

Gateway to Conservation: 2007 Coastal Bend Wildlife Photo Contest
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Introduction

This follow up article is based on my experiences in the 2007 Coastal Bend Wildlife Photo Contest, the world's third richest photo contest. A now all-digital contest, there are other noteworthy changes in the contest format. For basic information about the contest, please see my [2005 Naturescapes.Net article](#).

Coastal Bend Wildlife Photo Contest—Changes for 2007

The contest area was expanded to include three more counties in Texas for a total of fourteen counties. Land mass area totaled over 12,000 square miles. This expansion attracted more ranchers and photographers and helped to increase the visibility of the Coastal Bend's mission in the greater Corpus Christi, Texas region. For 2007, a total of 61 photographers/teams photographed on 54 ranches. (Some ranches hosted more than one photographer/team.) For comparison, in 2005 only 31 ranches participated.

I found a ranch in DeWitt County, one of the newly added counties only two-and-a-half hours from my home in Houston. This meant less driving time for me. The drawback was that the ranch was more inland so I was giving up wetlands near the coast and the probable loss of shorebirds, wading birds, and some other classes I liked to photograph. However, the ranch accommodations were air-conditioned and I really liked the rancher and his family. Since I was entering on a limited category basis, 20 categories instead of 53, I felt I could deal with any habitat issues. I entered as a single photographer.

The 2007 contest required that all images be entered as digital images even if taken as slides. I had just gone digital with my purchase of a Nikon D 200, so this would be my first effort to capture competitive images with a DSLR. I needed to interpret the digital submission rules and get all of my images ready for submission no later than July 13, the final day for receipt of entries. With shooting ending on June 30, this short amount of time concerned many of us. One entrant did not even own a computer when the contest started. However, he must have coped, as he ended up finishing in third place. The contest did provide "digital 101" sessions before it began to help photographers deal with the hurdles of the digital world. For each image, one had to submit the original unprocessed RAW file, a processed JPEG for viewing and judging and a processed TIFF for printing as the contest publishes a book of the winning images.

How the Contest Works

The photo contest committee:

1. Sets the rules well in advance of the contest period. Key items include: contest area, time period, image classes, limited or full entries, number of image entries, fees, awards, ethics statement, selection of judges, etc. (For 2007, the contest increased the prize money to \$91,600 from \$75,000 and allocated more of it to class and division winners by limiting the amount awarded to grand prizewinners. This was something the photographers have always wanted, as more money gets pushed down to anyone who has a class-winning image. It benefits the ranchers too, since half of the photographer's winnings get split with his or her rancher.)
2. Recruits landowners and photographers. The formation of a landowner/photographer team is left to the photographer and landowner.

Investments

For the photographer, the investments are fees, photo equipment, blinds, software and computers, in addition to time and talent. The photographer entry fee was:

- \$500 per team of two photographers, entry into all fifty-three (53) classes.
- \$400 per single photographer, entry into all fifty-three (53) classes.

\$250 per single photographer, entry into up to twenty (20) classes of photographer's choice.

The landowner entry fee was \$250 for 1000 acres or less or \$500 for more than 1000 acres. Special landowner fees were levied for landowners with multiple photographers on their properties.

Contest Results

In 2007, 61 photographer/teams entered, 51 as individuals and 10 as teams. Fifty-four landowners entered. These numbers were higher than the 2005 contest. The contest ran four months, from February 1, 2007 through June 30, 2007.

- The 53 possible entry classes were as follows:
- Birds Division, with 22 classes
- Mammals Division, with 8 classes
- Insects & Arachnids Division, with 7 classes
- Reptiles & Amphibians Division, with 5 classes
- Special Classes Division, with 11 classes

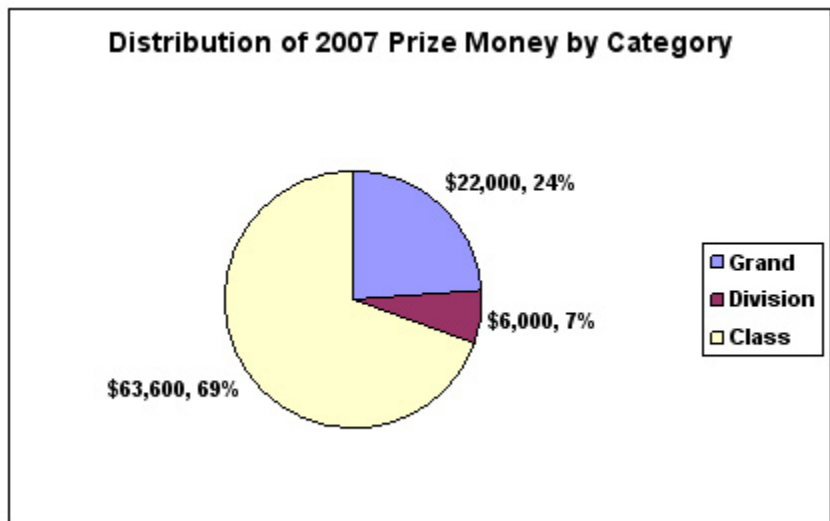
To win big money in these contests one needs to be a very good nature photographer with an excellent knowledge of native wildlife and habitat and also be on a property with diverse and excellent habitat. The more accomplished photographers usually have the inside track to get the best properties that usually repeat as winners in each contest. The three top winning ranches in 2007 were repeat winners from 2005, not in the same order, some with different photographers/teams.

In 2007, most ranches were plagued with above average rainfalls that started near the end of March and lasted through to the end of the contest. The rains impacted each of us in different ways. Some ranches became impassable until waters receded. On my ranch, the roads were reasonably accessible, but my traditional bird drips were completely ineffective. I made no entries in any of the small bird classes.

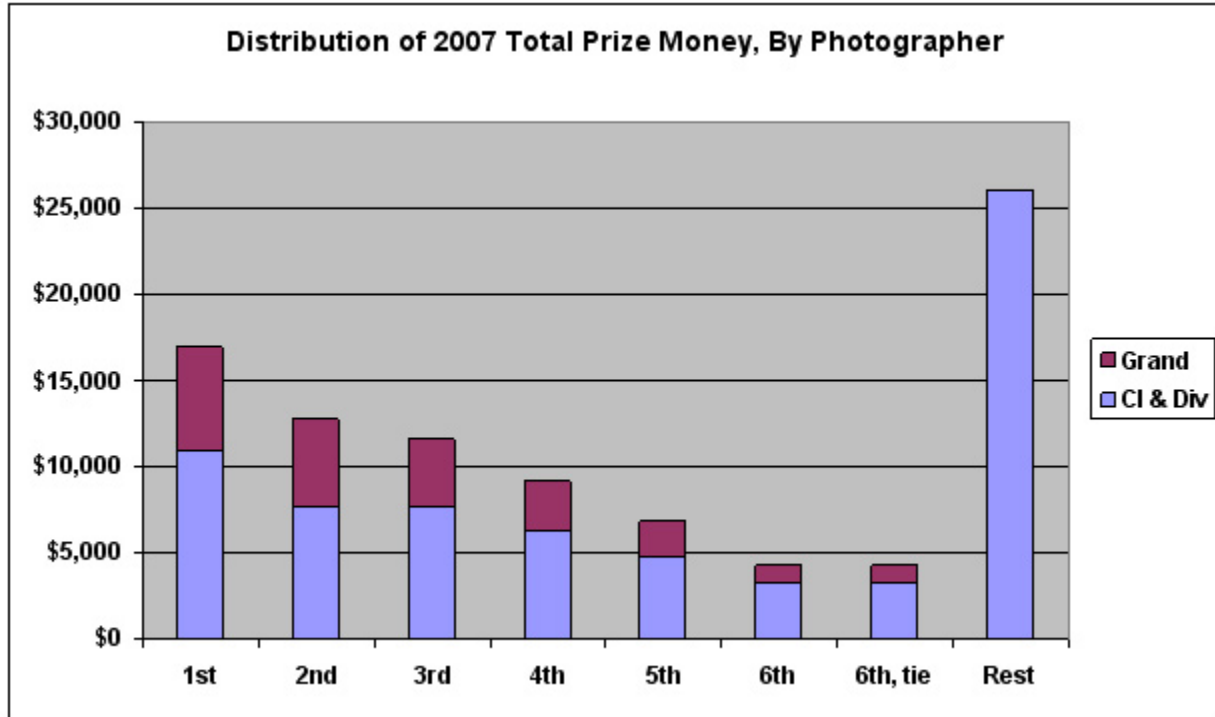
Results for the 2007 Contest: Total prize money was \$91,600. **Fifty-nine percent of the photographers/teams won any money, up two percentage points from 2005.** The top seven (there was a tie for sixth place) photographers/teams won 72% of the total prize money, down from 86% of the total prize money in 2005. For Class and Division prize money, the top seven photographers/teams won 64% of the prize money in 2007, compared to 68% in 2005 for the top six. One of the goals of the 2007 contest was achieved—more money was pushed down to the photographers in the form of class and division winning prizes. Landowners were really ecstatic in 2007 in that 39 received prize money out of a possible 54 or 72%. The 2007 awards banquet was packed. In 2005, there were only 19 winning landowners out of a total of 31, or 61%.

I finished in 29th place and won \$400 with a second place image in waterfowl. My landowner and I each got \$200. The theme of this year's contest was Gateway to Conservation. Each photographer submitted an image of the ranch gate. I won first place in the ranch gate category, a non-money category. I also had two honorable mentions that made the wall, but no money. The HMs will make the book along with the winning image. I had hoped to have done better, but given the competition, I really couldn't complain.

Here is the distribution of the \$91,600. Pay very close attention to how the money is distributed among class winners, division winners and grand prize winners. Most of the money to class winners should be the goal. The formulas for determining division and grand prize winners need to be a function of dollars to class winners.

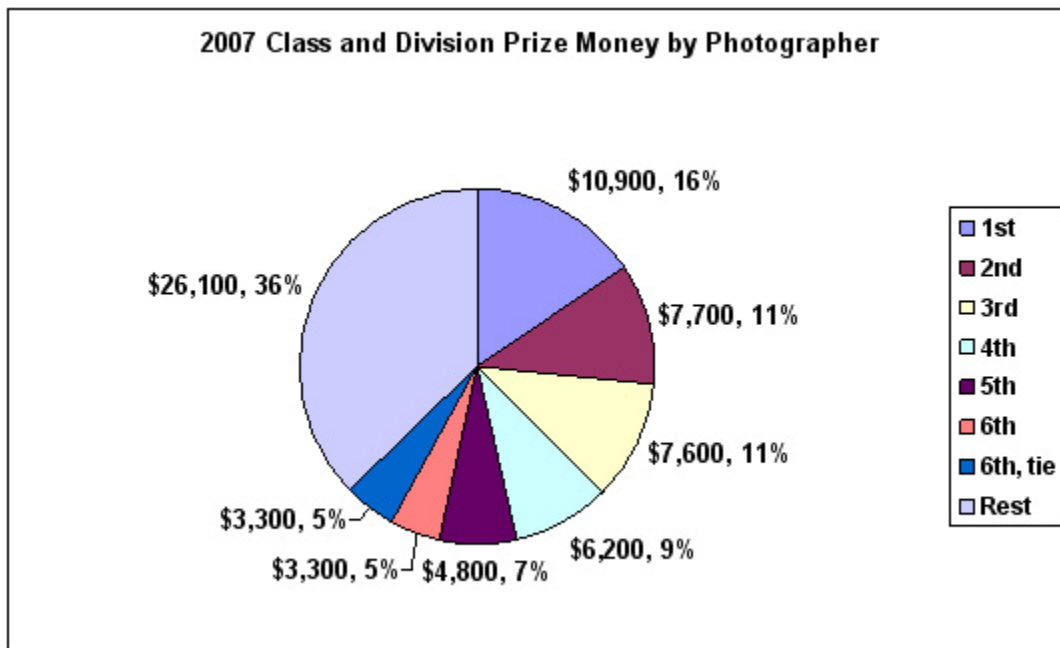


Here is the distribution of the prize money for the top seven photographers/teams (there was a tie for sixth place) and the remaining 29 money winners. I was very glad to see that 29 other photographers shared in a substantial share of the winnings as indicated by the far right bar on the chart—\$26,100 or 28% of total prize money. This is a major change from past contests. More money went to photographers outside of the top seven.



The first place photographer/team spent almost the full five-month period on the ranch. The second place photographer was a single photographer who lives in Houston and who photographed mostly on weekends. Both produced outstanding images.

This pie chart provides another look at similar data on Class and Division prize money for 2007 by photographer. The top seven only accounted for 64% of the winnings leaving 36% of the winnings for the remaining 29 winning photographers. There was a lot of competition and the judges had great images from which to make their selections.



Given the subjective nature of judging images, deciding what images to submit and knowing something about the judges' preferences are both very important parts of the contest. The judges in this year's contest selected images that I felt were more artistic than those in past contests. I found out from those present during the judging that some of the usual debates arose, like over the use of fill flash. The 2007 book is going to be one of the best ever from the Coastal Bend.

Here is a link to the rules:

http://www.wildlifephotocontest.com/files/2007_cbwpc_rules.pdf

Information on all 53 entry classes:

http://www.wildlifephotocontest.com/files/2007_cbwpc_rules_classes_attach_c.pdf

The digital submission guidelines:

http://www.wildlifephotocontest.com/files/2007_cbwpc_rules_digsub_attach_b.pdf

For more information about this contest or establishing a similar organization in your area, contact Michelle Horine at the Coastal Bend Wildlife Photo Contest, at 361-881-9316. Web site at : <http://www.wildlifephotocontest.com/>

I want to thank Michelle Horine at the Coastal Bend Wildlife Contest who provided me with data on the landowners, photographers and winning images for the 2007 contest. I and not the contest prepared the charts and graphs that appear above.



Joe Smith has over 40 years experience in photography including medium format black and white which he began as a teenager. He began nature photography in 2000 and learned by attending nature photo workshops but primarily by participating in Texas wildlife photo contests. He is one of the winning photographers in the 2001, 2003, 2005 and 2007 Coastal Bend Wildlife Photo Contests and also was a winner in the 2002 Valley Land Wildlife Photo Contest. Joe conducts photographic introduction seminars for eighth graders at various schools in Houston, TX and serves on the boards of various non profits. He recently helped Houston Wilderness publish its "Houston Atlas of Biodiversity." Joe photographs with Nikon digital cameras and Nikon lenses.

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