



Backlit Fixes

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In this lesson, we're going to tackle some of the challenges that arise when processing photographs that contain subject matter that is backlit. We'll learn how to lighten up the backlit subjects without losing detail in the brighter areas behind them.

I'll be using Adobe Lightroom to demonstrate the techniques, but know that you can just as easily use Adobe Camera Raw (ACR) because the adjustments are the same as those available in Lightroom's Develop Module.



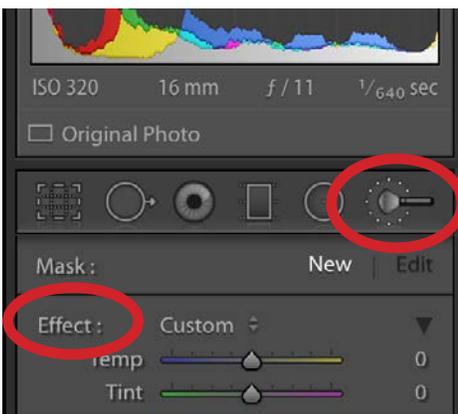
Here are the before-and-after versions of an image that was processed to optimize the backlit subjects.

In the first example image, we have two subjects in the shade with the bright sky and sun-lit ocean behind them. The sky is so bright that it's close to solid white. Because of this, any adjustment we make that is designed to lighten the entire brightness range will force that sky to white, and that's not what we want. We want to maintain the detail in the sky while lightening the subjects so that they appear the way they did to my eye when I was there. Many of the adjustments found in Lightroom's Basic panel will affect the entire image, so we're going to instead be making a lot of edits using the Adjustment Brush.

Initial Adjustments After opening the image in Lightroom's Develop Module, I experimented with the sliders in the Basic panel to see how effective they would be. I moved the Highlights slider way down in order to darken the sky and I moved the Shadows slider way up in order to brighten the subjects. This had an effect on the image, but the results weren't ideal. I'll next turn to the Adjustment Brush, which can be found in the Toolbar above the adjustment slider panels and below the Histogram. (In ACR, it can be found in the Toolbar above the main image window.



We tried to lighten the subjects by increasing the Shadows slider in the Basic panel but the result was a bit washed out and not ideal.



The Adjustment Brush icon can be found below the Histogram. Double-click on the word "Effect" to reset the sliders.

Adjustment Brush Settings When you activate the Adjustment Brush, the settings relating to it will appear at the top of the adjustment panels on the right side of the interface. The tool will remember what settings you last dialed into it BEFORE you started painting on your picture. Any changes you made to the sliders AFTER you started painting with the Adjustment Brush will not be remembered for the next time. To reset the sliders to their default positions (where no adjustments are dialed in), double-click on the word "Effect" in the top left corner of the panel.

Now, we'll focus only on the dark area of the image and we'll look for the brightest portion of that dark area. That might be the shiny element in the man's headpiece. We'll drag the Whites slider up as far as it will go (before starting to paint with the brush) and we'll also turn on the "Auto Mask" check box that appears below all of the Adjustment Brush sliders. This will help to constrain our brush strokes within the area we want to paint so that we don't get any over-spray into the sky areas. It does this by looking at what's under the crosshair in the center of the brush tip and constraining the paint strokes to only areas that are similar in color and brightness.

Next, we'll make the brush size very large. We can do this without getting over-spray because we turned on the "Auto Mask" check box. We'll paint over the dark areas of the image, taking care to make sure that the brush crosshair doesn't come in contact with any areas that are directly lit by the sun.



The Adjustment Brush Whites slider was moved all the way up, the "Auto Mask" check box was turned on (circled) and we are using a large brush to paint over the dark areas of the image.

Looking at the result, we can see that by moving the Whites slider all the way up, we were able to get some degree of brightening in the area we brushed, but it's not quite enough. We'll supplement the increase in Whites with an increase in Exposure and we'll also decrease the Contrast slider. If these adjustments resulted in the darkest areas becoming too light or murky, we can move the Blacks slider to the left, giving a black point to those darkest areas. Let's look at these sliders and what they're actually doing.

Adjustment Brush for backlit subjects

Whites: This adjustment thinks about the absolute brightest portion of the area you're working on and controls how bright that is. When we move this slider, we're taking the absolute brightest areas and making them brighter or darker.

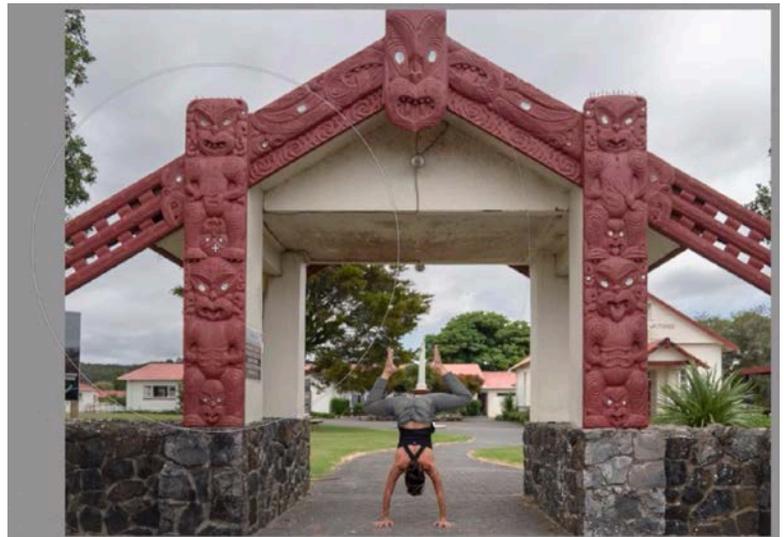
Exposure: This slider affects the image as a whole. It's not the first slider we move here because it is also brightening the darkest areas, which should stay dark in order to retain contrast.

Contrast: This adjustment controls the difference between the really bright areas and the really dark areas. If the bright and dark areas are too different from each other, we can move this slider down so the tones become more similar to each other. Bringing the slider down will lighten the darkest areas and darken the lightest areas.

Blacks: This adjustment controls only the darkest areas. Moving the slider to the left will darken the darkest areas, and this can be useful for adding a black point to an image.

Let's look at the same technique with other images. In the next photo, we have the subject framed in an aboriginal archway that is backlit by the bright sky. We'll start by making some initial adjustments in the Basic panel. We'll drag the Highlights slider to the left in order to darken the sky and recover some detail in that bright area. We'll then use the Shadows slider to lighten up the subject and dark archway, dragging it to the right and stopping before the area starts to look dull.

With the initial adjustments done, we'll move on to the Adjustment Brush. Again, this tool can be found in the Toolbar below the Histogram in the Develop Module. We'll move the Whites slider all the way to the right and turn on the "Auto Mask" check box (It's located below the Adjustment Brush sliders). Using a large brush, we'll paint over the dark areas, taking care to keep the brush's center crosshair within the dark area so that there is no overspray into the bright area.



At top is the original image. In the screen shot directly above, we used the Highlights slider in the Basic panel to recover detail in the sky and we are now painting over the dark area with the Adjustment Brush. The Adjustment Brush's white slider is pushed all the way up.

When using the Adjustment Brush, you can preview what part of the image has been isolated by typing the O key (for Overlay) or turning on the “Show Selected Mask Overlay” check box below the image window. This will place a colored overlay on the image in the areas that have been painted on with the Adjustment Brush. If there are any areas that you missed, you can paint on those areas to add the overlay. Exit the overlay view by tapping the O key again or by turning off the “Show Selected Mask Overlay” check box.

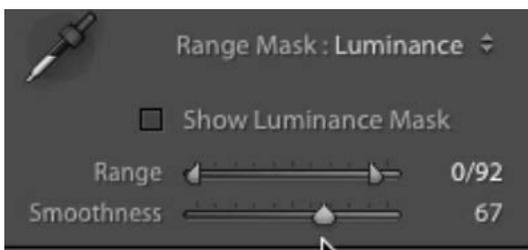
In the Adjustment Brush settings, we had only moved the Whites slider so, we’ll next move on to see if any other sliders need to be adjusted. In this case, we played with the Contrast slider, ultimately moving it to the left by a small amount.



The Mask Overlay allows you to see where you’ve painted with the Adjustment Brush. Turn on the Overlay by tapping the O key or by turning on the “Show Selected Mask Overlay” check box (circled).

The same technique was used in the image featuring the hobbit hole scene. The Adjustment Brush was activated, the Whites slider was set to 100 and then the brush was used to paint over the area that needed brightening. In this case, we'll take things a step further by using the Adjustment Brush again. We'll again set the Whites slider to 100. Because so much of this image needs brightening, we'll turn the "Auto Mask" check box off, use a large brush and then paint over the entire picture. This will brighten the whites in the entire image. As a result, the white cloud in the sky and some of the bright flowers in the foreground will lose detail because they are too bright. To fix this, we'll use a feature called the Range Mask.

Range Mask to limit adjustment This setting can be found below all of the sliders associated with the Adjustment Brush. We'll click on the Range Mask menu and choose Luminance. This will limit what portion of the image is affected based on brightness. Some settings will appear below the Range Mask menu. The Range slider has two handles. The one on the left represents the dark parts and the one on the right represents the bright parts. Whatever tonal range is between these two sliders is what the adjustment is going to apply to. When the sliders are set all



The Range Mask settings limit the tonal range affected by the Adjustment Brush. The right slider was moved so the adjustment could not affect the whites in the image.

the way to the left and all the way to the right, it means that the adjustment is going to affect the entire brightness range. In this example, the light areas have become too bright, so we don't want the adjustment to affect those really bright areas. To achieve this, we'll use the slider on the right (the one that represents the bright areas) and move it to the left by just a small amount. This will make it so the adjustment can not affect the areas that are white or really close to white.

Next, we have a slider titled Smoothness and this controls the transition between the tones that are affected by the adjustment and those that are not. We'll experiment with this slider, moving it to the left and right while watching the image to find the setting that makes it look the most natural. The position of this slider will be different for every image.

Range Mask Preview When working with the Range Mask setting, you can get a preview of what parts of the image are being affected by the adjustment. Hold down the Option key (Alt on Win) and when you start to move the left and right sliders, the image window will change to show you a black and white view where everything that is white is getting the adjustment. As you move the sliders, the view will change to reflect the brightness range being targeted.

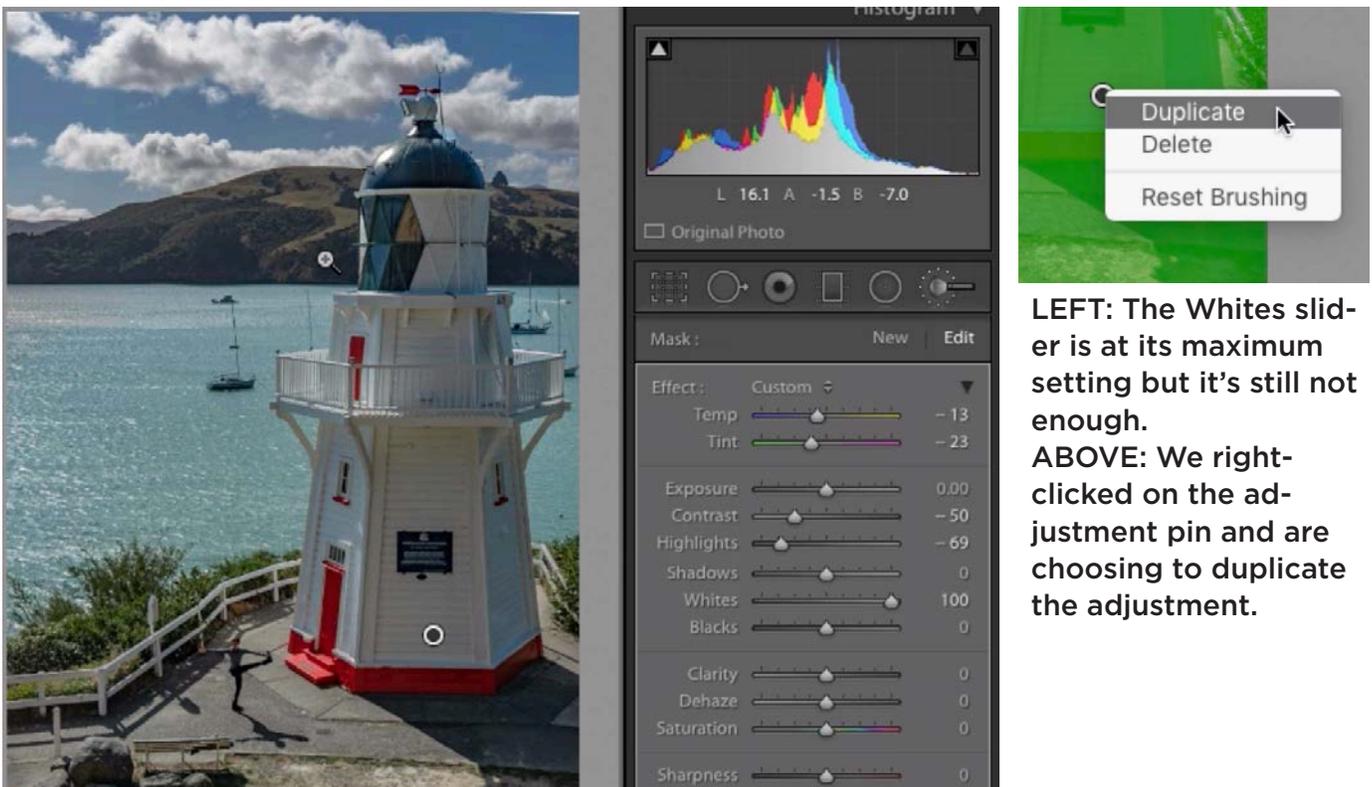


Here, we are holding down the Option key (Alt on Win) while dragging the Range Mask slider. This shows a preview of what areas are being affected by the adjustment.

White balance for shady areas Many of these backlit subjects are situated in the shade, and areas in the shade tend to have a blue color cast. That's because they are lit by the blue sky instead of the direct sun. If this is the case, the Adjustment Brush's Temp slider can be used to correct the color. With the Adjustment Brush still active from the brightening adjustment, move the Temp slider to the right, introducing more yellow into the targeted area. It's not that you're trying to make the area look yellow. It's because yellow is the opposite of blue, so moving the temperature toward yellow is going to help absorb the blue.

Removing Adjustment Brush Effect If you ever want to remove paint strokes made with the Adjustment Brush, you can do so by setting the brush to its Erase mode, which can be found below the Adjustment Brush sliders. Here, you'll also find settings to control the brush's size and flow. When set to erase, a little minus sign (-) will appear inside the brush tip and you can use the brush to remove the effect. You can also temporarily access the Erase mode by holding down the Option key (Alt on Win) when the Adjustment Brush is active. The brush will then erase the adjustment for the entire time you have the key held down.

When the Whites slider can't go far enough You may sometimes find that you crack the Whites slider all the way up but it's still not enough. You could supplement the brightening with the Exposure slider, but it's really not going to have the same effect. Here's what you could do instead. Move your mouse on top of a pin that is already applying an adjustment, right-click on the pin and a little pop-up menu will appear. Choose the Duplicate option. This will give you two identical Adjustment Brush applications. You will probably need to tweak the sliders in the second instance of the adjustment so that you don't have any settings that are overdone.



LEFT: The Whites slider is at its maximum setting but it's still not enough.
ABOVE: We right-clicked on the adjustment pin and are choosing to duplicate the adjustment.