Martin Bailey Photography K.K.

2023 Top Ten Photos Selection Process

Jan 6, 2024

I'm sitting down at my desk on January 3rd, 2024, to start the process of selecting my Top Ten photos from 2023. If you've been following my antics for a while, you'll know that this is a yearly exercise that I carry out and you can check out all of my previous selections by searching for Top Ten in the toolbar above.

To recap, I feel that learning to edit a selection of images down to a finite number is an important skill for a photographer, and comes into play pretty much every time we use our cameras. No one wants to sit through hundreds of images when you are trying to relay a story about somewhere you've visited or something you found interesting. Photo contest judges would never say, just send us your memory card and we'll look through all of your images and see if anything is worthy of a prize. It's your job to select your best work, and that is why I recommend that everyone with an interest in photography goes through this exercise each year, and come up with your own Top Ten.

When you look back over the years, you also see your progress, and your selections will also be a wonderful reminder of the best of your experiences, as you develop and use your photography to document your life. The subject matter will also show you what you are most interested in as a photographer. Even if you shoot many genres, like sport, portraits, street, wildlife, and landscapes, when you make your selection, you will find that you end up with shortlists that lean towards one or two genres, and this helps us to learn what we enjoy shooting. It's up to you if you try to create a final set of images that is balanced across all of your genres, or if you

prefer to list ten images that you personally most like out of your year's work.

The most important thing is that you strive to whittle down your selection to ten images. It could be more, say twelve, or even your top twenty, but the larger the number, the less difficult the exercise becomes, and if you select too large a number, you risk creating a less impactful final selection of images. I like ten, because it's a small enough
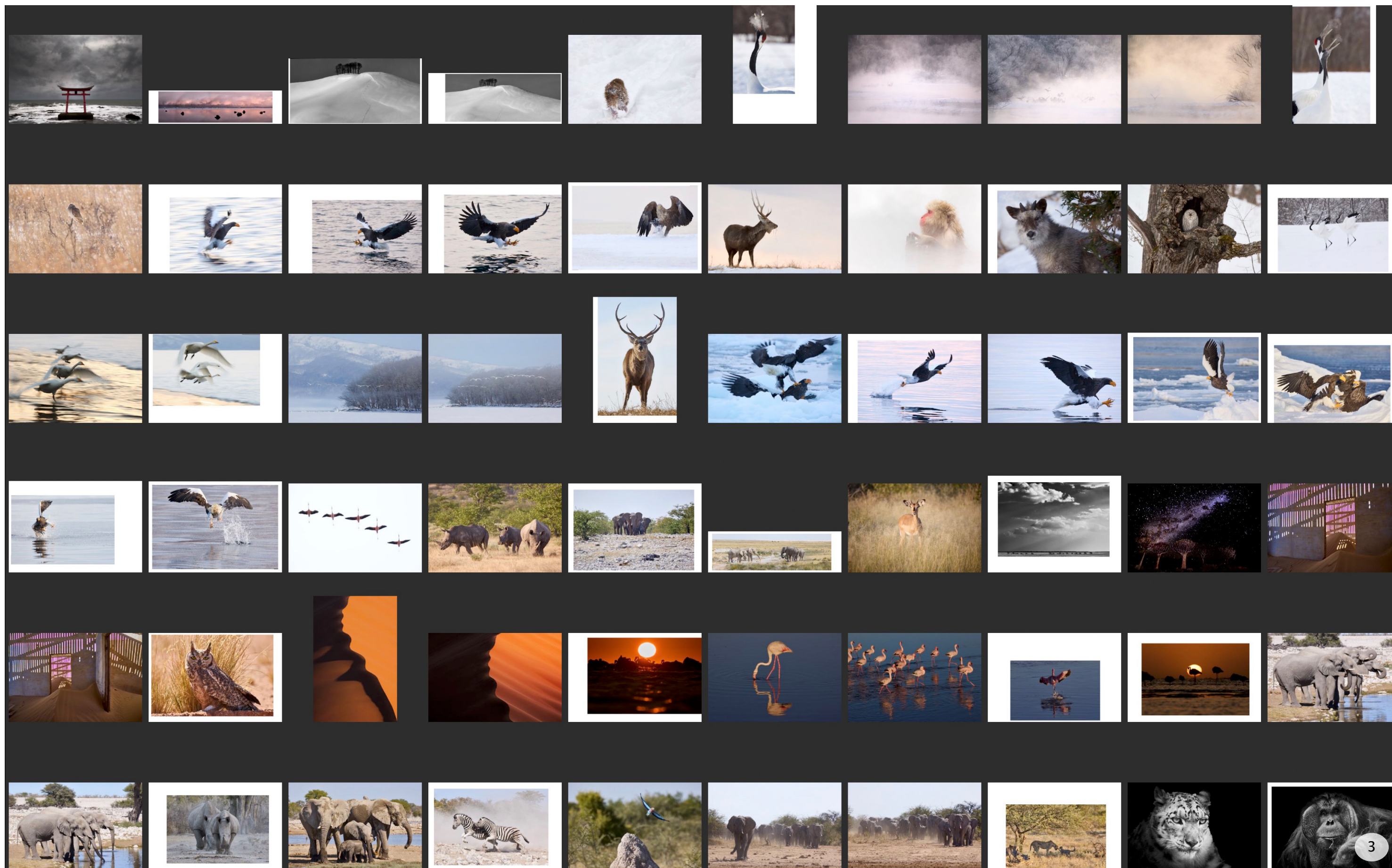
number to be difficult, and a large enough number to end up with a sample of work that still means something to me, and hopefully to others too.

If you've listened to or read about how I manage my images, you'll know that there are also now a few tasks I have to do as I start a new year. As I write this manuscript, I've just attached my 2023 Traveler Drive and my Finals SSD. Both are high-end Sandisk SSD drives. I do

one last check to ensure that all of the best work from 2023, my Final selection from each shoot, has been copied to the 2023 folder on my Finals drive. I then emptied the trash in my Capture One Pro catalog and ran one last backup of my 2023 Traveler drive onto my NAS, before clearing the catalog and deleting my 2023 folder. From this point on, the copy of my 2023 Photos on my NAS becomes my master copy and archive, but all of the work from the year that I care about is also on my Finals

drive, and I'll use the Finals drive copy to make my 2023 Top Ten selection.

I've got 1060 Finals from 2023, which is more than usual, but I did two Namibia tours this year, so a total of five tours, left me with more images to select from. To get started on the selection process, I've created an album named "2023 Top Ten" under my Top Tens album in my Capture One Pro collection and made that album my Selects collection. I have a keyboard shortcut defined, so now, whenever I hold down the option and command keys and press the Q key on my keyboard, the currently selected image will be added to my 2023 Top Ten album.

So, off I go now to look through my thousand-plus images from 2023 and see how many I'll select in my first pass. It's important to be selective, as I already know that only ten images are going to make the grade, so just throwing everything I like into the collection is a waste of time. Besides, these images are already my Finals. This means they are the best shots from my shoots throughout the year. They're in my Finals selection for a reason, and I'm glad they are, as this gives me a huge head start on my Top Ten selection process.

I'm picking up on this task now on January 5, after a morning flying a drone for the first time in five years, and it was a lot of fun. They've come a long way in five years, and I can't wait to get some new shots on my upcoming Hokkaido Landscape Photography Adventure. Anyway, having just finished my first run through just over a thousand images that I selected as my Finals after each shoot during 2023, I have 60 images to start and whittle down. This is often a higher number, but I found it pretty easy to make this first selection, for a number of reasons.

The first thing to note is that to me, many of the images I made in 2023 are very similar to previous years. The same tours, with slightly different opportunities, so I kind of automatically didn't consider many repeat images. Having said that, I was surprised to find myself excited about some of my Steller's Sea Eagle flight shots, but they are such magnificent birds, that I probably shouldn't be surprised. There were also a number of shots that I still feel were pretty special, and different, maybe also better than previous years, so they were obvious candidates. I've included a screenshot of the selection before I embark on my second pass.

First of all, I'm going to get rid of some of the almost duplicate images. I still have two of the copse of trees on the hilltop in Hokkaido and only need one

ISO 100   1/60 s   f/14   400 mm   MBP_Hokkaido_20230118_R516183_Panorama.dng   ☐ ★★★ · · ▤

ISO 100   1/160 s   f/14   343 mm   MBP_Hokkaido_20230119_R516230_Panorama.dng   ☐ ★★★ · · ▤

at the most. Likewise for the shot of a line of swans flying in at the Kussharo Lake with the frosty trees in the background, and, of course, the sea eagle shots. To perform this task, I generally select all images of the same subject and view them on screen at the same time.

Here's a screenshot of the Copse on the Hilltop comparison (previous page). Note that for this process, I often change the background of the Viewer in Capture One Pro to white, as this makes it feel more like a print to me, and I find it easier to view each image separately with a white background. It may be just me, but I find when I use a dark background, the images seem to be joined together, and it's more difficult to view them as separate pieces. I also turn on the Proof Margin, as that adds more white space around the images, which also helps.

I really like the panorama version of this shot, and love the texture in the snow on the right side of the hill, but I think I'm going to keep the top image, as we can still see a good chunk of the right slope, but it leaves a little more to the imagination with the crop of the top image. The top image also accentuates the fence leading down the hill, which I feel is an important and pleasing aspect, so the top image it is.
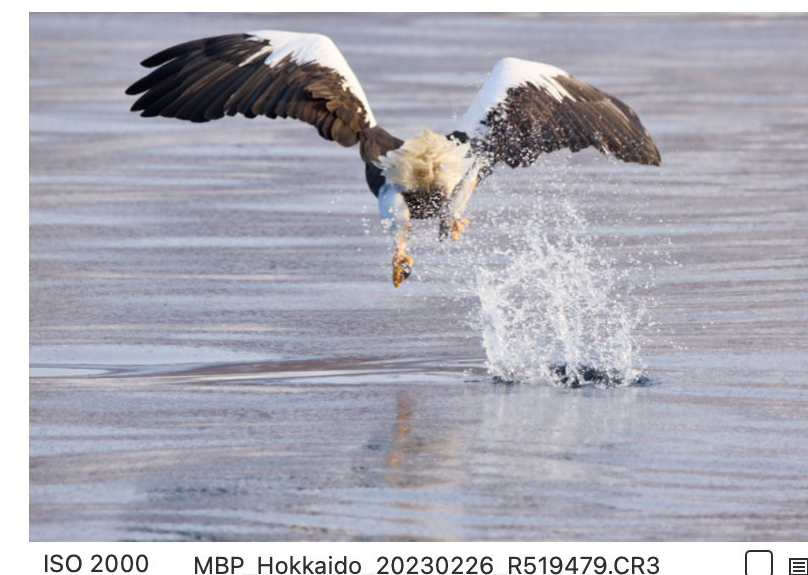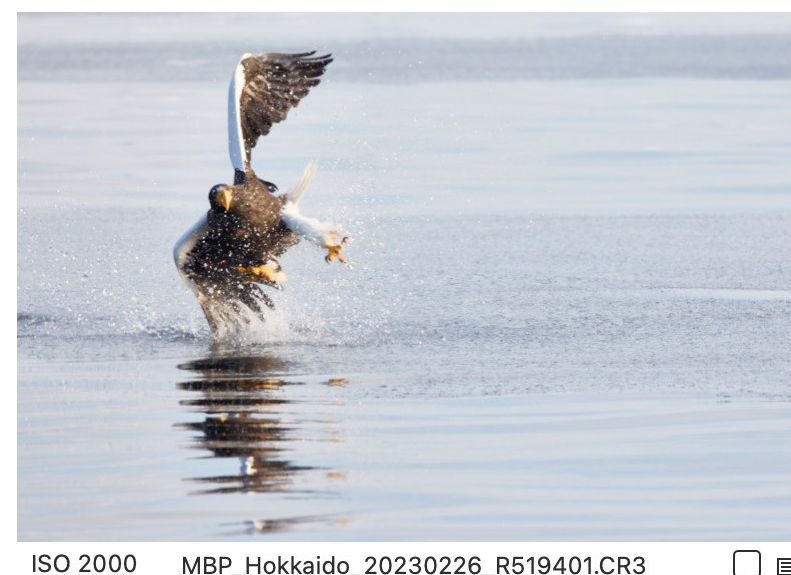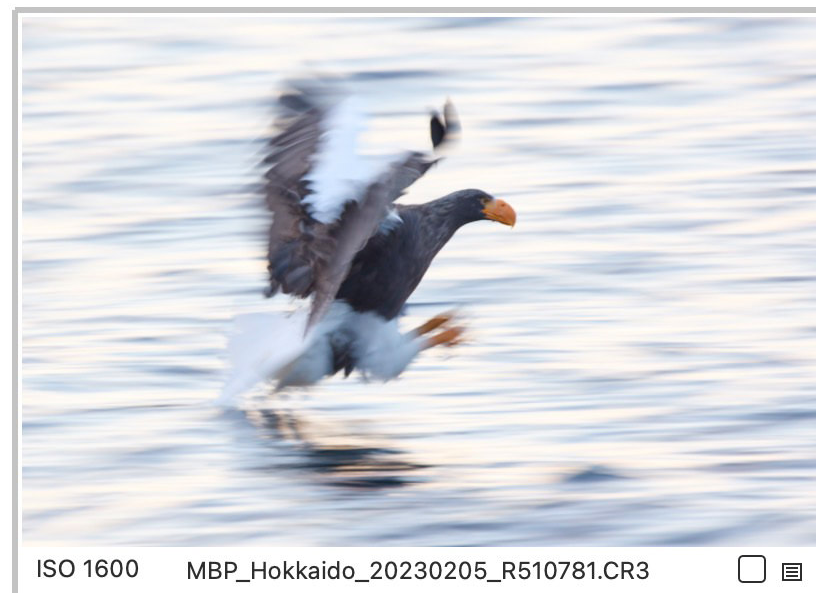
Another important indicator of whether the image should stay or go, is literally how I feel as the image comes onto the screen. I just flicked through the three shots of the cranes on the river and felt my mood rise as the first image appeared, and then it dipped as the second and third images appeared. Without overthinking the decision too much, I removed the second and third images.

I still have nine Steller's Sea Eagle shots in my selection, so here's

another screenshot to show you what I have, and we can work through my thought process together. I really like the panning shot in the top left. Of the top center and right images, I prefer the angle of the bird in the right image and

the reflection is better, so I removed the top center image. In Capture One Pro you have to deselect all images to delete one, and when I put the images back I found a tenth image of the Steller's Sea Eagles, but I removed it

from my selection, so I'm now down to eight, but now comparing the top right image with the left-center row image, I prefer the left center, so the top right is gone now too.

ISO 1600   MBP_Hokkaido_20230205_R510781.CR3

ISO 6400   MBP_Hokkaido_20230206_R512558.CR3

ISO 3200   MBP_Hokkaido_20230206_R512903.CR3

ISO 6400   MBP_Hokkaido_20230225_R517304.CR3

ISO 6400   MBP_Hokkaido_20230225_R517349.CR3

ISO 2500   MBP_Hokkaido_20230226_R518645.CR3

ISO 1600   MBP_Hokkaido_20230226_R519089.CR3

ISO 2000   MBP_Hokkaido_20230226_R519401.CR3

ISO 2000   MBP_Hokkaido_20230226_R519479.CR3

The image at the bottom center was the result of a collision between two birds and that doesn't feel great, so I'm removing that too, and the butt shot in the bottom left can go, as I still like the others more. Now faced with a smaller selection of five images, I see that if I'm to leave one image in, it's the center image of the above screenshot. I love the tension of that eagle almost leaving the frame on the right side, and the wake its tail caused in the water as it used its tail to gauge its height, so I'm going to go ahead and remove the rest.

As I compared the two similar shots of the lines of swans flying in at Kussharo Lake, I realized that I liked the bottom image with two lines of swans better, but it needed cropping to a 16:9 ratio to increase the impact. There was too much sky and foreground snow in the original edit. I also removed the landscape aspect Ezo Deer shot in favor of the portrait aspect image, as I still love the proud look on the face of the deer that is looking straight at me for his portrait. I removed both of the Whooper Swan panning shots, as neither kept my attention as I passed over them.

I'm now starting the second pass of my Namibia images, and immediately removed the flamingo flyover shot, as my mood dipped when I looked at it. I've still got a lot of elephant shots. I removed the two images of the large herd coming towards the camera in favor of the more distant herd shot, but again, I cropped the shot vertically, this time to a 1:2 aspect ratio. This image feels more cinematic to me now. I also removed some of the foreground rocks and piles of dung, to clean it up

a little. I'm leaving in the biblical panorama for now, as I love the feel of that image, but I removed the black and white elephant procession image.

I removed the three blue water flamingo shots too, as they don't feel that artistic, and I kind of knew they wouldn't make the grade when I added them but wanted to have a second look. I'm leaving the second of the two flamingo sunset images in the selection for now, but don't know if it will stay.

Now, at the end of my second pass, I'm down to thirty images, as you can see in this screenshot. Now it's starting to get difficult, but that means I have to start

and get brutal. From the thumbnail view, I can see that the Lilac-Breasted Roller can go, as it lacks impact. The Kolmanskop slat room shot can go too, as I've included that in a previous top ten, I'm sure. The laughing impala is cute but has to go, and that goes for the baby snow monkey running away as well.

I'm also going to remove the two cranes with their breath. I was really happy to get that shot, but there is a better shot to be made, so I'll remove it in anticipation of improvement. The Ural Owl and Serow can also go, and the two dancing cranes shot is out of here too. Aargh! This is getting difficult now. I'm down to 22, so I still have to remove 12

images. As cool as it would be to have a snow leopard shot in my top ten, I think I'm going to get rid of it. The fighting zebra can go too. Twenty left!

Let's say goodbye to the short-eared owl because its expression is not great. The White-Tailed Eagle kicking up snow can go as well. I just removed the three rhinos shot. I prefer the cool gray palette of the other rhino image. With seventeen images left, I can see that as much as I love the Steller's Sea Eagle shot, it has to go, and the Ezo Deer is starting to feel out of place as well. The biblical elephant shot is perhaps not as impactful as the other images, so that's gone too.

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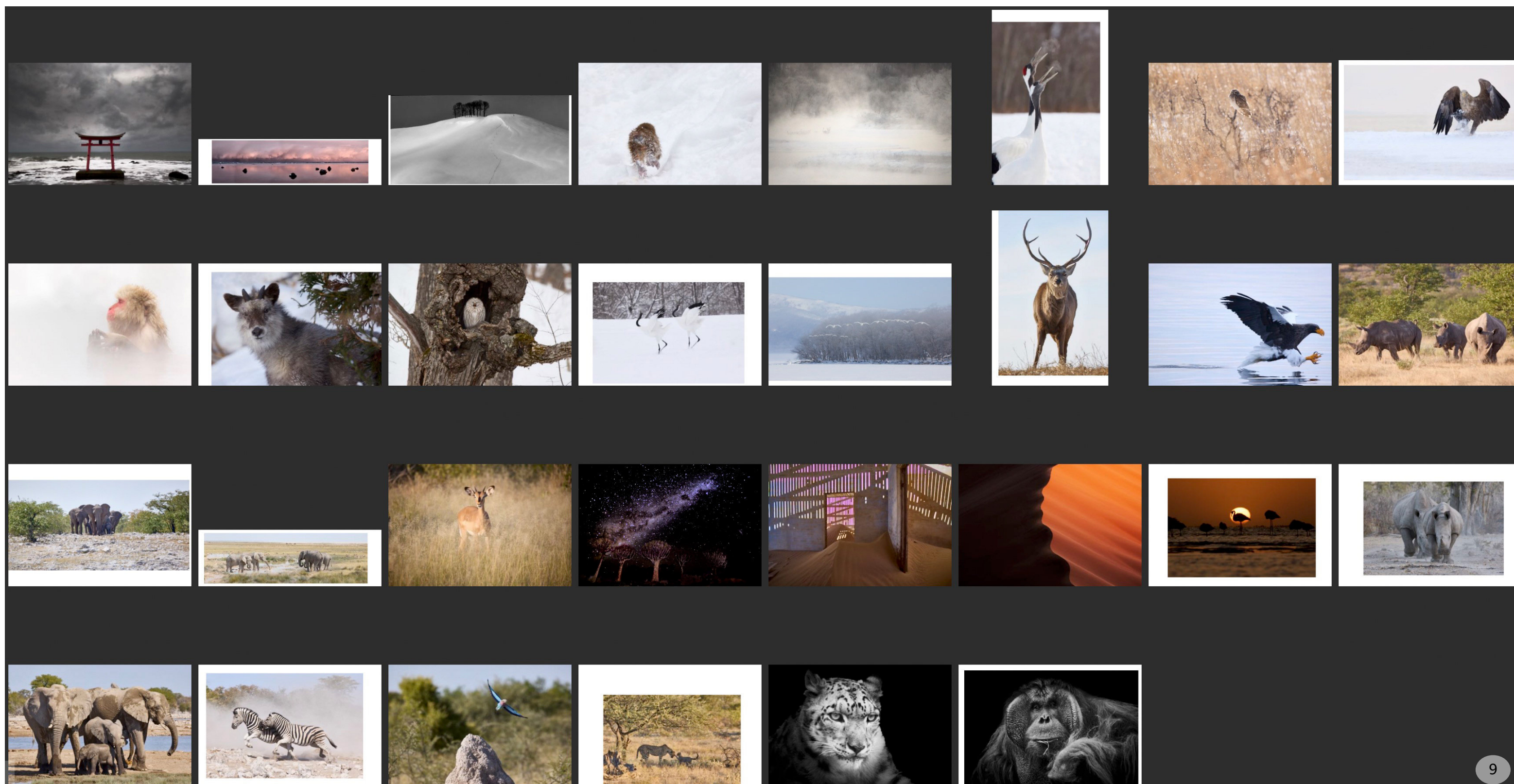
With 14 left now, it's a painful decision, but the cranes on the river and the lines of swans shot probably have to go too. It's slideshow time. I have to try and feel my way to the final two removal candidates. And, I now feel that I have to remove the dune shot because as much as I love it, I can't think of any other reasons to keep it. And, now, at eleven images, I think my only option is to remove the orangutan shot because it's a captive animal, which makes it low-hanging fruit. I hate that expression, because I love that shot, and shooting at zoos is a great way to spend a day, but I cannot think of a reason to remove any of the other shots.

So, there we have it. I'll add my ten images for reference after this. It's been a more difficult process than many of my previous years. I hope that's an indication that I have improved some as a photographer because it was harder than usual to cut the chord on many of my selected images. I'm somewhat saddened to have removed all of my Hokkaido Winter Wildlife images, as I still love that work, but I think my other work trumped my results from 2023, although, to be honest, on a different day, I may have made different choices.

I'm not going to talk you through each of the images, as I've already done that in previous Podcasts and blog posts, and this really isn't about the individual images. It's all about the process, and learning to create a strong set of images for whatever reason. This is what I feel to be my best work from 2023, but this could be about a selection process for any reason. Employ the things you learn from this process when selecting images and the viewers of your selection will enjoy your presentation much more than if you were to show more images.

If you do this yourself, please leave a link in the comments below, as I enjoy seeing what you've been up to over the year as well. All the best for 2024!

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