

The Birdlife Photography Image Moderation Process: September 2021-Graham Cam

Since stepping aside from the BLP committee, I now spend considerable time moderating photos submitted by members to the Birdlife Photography digital library. As such, I take this opportunity to provide encouragement and suggestions for making the process more efficient and of course most enjoyable, for both members and our dedicated moderating team.

For the benefit of new members, let me summarize the moderating process – once a member has submitted a photo to BLP, it resides in order of receipt, in an unpublished image folder accessible by image moderators appointed by the BLP committee. As part of the moderating process, images are assessed in terms of the following:

Gallery – has the photo been submitted to the most appropriate gallery for publication?

Image dimensions and **file size** – are these metrics correct as specified for the gallery selected? (I'm in the habit of checking these, but it's actually not necessary, since the website now does not allow images to be submitted which do not meet the requirements for the gallery.)

Comments field – this field is mandatory for competitions and with specific competition requirements.

Whilst optional for other galleries, this is one field which should feature in your selection of an image, especially for New Images. Unlike social media, images submitted to the BLP digital library should in my view be your very best images, not necessarily the best image on our website, but the best image you can capture. Our mission statement is to encourage and mentor each member to become a better photographer and moderators take this to heart, which is why you often receive an email from us with suggestions for improving your image.

Whilst there is no intention to preclude members from making statements as to why you captured an image, such as *'this was my first opportunity to photograph this species'*, I think it is important to add the key reasons why you selected the photo. Treat each submitted image as if it is in a major competition in which you are required to convey the positive elements portrayed in the image. At the same time discussing any negative elements in the photo is encouraged, as this is a useful learning experience for both the photographer and other members. Discussing any minor negative elements would rarely disqualify your image from publication. We are not asking you to write a thesis, but if you are unable to articulate 2-3 positive elements in the image, then ask yourself *"Is this image worthy of submitting for publication in the New Images gallery?"* All too often images are submitted without any comment as to its photographic qualities. As an alternative, you could consider submitting the image to the Critique gallery for feedback.

We know that many of you love to photograph birds every day, although this has not always been possible during our Covid lockdowns. We certainly encourage you to regularly photograph birds and at the same time we encourage you to be highly critical of your photography. Set yourself a high standard and if an image doesn't meet this standard but it is still a good image, then you might consider another option – publishing the image on our BLP Facebook site where there is no image moderating process. BLP - Facebook affords you

the opportunity to publish every day, reserving you best images for the BLP galleries. Of course, you are not precluded from submitting/posting the same image to both our digital library and Facebook page.

Equipment and camera settings – this field is mandatory for competitions.

For other galleries it is optional. It might seem to be a duplicated requirement given that images should be submitted with a complete EXIF data set (contact BLP if you don't know how to do this), which moderators can assess, however, it makes our lives much simpler if the key settings are transcribed in this field. It also provides further opportunity to describe in greater detail, the equipment and settings employed, which might include a hide, bird bath, monopod, tripod, food source or some special set-up.

State, Location, Date – these fields are straight forward requirements.

Species – this is a field where moderators check and double check. Of course, we are not infallible and from time to time we can be distracted by the beauty of the image submitted and overlook an identification error, which is later corrected often thanks to contact by members. Conversely, we regularly assist in difficult identifications, in which case you will receive an email from one of the moderators as we seek to assign a correct identification.

Keywords – this is a field that continues to require more attention by members. Each keyword is checked for accuracy. If you are unsure of a keyword, then a box is best left blank. Moderators will fill boxes where appropriate. It is always beneficial to check your image after publication as moderators may have added keywords to your image, which can be informative for identification etc. The keyword which causes the greatest confusion is *behaviour/display*. This option is really designed for specific behaviours or displays other than those (such as feeding) listed in this field. A bird hanging from a branch may not warrant ticking this box, nor does a waterbird swimming in a pond. If one or more birds are showing an aggressive behaviour or performing a dance or gesture, perhaps involving a second bird or group of birds, or using some form of 'tool', then this does warrant a 'tick'. Similarly, a photo with a Comment – 'this bird was singing loudly and attracted my attention' but the bird appears to be sitting quietly with its beak closed, does not warrant a 'tick' in this box. Ticking the *behaviour/display* keyword should be accompanied by a description of the relevant action in the 'Comments' field.

Two other keywords which create confusion are 'juvenile' and 'immature'. This can be confusing as some young birds retain their juvenile plumage for only a few weeks, whilst others transition from a juvenile plumage into adult plumage over several months. This transition, generally during the first year is not an 'immature' stage. A designation of 'immature' should be confined to a specific and defined 'immature' plumage, which is species dependent. I make a plea here – every member should have their personal copy of the Australian Bird Guide – Menkhorst *etal.*, this is the most recent and comprehensive field guide. Please purchase a copy.

One common example where more than one keyword is appropriate is when an adult bird is identified as either a 'male' or 'female'. Most often the keyword 'adult' has not been simultaneously ticked. It is possible to have a male or female in immature plumage and hence

the more detail the better. Selecting 'male' or 'female' is often only half the answer! Remember any number of options can be ticked if appropriate for that image.

As part of the moderating process, moderators are required to rate the quality of each image. This assists BLP with several internal functions and it essentially a four-tiered hierarchy. Some of you may have received an email indicating that your image is not suitable for publication. This is very rare as the standard of submitted images is quite high. Other members may have received an email which indicates that the image will only be published for a one-month period and then deleted; similarly, few images fall into this category. In both cases the reasons for such a decision are clearly articulated to members and with an opportunity for discussion with the moderator(s). There are two further categories which result in publication and retention of your image in the digital library. From time to time a moderator may suggest or change the gallery to which the image is being submitted if the image best fits the criteria of another gallery. We will never redirect an image to the Critique gallery without your consent.

One of the commonest issues I encounter, is viewing good images which have one or more minor flaws, and these flaws contribute to reducing the quality of the image. In general, the image has undergone global post processing (raw conversion, exposure/brightness, contrast, highlights, shadows, clarity, vibrance, saturation) but not localised post-processing, targeting some of the same adjustments to specific areas within the image. It is these areas, often associated with highlights and shadows that are overlooked. Localised post-processing takes a few more minutes to complete and is well worth the effort, it can make the difference between a good image and a great image. It can also indicate that an image is beyond rescue and perhaps another image should be selected, or another photo opportunity planned. For those of you using Adobe Lightroom Classic I have produced two videos in which I show you how to apply these basic edits.

The home page displays images on the left-hand and right-hand edges. The right-hand images are those selected by moderators for a specific reason; it maybe that the image is acknowledged as extremely high quality; the image may depict a rare or unusual behaviour; or it may be that the moderator wants to acknowledge the technical progression of a member.

A Suggested Workflow for Submitting Images

At the time of writing this review, there were 29,837 images in our digital library. Whilst our database can easily manage this number of images, how do we put them to best use? A member recently responded to my email agreeing that my suggested edits would make for a better image, but did it really matter as the images were not being used by others for any purpose. My response is multifaceted; making your images the best they can be should be high on your priority list; having a digital resource for conservation purposes does not mean that we can compel conservation agencies to use our resource, but we certainly encourage them to do so; with so many images to view how do we showcase our very best? The latter is difficult to achieve, especially for a group like BLP which functions on the goodwill of volunteers. When I was President, I instigated the Premier Bird Image Gallery to showcase our very best images. Judging images and maintaining a judging panel (comprising experienced photographers with the necessary skills) was not sustainable long term, which is why images are not being added to the PBIG. What can we do? One option is to submit only our very best images.

The workflow which I would like all members to consider is as follows:

After post-processing your image, refrain from immediate submission. Review the image over the next 2-3 days; be critical, look for defects you might have missed; spend additional time learning more about post-processing.

Consider options such as submitting the image to the Critique gallery if uncertain or to our Facebook page or to both; perhaps ask another photography member for their feedback.

Access the BLP digital library and view how many images there are for the species you are submitting. The Superb Fairy-wren has 340 images, hence ask yourself if another image is adding value to the library, or simply adding content. If it is a 'superb' image (forgive the pun), with some exquisite photographic element, such as 'special lighting' or a 'creative composition', then it should be submitted. The same applies if it has identification value, or some specific behaviour that is minimally represented. The flipside in this decision-making process is for a species with few images, in which case, your image might be the superior image in that gallery, even though it might have some defects. The bottom-line is to be realistic when making a decision.

If after all these considerations, you think your image should be submitted, we look forward to viewing your image. Before you open the submission page, prepare in advance the fields discussed above; prepare the comments which share why you selected this image, what photographic elements make this image special; write down the equipment and camera setting used, be confident with your species identification and keywords.

Finally, please remember our code of ethics; keep abreast of any updates – our code has recently been revised. For those members submitting photos of birds in hollows, I ask that you include in the 'Comments' field the reasons why you determined the birds were not incubating eggs nor feeding young, especially if your image was captured during that species recorded breeding season.

Best wishes to you all, and enjoy your BLP membership,

Graham Cam

Top 10 Tips

1. Capture the best image possible – learn how to shoot in RAW format and effectively post-process.
2. Review your photo at full size (100%), assessing sharpness, digital noise, overall composition and identify areas which require both global and local post-processing.
3. Following post processing put your edited photo aside for 24-48h and review again with fresh eyes. Further post-processing may be required.

4. During this time, review the BLP digital library for the species photo being submitted; does your photo simply add further content or does it add value to that species gallery? How does the quality of your photo compare to other published photos?
5. If you are uncertain about submission of an image to the New Images gallery, consider the Critique gallery.
6. For photos which may not be of equal or better quality than our published photos, consider posting on our BLP Facebook page.
7. The 'Comments' field is critical for honing your photography skills. This field should convey 2-3 photographic elements which you consider make this a quality photo and worthy of publication. BLP encourages every member to populate this field.
8. The equipment and camera settings field greatly assists moderators. Please consider providing the camera model, lens, capture focal length, ISO, depth of field, shutter speed, and any additional information you consider important.
9. When submitting a photo, select all the appropriate keywords; any number of keywords can be selected. Several keyword issues have been highlighted in the video discussion.
10. Finally, remember our code of ethics and keep abreast of updates. Please consider our discussion of photos of birds in hollows.