Sunset Tricks

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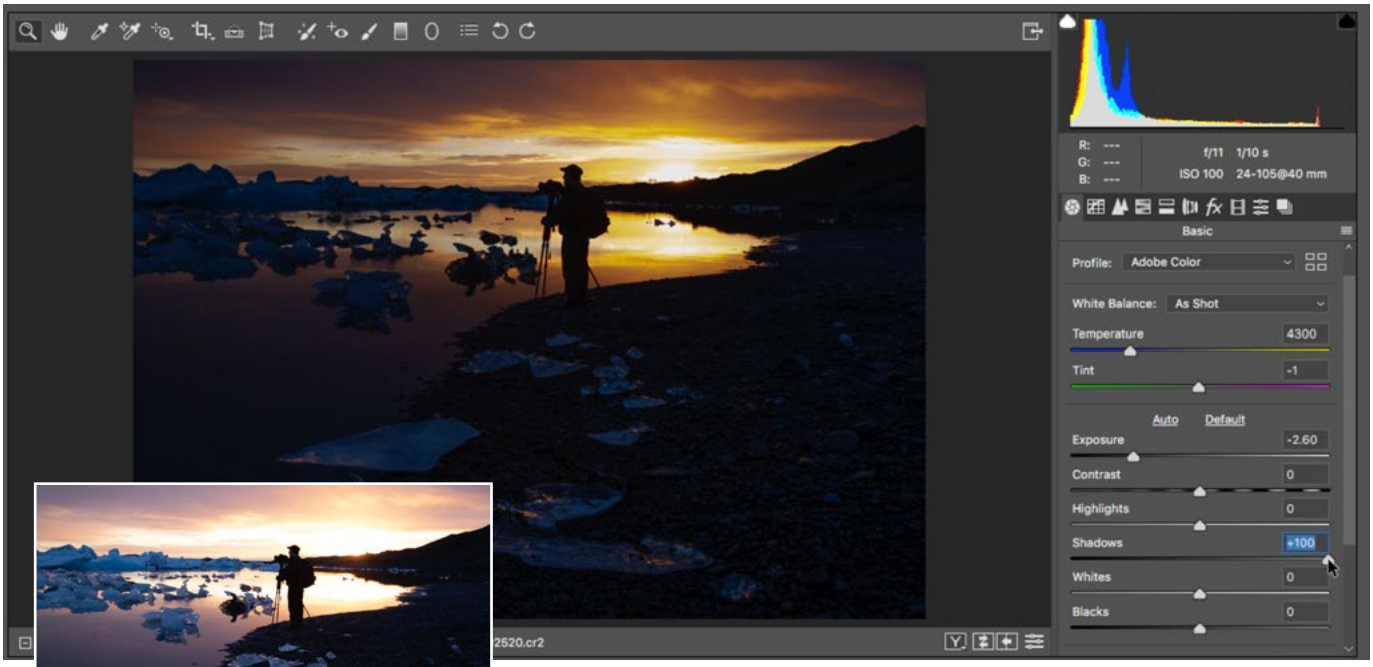
In this lesson, we're going to cover some special techniques for adjusting sunrise and sunset images.

Correcting for areas that are too bright

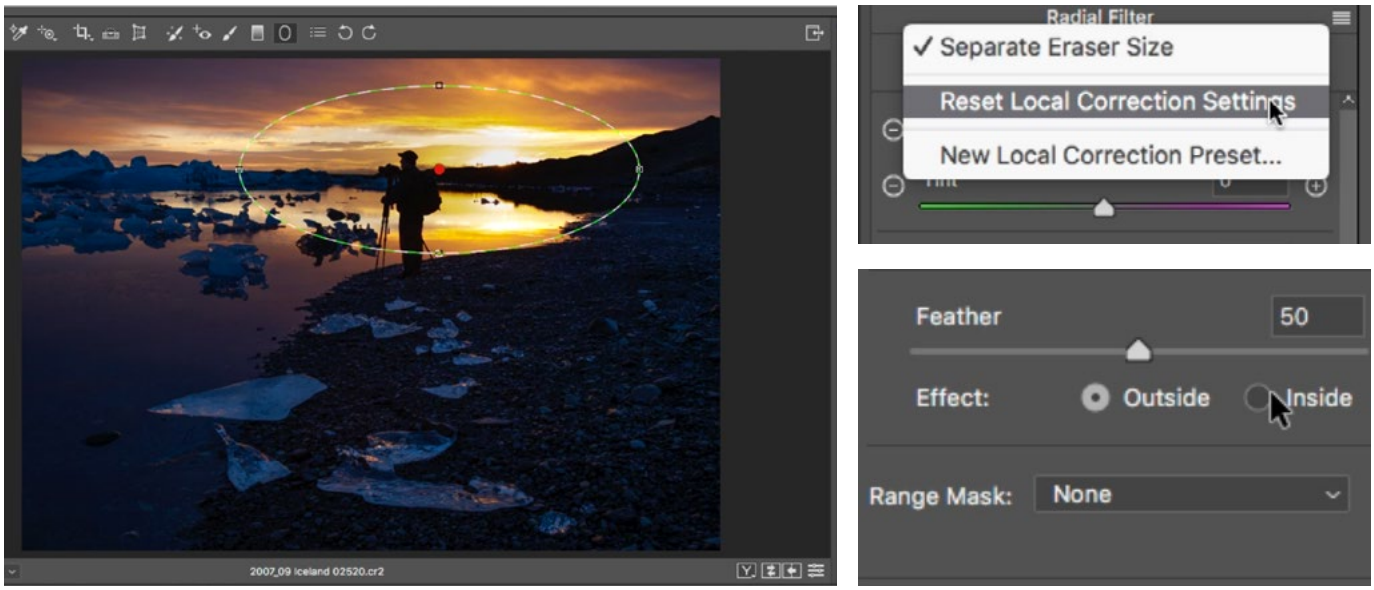
One of the common issues with sunrise/sunset images is that the area around the sun is too bright. It might seem like a good idea to drag the Highlights slider way down in an attempt to correct for this, but this can sometimes result in an unnatural, dull look. Instead, I will turn to the Exposure slider. I know that, by lowering the exposure, the dark areas are going to become too dark, so I will take the preemptive measure of increasing the Shadows slider first. In the example image of the Iceland sunset, I moved the Shadows slider all the way to the right so that I could easily see what was in the dark areas in the foreground. Then, I moved the Exposure slider to the left, bringing back detail to the bright area around the sun.



Left: The original image. The Shadows slider is moved all the way to the right and the Exposure slider is lowered until the sky looks optimal.

Now I have the sky area looking much better, but the rest of the image is too dark (even though I had moved the Shadows slider all the way up). In order to get the rest of the image to come back, I will usually turn to the Graduated Filter, the Radial Filter or the Adjustment Brush. In Camera Raw, these are all located in the Toolbar at the top of the interface. In Lightroom, these are located on the right side of the Develop Module, above all of the adjustment panels. In the video example, I'm going to use the Radial Filter.

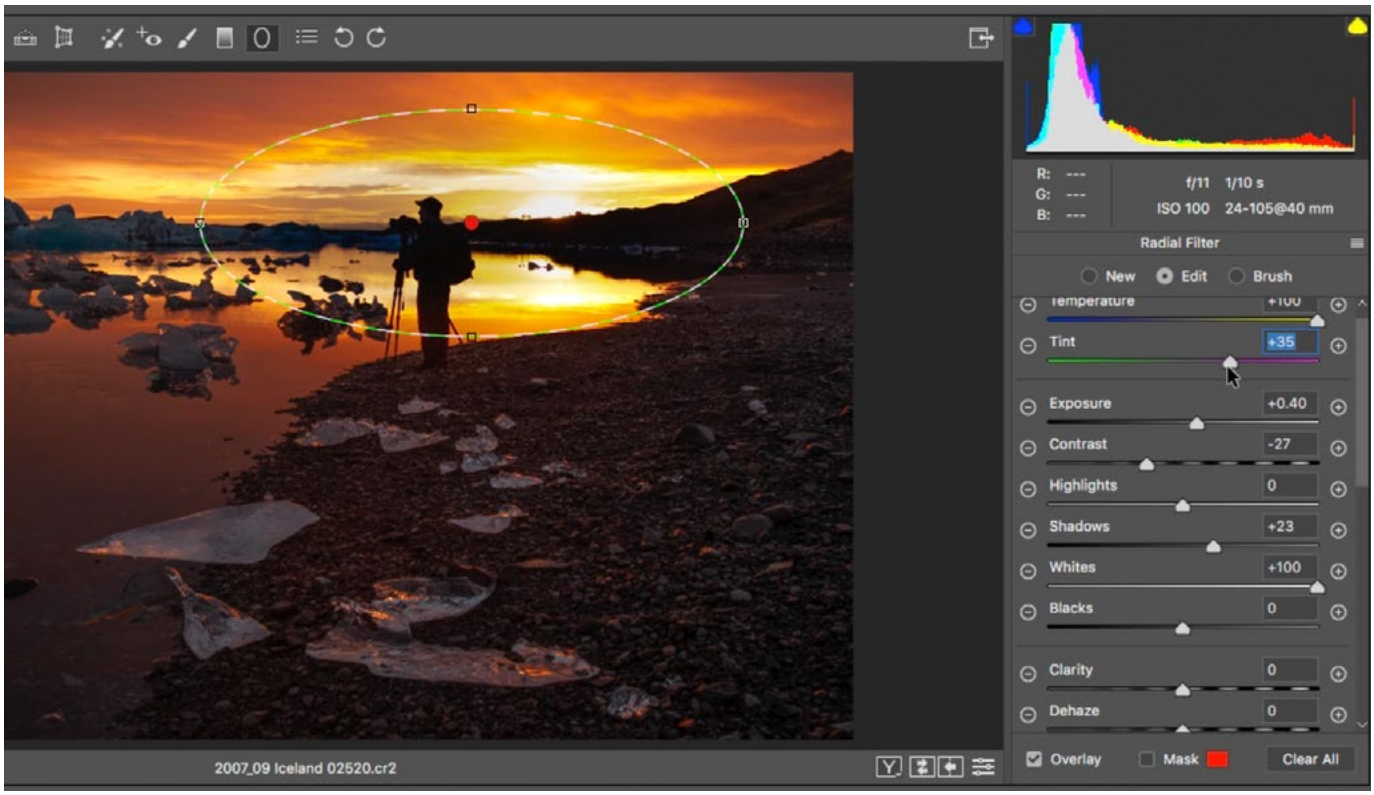
With the Radial Filter active, I'm going to drag out an oval shape that encircles the bright area of the image (the sun and bright area of the sky). Then, I'm going to click on the little "hamburger menu" in the top right corner of the slider panel and choose "Reset Local Correction Settings" from the pop-up menu. This will set all of the sliders to their default positions so that no adjustment is being applied. Now, I already made adjustments to optimize the sun area, so I want to use the Radial Filter to adjust the REST of the image. To do this, I'll ensure that the Effect option is set to Outside and not Inside. This means that when I move the sliders, the adjustments will affect everything that is outside of the circle.



The Radial Filter was used to drag an oval over the bright/sun part of the image. Then, we used the hamburger menu to Reset Local Correction Settings, which zeroed out all of the sliders to their default positions. We also set the Effect setting to Outside, which tells the filter that we want to affect the area on the outside of the oval.

I find that the Whites slider does the best job in bringing back detail in the areas we want, in a scenario like this one. The Whites slider takes the absolute brightest portion of the image and brightens it to make it closer and closer to being white. I will move this slider up significantly. I will also drag the Contrast slider to the left, lessening the difference between the dark and bright areas. These initial adjustments provided a good start, and I will continue to tweak some of the other sliders. Moving the Shadows and Exposure sliders to the right a bit will help in bringing a little more light and detail into those dark areas.

Next, I will start to look at color. Shadow areas tend to be much more blue, and I want to make the foreground look as if the sun is hitting it more, so I will need to warm up the color of the area. To achieve this, I'll drag the Temperature slider to the right and tweak the Tint slider as well, dragging it a small amount to the right, toward magenta.



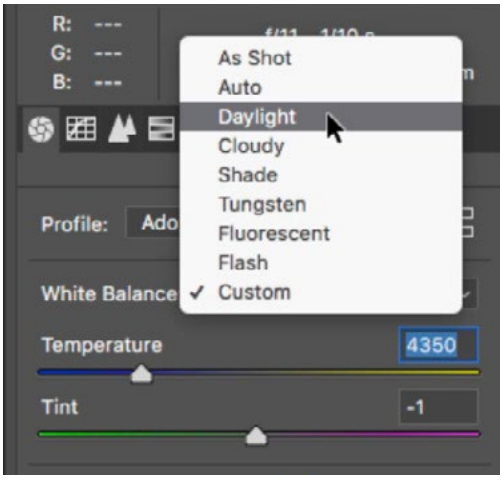
Here, we're making the area outside of the oval warmer by adjusting the Temperature and Tint sliders.

When using the Radial Filter, know that you can change the size and shape of the circle/oval at any time. Simply click and drag on the sides of the oval to adjust the shape. When you click and drag on one side, the opposite side will resize as well. If you don't want this, hold down the Option key (Alt on Win) while dragging and only the one side will move. You can also adjust the Feather slider (on the right side of the interface) to determine how soft the transition will be.

Now that I'm done using the Radial Filter to adjust a specific portion of the image, I will exit the tool by switching back to the Hand Tool (at the top of the interface).

Adjusting the white balance as a whole

Up until now, I was focusing on correcting for the sky being too bright and then the foreground being too dark. Now, I'll look at the image as a whole and adjust the white balance. When it comes to sunrise or sunset images, I often times begin by setting the White Balance menu to Daylight. This can be a good starting point and I will tweak the Temp and Tint sliders if needed.



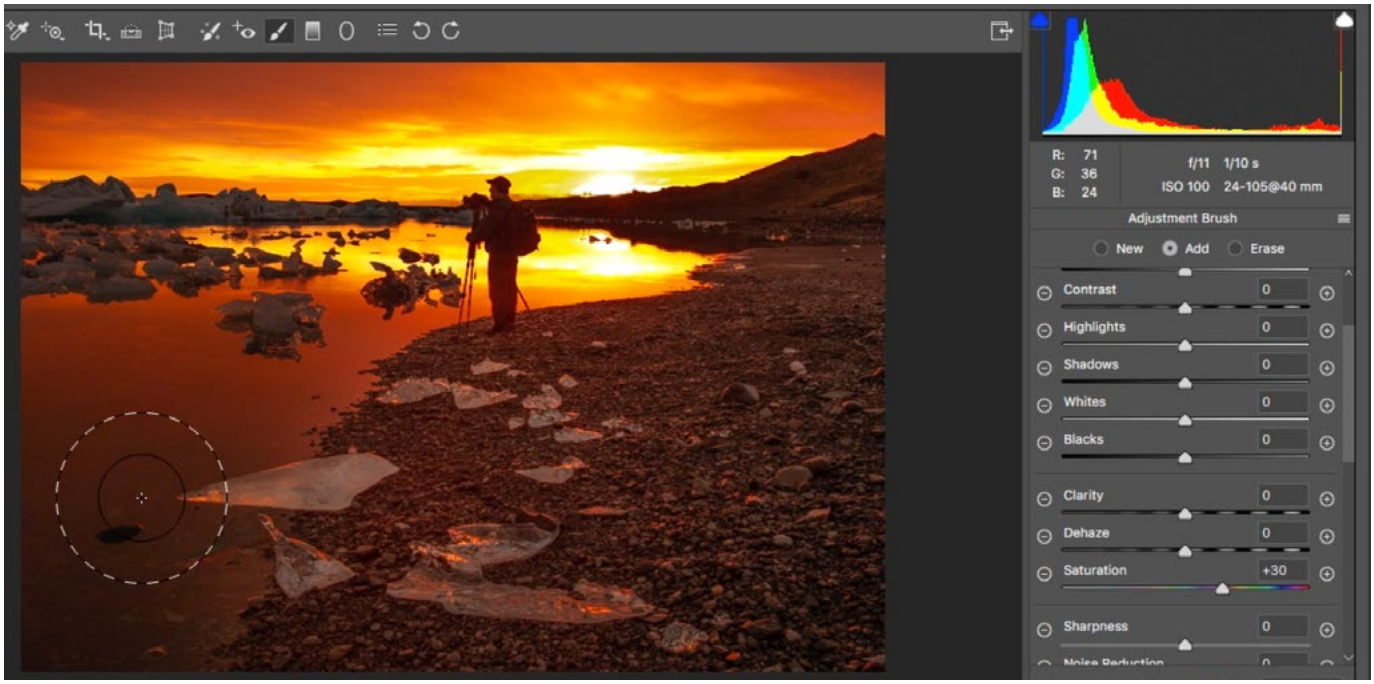
The White Balance menu is being set to Daylight, as this will serve as a good starting point for tweaking the white balance.

Adjusting specific areas with the Adjustment Brush

The Adjustment Brush is located in the Tool Bar above the image window in Camera Raw and it's a great tool for adjusting specific areas of the image. I want to further adjust the very dark areas, making them brighter and drawing out more detail. I will activate the Adjustment Brush and use it to paint over those dark ar-

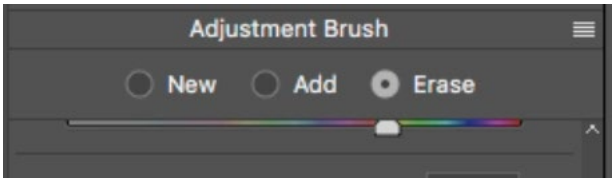
eas. The tool will remember the settings last used and apply them to the targeted area, so I will then use the little hamburger menu at the top right corner of the adjustment sliders and choose to Reset Local Correction Settings. This will zero out the sliders, returning them to their default positions. I will now adjust the sliders to bring more light into those dark areas by bringing up the Whites slider and lowering the Contrast slider. I will also bump the Exposure up just a bit, but you need to be careful not to overdo this one because it could result in the sky becoming too bright again. I will also look at the white balance of the dark areas, making sure that they're not looking blue. If they were a little on the cool side, I would move the Temperature slider to the right in order to warm them up.

When using the Adjustment Brush, you can complete one adjustment and start a new one by clicking the "New" option at the top of the adjustment slider panel. I will start a new adjustment and, again, reset the sliders by choosing to "Reset Local Correction Settings." With this new adjustment, I would like to make the water in the bottom left corner of the image more colorful. To do this, I will bring up the Saturation slider and I'll also move the Temperature slider to the right a bit, warming up the area. Then I will use the brush to paint in the adjustment over the area.



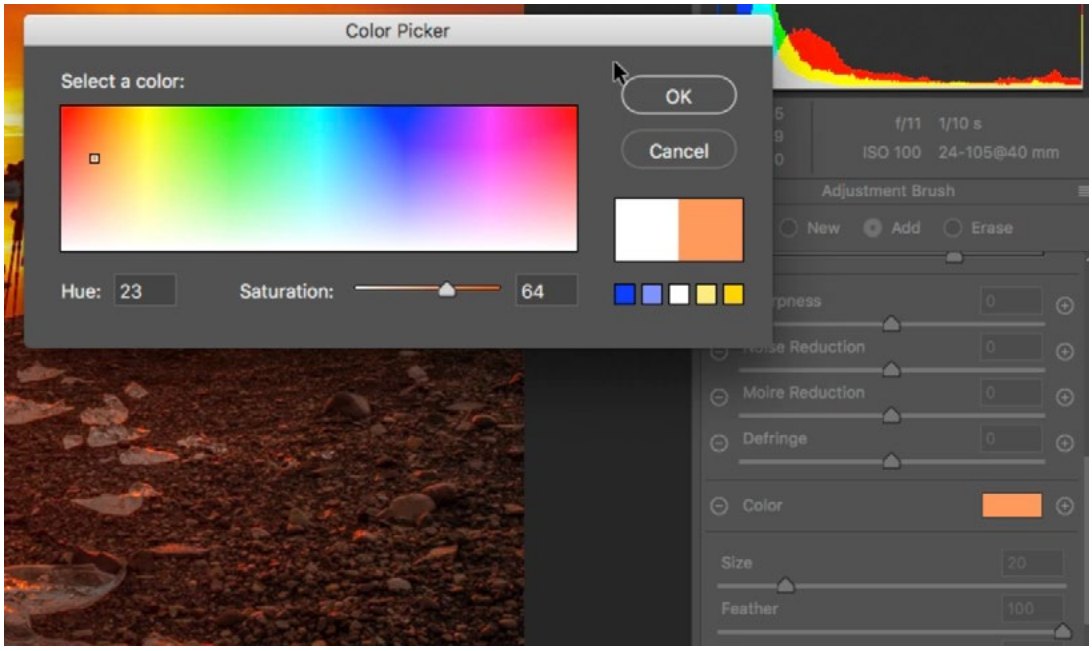
The Adjustment Brush is being used to make the water in the bottom corner more colorful.

If you ever need a better view of what you're painting with the Adjustment Brush, turn on the "Mask" check box at the bottom of the sliders for the Adjustment Brush. This will place an overlay on the image so that you can see what areas the adjustment is affecting. If you find that you've accidentally painted over an area you don't want to change, you can change the brush to the Erase setting at the top of the Adjustment Brush sliders.



You can set the Adjustment Brush to Erase the adjustment by using the settings at the top of the adjustment panel.

Add Color Sometimes, you'll find that the Temperature slider is ineffective in warming the image, and the reason for this is usually because the image has already been pushed all the way to the warm side. That's the case with our example image, so I will instead turn to the Color setting, located below the Adjustment Brush sliders. This will allow me to force a color into the area I have targeted with the Adjustment Brush. I'll click on the color swatch rectangle to the right of the word "Color" and the Color Picker will appear. I'll use it to choose the color I'd like to add.



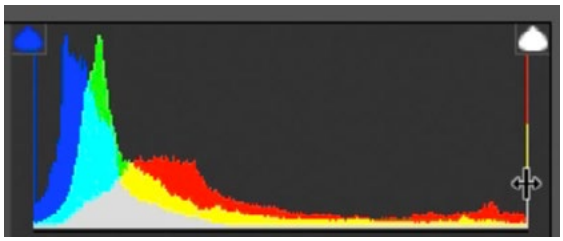
The color setting can be used to force a color into the area targeted with the Adjustment Brush. Here, we're adding an orange hue to warm up the bottom corner even further.

I'm going to continue targeting different areas of the image using the Adjustment Brush. The icebergs in the background are larger and denser, so I feel they should have more of a cool, blue hue. I will create a new instance of the Adjustment Brush by clicking the New option at the top of the adjustment sliders. Then, I will move the Temperature slider to the left, into the blues. I will also bring up the whites slider, which will lighten up the bright parts of the area. Then, I will use the Adjustment Brush to paint over the icebergs.

Here, we are using the Adjustment Brush to paint over the icebergs in the background. The Temperature slider for the Adjustment Brush was moved to the left, creating a more cooling effect in the area.

Clarity The Clarity slider is another setting that can be used to bring detail back into the shadowy areas. When adjusting an image like this one, consider using the Adjustment Brush to add Clarity to the dark foreground. Be careful with the amount, though. Too much clarity can sometimes result in glowy edges.

Saturation Clipping When it comes to sunset/sunrise images, I sometimes don't mind if there is a bit of saturation clipping, or loss of detail in the very colorful areas. You can tell if an image has saturation clipping by looking at the histogram. If you see a colorful spike on either side of the chart, that means the coordinating



The colored spikes on the ends of the histogram indicate that there is saturation clipping in the image.

color is so saturated in an area that it has no detail. You'll need to assess the image and decide whether or not this is a bad thing. If it's an area that could benefit from having more detail, then by all means tone down the Saturation or Vibrance sliders. In our case, it's the colorful area where the sky is reflected off of the water in the back portion of the image, and I don't feel that this area will benefit from more detail.

Noise Reduction After you're completely finished adjusting the image, it's a good idea to determine whether or not you need to apply some noise reduction. Noise can become a problem in shadow areas that you have brightened significantly, and it will be more noticeable in areas that don't contain detail. In our example image, I lightened up the rocky foreground, but because of all the rocks and other details, the noise is not very noticeable. If the area you've lightened is smoother, containing less detail, zoom in on the area to see how much noise there is. If you see a significant amount, then use the Noise Reduction slider to minimize it.

Above, you can see the before and after versions of the sunset image we used as an example in this lesson.