

From the book

***Augenzeugen der Natur- 50 Years GDT
Nature photography through the ages***

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Nobody would have dreamed of this back then ...

50 years of GDT history

"Without its idealists, no association could exist. Without its phlegmatists, none would have enough members."

Hans-Heinrich Hitzler

4 April 1971, shortly after ten, the sky cloudy, no rain. Nine gentlemen stand in front of the backdrop of the Hellenthal game reserve, and Gisela Pölking presses the shutter release of her Rolleiflex. This immortalised a moment that was to have a lasting influence on all our lives as nature photographers - the founding of the *Gesellschaft Deutscher Tierfotografen e.V.* All of us who know each other today, are friends with each other, initiate joint projects or argue about the future development of the association can only do so because 50 years ago these nine pioneers brought the GDT into being: Horst Niesters, Walter Wissenbach, Wolfgang Steinborn, Fritz Pölking, Fritz Steiniger, Reinhard Siegel, Hansgeorg Arndt, Karl-Friedrich Müller and Walter Rohdich.

The first meeting minutes read: *"The task of the society shall be the dissemination of good, scientifically impeccable animal photographs by the members as well as the promotion of natural history ... and environmental protection."*

The photographs taken by early GDT members such as Georg Rüppell or Heiko Bellmann impressively prove that these objectives were met. Their work and that of many other GDT photographers at the time expanded the knowledge of behavioural research and other fields of biology. For example, a photo series on kingfishers by Fritz Pölking served as a model for scientific drawings in the *Handbuch der Vögel Mitteleuropas*, the standard work on Central European ornithology. But the booming market for identification literature also had a huge demand for documentary animal images at that time. Nature and environmental protection associations still like to use the photographs of GDT members today to communicate their concerns to a broad public.

From the very beginning, competition among GDT photographers played an important role - the ambition of hunters with cameras cannot be denied to this day. Year after year, GDT members compete with their pictures for the coveted title of ***GDT Nature Photographer of the Year***. The successful participants in this

competition received medals, certificates, challenge cups and achievement pins. The competition placings were converted into points, which are still recorded today in lists called the *GDT National League* and the *GDT Achievement List*. In 1976, GDT President Herbert E. Maas donated a crystal challenge cup which was presented to the winner of the members' competition. The inscription on it read "For the best animal photo", the picture underneath showed a roaring stag. It would be easy and at the same time cheap to make fun of it. Anyone who describes forms of expression of a bygone era should have understood history. The GDT was and is always a reflection of the social conditions in our country. Today, as far as the official statements of the association are concerned, we gender nature photographers. Perhaps in 50 years' time we will also be amused by this.

In November 1971, at the **GDT's first annual meeting** at the Jägerlehrhof Springe, the GDT already had 55 members. For the first time, the GDT membership card was issued, with passport photo, address, signature, running membership number, GDT stamp and the first logo of the GDT, the emblem of the then revolutionary, now legendary Novoflex high-speed lens and Hasselblad camera. This logo was to surpass the lifespan of the membership card by decades.

One became a GDT member by applying with ten animal pictures. Whether their quality was sufficient was decided by the respective board. In the meantime, the number of application pictures was increased to 20, of which 10 had to be animal pictures. Today there are still 20 pictures, but without the requirement that animals must be represented as a motif. However, under this premise, the quality of the portfolio must be extremely varied and of high quality in order to be accepted as a full member, as it has been called since 1994. In the meantime, it is no longer the board that decides on admission, but an external committee.

Nine years after the founding of the association, in 1980, **the first GDT regional groups** came into being under the presidency of Herbert E. Maas. There were five of them: North, Northwest, Hanover, Central and Bavaria/Baden-Württemberg. A somewhat arbitrary naming from today's point of view. In the meantime, 41 years later, there are 15 regional groups in Germany and another one in Switzerland. They offer GDT members and interested guests the opportunity to meet apart from the general meeting and the festival, to organise excursions, to realise joint book and lecture projects and to deal intensively with current topics in nature photography in smaller groups. But it is also an opportunity to marvel at what crazy things the board has come up with again. To ensure that such wonderment does not develop into a blockade attitude, the regional group leaders have always been an enormously important interface between the board and the membership base. The more intensive the cooperation between the respective executive boards and the regional groups, and the more transparently decisions were communicated, the more peaceful and constructive the life of the association. Since 2004, the regional groups have presented themselves annually with a lecture at the *International Nature Photography Festival* in Lünen. Anyone who thinks that these are second-rate, provincial performances is very much mistaken: year after year, the regional groups inspire the audience with outstanding photography, successful presentation techniques and a great sense of humour, earning them storms of applause.

Since 1986, the GDT has awarded the **Fritz Steiniger Prize**, which was introduced in memory of founding member Fritz Steiniger and his services to the GDT. It honours a natural person who has rendered outstanding services to nature photography or the GDT. The *Fritz Steiniger Prize* consists of a sculpture - in its original form a granite block with a replica of the original Leica - and a certificate. In addition, the prize winner is made an honorary member of the GDT with the award. Herbert E. Maas, president of the GDT for nine years, was the first to receive this award. He was followed in the next 35 years by Heinz Sielmann, Fritz Pölking, Horst Niesters, Frans Lanting, Klaus Nigge, Dietmar Nill, Winfried Wisniewski, Hannu Hautala, Stephen Dalton and Jim Brandenburg.

Once a year, since 1971, the members of the GDT have met at an event that was called the Annual Conference, Annual Meeting, Annual General Meeting and later the **General Assembly**. The venues changed until, with a few exceptions, the Hessian town of Grünberg became established as the meeting place from 1976 onwards.

In 1988, a modern term entered the GDT: Festival. Under the presidency of Jürgen Markmann, the GDT's first **Nature Photo Festival** was held in Braunfels, Hesse. Note: "Naturfoto" had meanwhile replaced "Tierfoto". The members' meeting remained part of the event, but the focus was now on exhibitions and above all on the lecture programme, which was almost exclusively given by GDT members. The lecture titles were, for example, "Tricks of a Wildlife Photographer", "Impressions from Moor and Heath", "Native Wild Bees", "The Meadow Viper - Portrait of a Reptile Species Threatened with Extinction" or "With the Camera in Wetlands". The focus was thus on natural history, species conservation and technical topics. Quite tentatively, in the course of the five years that the festival was held in Braunfels, names of foreign speakers were also mixed into the lecture programme, among them the Finn Hannu Hautala, the Norwegian Asle Hjøllbreke, Janos Jurka from Sweden and the Swiss Eugen Hüttenmoser and Felix Labhardt.

1989 was a fateful year for Germany: after 28 years, the Berlin Wall fell. The GDT board under Fritz Pölking reacted promptly to this by offering the East German nature photographers' associations in 1990 to accept their members into the GDT in a simplified procedure. In the same year, the first GDT regional groups in the new federal states were founded in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and Saxony.

Since 1994, it has been possible to join GDT as a supporting member. Today, these natural persons or legal entities are simply called **members**. Only those who successfully apply with 20 images may call themselves full members. A member enjoys all the advantages of a full member, but does not have the right to stand for election, i.e. cannot hold an elected office in the GDT. In addition, members are not entitled to use the sign GDT behind their name in picture publications or correspondence. One can live with both quite well, so that many photographers took advantage of this option and the number of members grew by leaps and bounds.

Over the years, there were repeated discussions about whether this distinction would create a kind of two-class society. A survey conducted in 2002 among all

GDT members as to whether this distinction should be abolished, if necessary, came to a clear result: no. Interestingly, it was mainly the then still so-called supporting members who insisted on maintaining the separation. Gaining a higher status through special photographic achievements was and is probably a great incentive.

In 1996, the GDT celebrated its **25th anniversary**. Ulrich Wiede, who had come to the presidency like a virgin to the child thanks to his deserted predecessor Willi Jacobi, wrote the following with his team a chronicle with the most important events of the past 25 years. At that time, the GDT already had 307 members.

After five years in Braunfels, Klaus Nigge brought the Nature Photography Festival to **Lünen** in 1993. For 28 years now, the festival has taken place in the city on the river Lippe. The combination of a theatre hall, exhibition rooms and enough space for a large photo market made this venue almost perfect. Although a much larger hall could be filled with visitors today, all efforts by various board members to find an alternative location failed due to one or the other decisive criterion. The great advantage of the loyalty to the location was also that all the forces involved in the realisation of the festival - theatre technology, hotel staff, city administration and the now no less than 50 volunteers from the GDT - now know each other so well that they understand each other as it were blindly when working together. When breakdowns occur, and they always do, they can usually be fixed so quickly that festival-goers don't even notice.

In the first years of Lünen, Gerlinde Schmidt, formerly the GDT's strict treasurer and organiser of the festival in Braunfels, was responsible for advance ticket sales. This demanding task, concerning the personal preferences and numerous special requests of the festival visitors, was taken over by Monika Bruisch in 2006. Together with her wife Sigi Zang, she soon manned the information desk, the first point of contact for guests and speakers in Lünen.

Hans-Günter Rudas, the ruler of the slide projectors, was there from the beginning. Until 2004, lectures in Lünen were held exclusively on slides. Those who experienced it will still remember all the adversities of this technique: the slides expanding in the heat of the projection required constant readjustment of the sharpness. From the front row of the stalls, the cry would always resound: "Now it's sharp!" No matter how much effort had been made in advance, some lint and dust grains always remained on the slides, which sometimes even distracted one from the composition when looking at the pictures. Not to forget the unavoidable classic: a nervous speaker stumbles on the way to the technical line and all of a sudden all the slides were on the not-so-clean floor. Hectic attempts were made to restore the planned sequence. This was not always successful, so that the comment "Well, now there should actually be a completely different picture" was often heard. As was the popular joke "Turn your head 180 degrees, please!" when a slide ended up upside down in the magazine.

In 2004 there was the **first digital lecture**, held by Mark Gross, later a member of the GDT board. Hans-Günter Rudas could not quite get to grips with this new technology, and in 2007, when the last slide lecture was held in Lünen, his long and

glorious time as festival technician came to an end. This post was taken over by Bernd Nill, who mastered the new technology with aplomb and to this day, supported by a team of tech-savvy comrades-in-arms, manages the balancing act between Mac and Windows presentations with great nerve in the truest sense of the word.

From the very beginning, the festival in Lünen was internationally oriented. Speakers from all over the world arrived over the years and spoke: English. This met with difficulties and protests because not all visitors understood this language. As good as they were, the translations by Beate Raberg and Florian Möllers delayed the flow of the lecture, and for those who understood English, the event sometimes turned out to be a bit boring. As the proportion of those who understood English increased steadily over the years, the translation was dispensed with at a certain point, which rightly annoyed some older members in particular. In addition, the number of foreign visitors grew steadily, who in turn did not understand the German contributions. A solution to all concerns was found in 2017 by providing simultaneous translations via headset.

Since 1993, almost the entire international nature photography celebrities have gathered in Lünen. It would be much easier to mention those who have not been on this stage than vice versa. Somewhat absurd, but under the slogan "Lust auf Lünen" (Lust for Lünen), the name of this rather inconspicuous town on the edge of the Ruhr region has become the epitome of outstanding nature photography worldwide.

And what haven't we experienced: we have dived down to fearsome leopard seals with Paul Nicklen, climbed up with Milan Radisics to view the battered world from above, and accompanied Bence Mate on his amazing path to perfect perch photography. We waited patiently for Mishio Hoshino to finally show the second image of his lecture and for Jim Brandenburg to finish the story of his German ancestors. We listened to Jorma Luhta and Lassi Rautiainen, only slightly drunk and singing Russian children's songs, show the best nature photos from the north of Finland, and listened to the guitar music that accompanied Jasper Doest's talk about a remote Dutch island. We saw Mark Moffet on this stage, performing the mating dances of South American spiders quite realistically, and Klaus Nigge as a courtship ostrich. The kingfisher paintings by Charly Hamilton James knocked our socks off just as much as the Okavango story by Frans Lanting or the whale paintings by Audun Rikardsen. What a history!

We had tears in our eyes from emotion, from horror, but often also from laughter. We learned a lot, often indulged ourselves and sometimes yawned. There were tops and flops at every festival. The big names did not always live up to our expectations. And then there were always the new discoveries, the unearthing treasures that surprised us. Names that hardly anyone knew what to do with beforehand. And those who came back from the photo market because they thought they hadn't missed anything were annoyed afterwards.

For many a young photographer, Lünen was a springboard, a catalyst for their own career. And even today, established photographers like to schedule their premiere

on the last weekend in October in Lünen, knowing that they are dealing with a real professional audience whose judgement can be trusted. To quote our Italian member Bruno D'Amicis: "*The stage in Lünen, the most terrifying place in the world.*" But our audience, at least in the later years, was always fair and gave everyone a chance.

In the eighth year of the festival, 2001, there was a drastic change that still has an effect today: under the presidency of Jürgen Borris, a new competition was launched on the occasion of the GDT's 30th anniversary. This was to be advertised throughout Europe and judged by a panel of experts. ***GDT European Wildlife Photographer of the Year*** was the title of the new project, which was intended as a one-off event. But it did not remain a one-off, and this year, 2021, the competition celebrates its twentieth anniversary. In the meantime, it has long since secured a firm place among the renowned competitions because it is able to show what contemporary European nature photography has to offer with great continuity across all subjects. This is above all due to the juries of international luminaries of nature photography and the media, which are assembled with great care every year.

Of course, this innovation initially caused some grumbling among the GDT members. The long-time local heroes probably feared competition from their European colleagues. Perhaps they also had still remember the experiment in 1988, when the first open competition was announced, the title of which was, from today's perspective, less than elegant: *Wildlife Photography for Conservation*. At the time, it remained a one-time edition - according to persistent rumours, because the entries from external photographers were conspicuously good. In addition, many GDT members feared that the association competition would be outclassed by its big brother. This fear turned out to be groundless, because the quality of the GDT-internal competition, which has existed since 1971, has continuously improved until today, and the awarded pictures can often very well compete with the international results. From 2009 onwards, the responsibility for the organisation of both competitions lay with our current treasurer Marc Hesse, who has since managed this enormously time-consuming and responsible task with great professionalism.

The motifs that were chosen as the overall winner of the *European Wildlife Photographer of the Year* competition caused scandal with the greatest regularity. From shaking heads to incomprehension to categorical rejection - the potential for outrage was always great. Just think of the mystical alligator by Dr. Siegmund Bergfeld (2002), the sad dancing bear by Klaus Echle (2003), the monkey sizzling on a barbecue grill by David Maitland (2008), the black and white photograph of a cheetah by Britta Jaschinski (2010) or the fox shadow by Richard Peters (2015). In contrast, hardly a word was said about the more pleasing overall winners.

The results of this competition have always been premiered in the gallery of the Hansesaal at the start of the *International Nature Photography Festival* in Lünen. With one exception: in 2002, the second year of the competition, they were hung closely together in the foyer of the theatre, while the showpiece of the presentation

rooms was reserved for large-format pictures by the American photographer Robert Glenn Ketchum. Although these were quite outstanding from an artistic point of view, they were so far removed from classical nature photography that many GDT members, who had just digested the shock of the newly established competition, lost their heads and the threatening word "resignation" became the most frequently heard term at the 2002 festival. The one or other rather experimental contribution in the lecture programme had an additional negative effect, and so it remained with this experiment - the board had heard the warning shot.

The way in which the presentation of competition images and their marketing have developed over the last twenty years is a prime example of the GDT's steady professionalisation. Whereas in the beginning there were still small-format prints on Kapa plates hanging on curling nylon cords on the walls in a more haphazard than planned manner, now there are uniformly large square metal frames hanging on fancy wire ropes and placed with millimetre precision. In this context, it is essential to mention Bernd Lamm, who has been carrying out the task of setting up the exhibition for so many years with an unerring eye that a spirit level is almost superfluous. But it is not only the elegant frames that are convincing: the uniform layout and the captions integrated in the picture in two languages, including the logo, give the exhibition a calm, elegant impression despite the variety of picture formats. And this also finally puts an end to the time when the glue on the back of the little cards with the captions came loose and these were ground under the feet of the festival visitors. The qualitative upgrade of this exhibition is, like so many things, mainly due to the commitment of our current vice-president Sandra Bartocha, who can rarely accept that something should only be good if it can be better.

At the beginning, hardly anyone would have thought that the images from the competition could be used outside the festival in Lünen. But the realisation that this would amount to an incredible waste of resources soon prevailed. Under the presidency of Markus Botzek, Juliane Margraf and her company Tourmalin took over the **exhibition management** for the competition in 2004. The pictures were first presented in Germany, then increasingly in neighbouring European countries in museums, galleries and at festivals. This killed three birds with one stone: the external impact of the competition was enormously increased, the GDT was able to open up new sources of income in this way, and the statutory obligation to disseminate good, natural history photographs was fulfilled. In addition, the company Crescent has taken over the management of the exhibition in Spain since 2012, which is mainly thanks to Michael Lohmann, the president at the time. In the meantime, three competition years are touring Europe at the same time, a remarkable success. After the death of Juliane Margraf in spring 2019, our managing director Karen Korte took over the exhibition management, which was going very well until Covid-19 threw a spanner in the works. When this book went to press, it was impossible to foresee what the future of exhibitions in museums and festivals would look like.

Speaking of Karen Korte: the larger the GDT and the more numerous its activities became, the more the workload for the respective boards increased, of course, until

finally a point was reached where the tasks could no longer be managed on a voluntary basis - an external **office** had to be established. This was taken over by Mara Fuhrmann in 1994, until she decided to pursue other goals in 1998 and handed the job over to Florian Möllers, who ran the office until 2002 alongside his work as a nature photographer. Today he is more famous for his role as a charming presenter, leading through the festival programme with his congenial colleague Markus Botzek. And then Karen Korte came on the scene. Since then, as managing director, she has ensured that the many threads of the now highly complex association are firmly tied together time and again. She quickly became the "face of the GDT" with her open-minded, professional manner. Seven board members have come and gone since then, but Karen remained at the helm and became an important constant in the changing history of the association.

In 2002, for the first time, the general meeting was separated from the festival. A wise decision, because the often overflowing meetings took up far too much time and space during the already busy festival weekend. The date for the general meeting was set for early spring. After a few less than satisfactory venues, Haus Sonnenwinkel in Bad Essen, Lower Saxony, established itself as the perfect venue, alternating in recent years with the Urwald-Life-Camp in the Hainich National Park in Thuringia, in order to also meet the needs of members living further east and south. Whereby it sounds a bit strange at this point to speak of "the last few years", because thanks to Corona the last two general meetings took place virtually, which hopefully will not happen again in the future.

Furthermore, in 2002, the GDT publication **Forum für Naturfotografie**, which had been established for decades and appeared three times a year, was split up. All internal association contributions, such as letters to the editor, activities of the regional groups or minutes of the board meetings, have since been published in **GDT Intern**, which was sent to members in printed form until 2018 and has since been available online as a PDF, taking into account the idea of sustainability. General photography topics have appeared in *Forum Naturfotografie* since 2002, which quickly developed into one of the highest-quality magazines in the field of nature photography. Editor-in-chief from 2002 to 2008 was Florian Möllers, followed by Sandra Bartocha, who to this day ensures that the magazine meets the high standards. Since 2014, the Tecklenborg-Verlag printing and distribution of this publication, which has appeared four times a year since then.

2007 was a sad year for the GDT. We had to say goodbye to our highly esteemed founding and honorary member Fritz Pölking. His pictures and publications have inspired generations of nature photographers and will remain unforgettable forever. To honour his achievements, Tecklenborg-Verlag, in cooperation with the GDT, has been awarding the **Fritz Pölking Prize** and the **Fritz Pölking Youth Prize** for an outstanding nature photography project or portfolio within the framework of the *European Wildlife Photographer of the Year* competition since 2008.

The GDT's finances have always been managed by dedicated and dutiful treasurers. However, over the years, income and expenditure grew exponentially in parallel with the development of the association. As a result, the lay people who were

supposed to deal with this matter felt increasingly overwhelmed. In 2010, Thomas Block became treasurer of the GDT, another stroke of luck for our association. With his knowledge as a tax consultant, he turned the GDT's finances upside down and created a solid foundation from which realistic financial planning for the future was possible. To this day, he accompanies the financial fortunes of the GDT as an external tax consultant.

During the term of office of President Martin Eisenhower, an important innovation took place: in 2011, the **GDT Youth Group** was founded with the aim of promoting the next generation of nature photographers. The group was very popular right from the start and is still an important contact point for newcomers to nature photography. Its members soon convinced with outstanding images that still regularly appear in national and international competitions today. And in the meantime, some former youth group members are regional group leaders or members of the board. So apparently there is no need to worry about the future of the GDT.

Since 1971, the emblem of Hasselblad with the Novoflex lens served as the logo of the GDT. At the end of the nineties, two barn swallows made short flight attempts as an alternative, but they quickly returned to the old logo. Until 2013, when the GDT's external image underwent a general overhaul: In close cooperation between Sandra Bartocha and graphic designer Roland Wehking, a completely new corporate design was created. A new logo had to fulfil the requirements of offering the greatest possible flexibility with maximum graphic reduction in terms of applicability to GDT's diverse products and activities. Since then, the slightly slanted viewfinder has become the distinguishing feature of the GDT.

In 2019, under the presidency of Stephan Fürnröhr, one of the most important changes the association has experienced took place: After proponents and opponents of a potential name change had been arguing their heads off since 2011, the GDT's general meeting on 27 April 2019 decided on the long overdue change of the association's name to **Gesellschaft für Naturfotografie e.V. (GDT)**. The simultaneous retention of the abbreviation GDT shows respect for the history of the association, especially as these three letters have established themselves as a trademark for outstanding nature photography work in Germany and throughout the world over the past 50 years.

The year is 2021, and at the time of going to press, the GDT has almost 2,000 members, including 90 foreign members from 14 different European countries as well as Canada, Australia, Mexico, Russia, Israel, Saudi Arabia and the USA. The open-mindedness towards all subject areas of nature photography, the preservation of values, a professional association structure including future-oriented youth work and, last but not least, the use of modern forms of communication such as Facebook, Instagram and Youtube have made this possible. In the past fifty years, the GDT has developed from a group of nine dedicated wildlife photographers into Europe's leading nature photography society with a worldwide reputation. No one would have dreamed of that back then ...