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A marmot’s final moment before becoming fox food wins an award — and tells us about climate change

Yongqing Bao won Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2019 for his image, “The Moment,” of a fox hunting a marmot on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. (Yongqing Bao)

By

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“The Moment” was rare yet relatable.

In a picture captured by Chinese photographer Yongqing Bao, a female Tibetan fox and a Himalayan marmot meet. The fox, hunting to feed her three cubs, crouches, ready to pounce. The marmot, upright and pivoting on one small claw, opens its mouth in a silent screech.

The creatures face each other — suspended in what Roz Kidman Cox, chair of the judging panel for Wildlife Photographer of the Year, called an “extraordinary” natural moment.

“Photographically, it is quite simply the perfect moment,” said Cox, who awarded Bao first place in the photography contest, which is sponsored by London’s Natural History Museum. “The expressive intensity of the postures holds you transfixed, and the thread of energy between the raised paws seems to hold the protagonists in perfect balance.” Bao told BBC he waited for hours in an alpine meadow of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, an expanse of elevated land in central and east Asia, to capture the hunt.

The fox lay in the grass, waiting for passing prey. The young marmot walked into her trap.

The pictures that followed Bao’s award-winning moment are gruesome, Bao told BBC. He summarized the end result simply.

“That’s nature,” he said.

Yongqing Bao at the Wildlife Photographer of the Year Awards on Oct. 15 at the Natural History Museum in London. (Tim P. Whitby/Getty Images for the Natural History Museum)

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Bao was born and raised in the area where he captured the photo, according to the museum. He developed a fascination with local wildlife and now serves as director and chief ecological photographer of the Qilian Mountain Nature Conservation Association of China.



“During years of photography, I have come to realize that there is a long way to go in terms of environmental conservation,” Bao told London’s Natural History Museum. “As a photographer, I believe that it is my responsibility to let people know that wild animals are indispensable friends to humans.”

‘The moment’ by Yongqing Bao (China). Overall winner. Joint Winner 2019, Behavior: Mammals.

“It was early spring on the alpine meadowland of the Qinghai–Tibet Plateau, in China’s Qilian Mountains National Nature Reserve, and very cold. The marmot was hungry. It was still in its winter coat and not long out of its six-month, winter hibernation, spent deep underground with the rest of its colony of 30 or so. It had spotted the fox an hour earlier, and sounded the alarm to warn its companions to get back underground. But the fox itself hadn’t reacted and was still in the same position. So the marmot had ventured out of its burrow again to search for plants to graze on. The fox continued to lie still. Then

suddenly she rushed forward. And with lightning reactions, Yongqing seized his shot. His fast exposure froze the attack. The intensity of life and death was written on their faces – the predator mid-move, her long canines revealed, and the terrified prey, forepaw outstretched, with long claws adapted for digging, not fighting. Such predator-prey interaction is part of the natural ecology of the plateau ecosystem, where rodents, in particular the plateau pikas (smaller than marmots), are keystone species. Not only are they the main prey for foxes and nearly all the other predators, they are key to the health of the grassland, digging burrows that also provide homes for many small animals including birds, lizards and insects, and creating microhabitats that increase the diversity of plant species and therefore the richness of the meadows.”

Canon EOS-1D X + 800mm f5.6 lens; 1/2500 sec at f5.6 (+0.67 e/v); ISO 640; Manfrotto carbon-fibre tripod + 509HD head.

A Tibetan fox rushes forward—teeth exposed—while the marmot it’s after screams out in surprise, undoubtedly knowing that its days are numbered. The standoff between these two animals, high in the alpine meadows of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, has won photographer Yongqing Bao the title of Wildlife Photographer of the Year. Developed and produced annually by the Natural History Museum, London, the 2019 contest saw over 48,000 entries from 100 countries across 19 categories.

While the standard of photography was high, it was Bao’s *The Moment* that ultimately won over the judges. His scene of horror—and humor—demonstrates just how tough life in the wild can be. Every emotion of the marmot can be felt, as it flings its paws in the air and opens its mouth to cry out. One can almost imagine its scream, as it attempts to warn the rest of the colony about the danger at hand.