almost as unsettling as the quality of the pictures they took. The 2018 winner in this group, 16-year-old Skye Meaker, earned his title of Young Wildlife Photographer of the Year with *Lounging leopard*, a close-up of a female leopard in Botswana. He found her after several hours of searching in a game park. Like many other subjects in this exhibition, leopards are deeply endangered –hunted by men coveting their spotted skins.



Skye Meaker, Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition 2018

The quality of the pictures, some taken by children as young as 10, and the appreciation of nature that they reveal, encourage a visitor to think that there may yet be hope for Earth. On the other hand, the destruction and degradation visible in so many photos, and the depressing information in their accompanying captions, are a *cri de coeur*. By the time the 2019 contest is over, up to 2,000 *more* species on earth will become extinct.

The competition was created by the Natural History Museum of London 55 years ago. Under the museum's tutelage, it has gained international attention over the course of decades, and the 2018 contest attracted 45,000 submissions from 95 countries. These were judged by an expert panel on their photo excellence, artistic merit, relevance to biodiversity and sustainability, freshness of composition, technical proficiency, innovation, narrative form, and ethical practice. The 2019 winners are on display in London through May 31, 2020.

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