



Image Blending

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In this lesson, we're going to look at an image blending technique that can be useful for really challenging images. There are some images that are difficult to perfect as a whole using Lightroom's adjustment sliders. In instances like this, you can take the same image and process it multiple times, optimizing a different area in each version. Then, you can blend all of those versions together, using only the enhanced area from each version.

The example image Our video example image was shot mid-day, outside in a vineyard. When shooting the image, I made sure that the histogram on my camera did not show a huge spike on the far right side. This would have indicated that the brightest area (the sky) was blown out to white. On a mirrorless camera, you can also turn on the zebra stripes feature, which will overlay those stripes over any areas that will have a loss in detail. Know that this preview that your camera shows you is based on a jpeg version of the picture. The end result that is loaded onto the computer should be raw (presuming that you are shooting in the raw format). Because I made sure that the sky was not blown out to white, we will later be able to retrieve detail from that bright area.

The subject in this image is very dark. Her pants are close to solid black and it's hard to see her face because it is also dark.



Above, you can see before-and-after versions of the video example image.

We are going to process this image multiple times, focusing on a different area in each version. The file that you received with the course downloads contains some Snapshots so that you can see how I processed the image for all the different areas. You can find these within the Snapshots panel in Lightroom's Develop Module. Here, I am going to describe my mindset when processing each version and then we'll move on to blend all of the versions together in Photoshop.



Here, we initially adjusted the image in Lightroom to optimize the vines. On the left side, you can see that the Snapshots panel contains a snapshot for each of the different elements in the image. You will have access to this in the practice file.

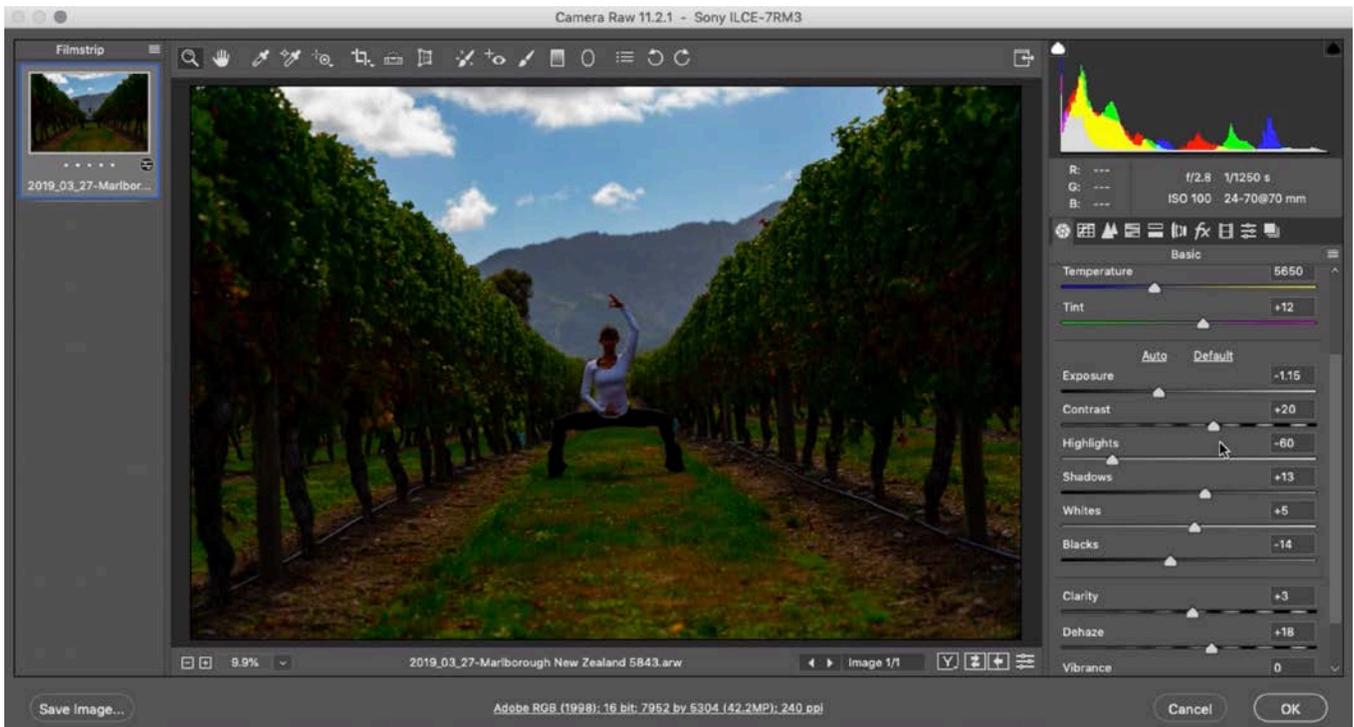
Optimize the vines

In the first pass, we'll adjust the image to optimize the vines. Once the vines look ideal, we'll want to open the image in Photoshop, but we need to do that in a special way. Whenever we're going to use this blending technique, where we create multiple versions of the same image, we need to open the image as a smart object in Photoshop. With the image active, we'll click on the Photo menu and choose **Edit In > Open as Smart Object** in Photoshop. The image will open as a layer in Photoshop. The bottom right corner of the image thumbnail in the Layers panel will include a little icon, indicating that the layer is a smart object.

Optimize the sky

Now we need to create a duplicate of that layer in order to optimize the image for another area. We can not, however, use the standard method of duplicating a layer. This would simply create a second instance of the same smart object, where any changes made to one instance will automatically be applied to the other. We want to be able to edit the individual layers independently of one another. To achieve this, we'll duplicate the smart object by clicking on the Layer menu and choosing Smart Objects > New Smart Object via Copy. The key word here is "new." A new layer will appear in the Layers panel and this is a new, independent layer that we can change without affecting the original layer.

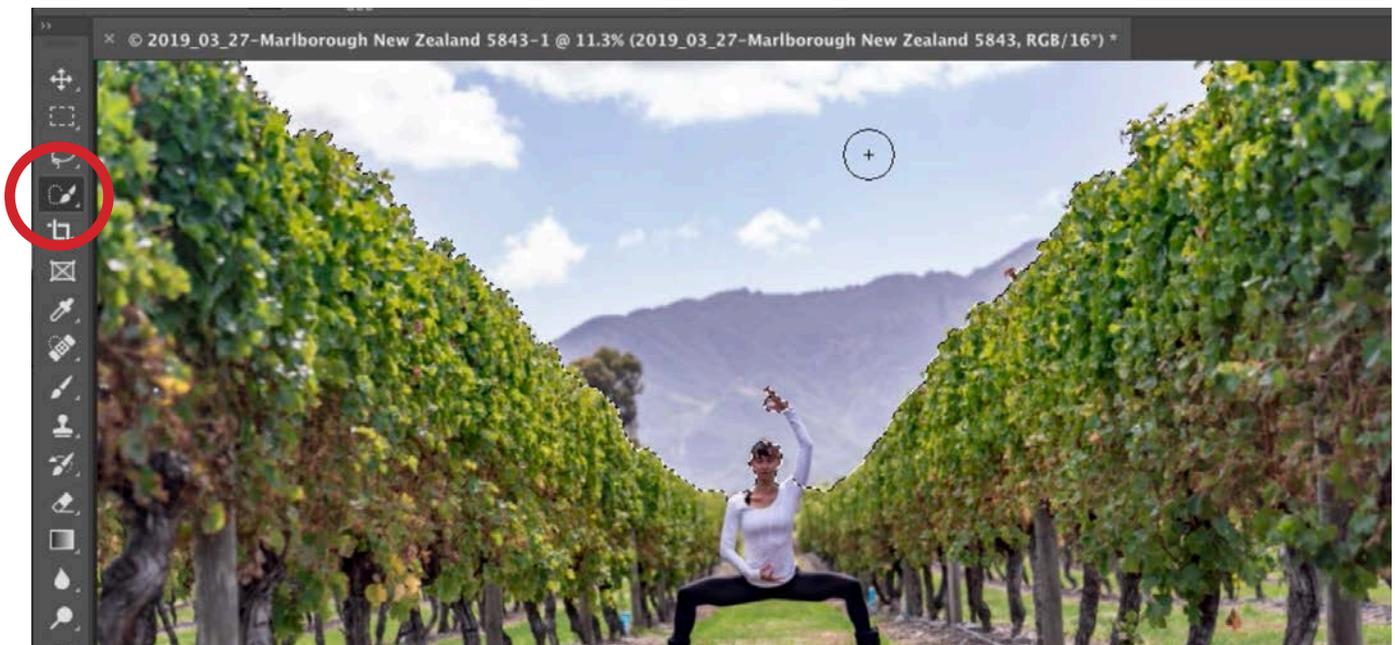
We now want to process the new layer using different settings that will optimize a different area. We'll double-click on the layer thumbnail and the image will open in Adobe Camera Raw (ACR). Here, we can optimize the adjustment settings and this time we're going to optimize for the sky.



Here, we are adjusting the image to optimize the sky in Camera Raw.

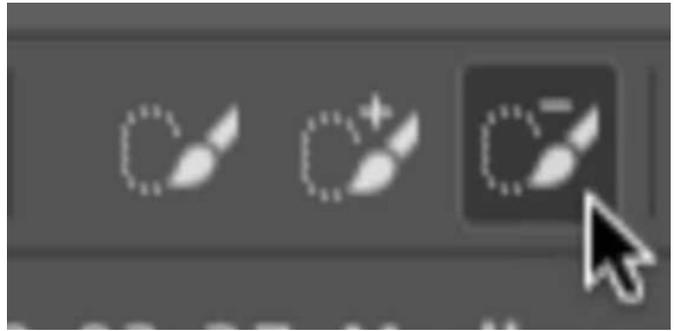
This lesson is focused on image blending and not optimization via the adjustment sliders, so we're not going to go into detail on what sliders were moved to fix the sky here. If you are following along with the image file included with the lesson, know that you can click on the Snapshots panel (It's the far right icon in ACR's adjustment settings.) to see the different settings used for each version of the image. After adjusting the image to optimize the sky, we'll click OK to exit the ACR window.

Now we're going to end up with two versions of the picture stacked on top of each other. The top version is the one where the sky looks good. To merge this layer with the one beneath it, we will use a layer mask to hide everything except for the sky area. We'll start by making a selection around the sky and mountain area, but we'll actually do this by using the bottom layer, because it's lighter and the selection tools will have an easier time. We'll turn off the eyeball icon for the top layer and click on the bottom layer so that it's active. We'll then click on the Quick Selection Tool (within the Toolbar) to make it active. We'll use the tool to click and drag over the area containing the sky and mountains. When we release the mouse button, we'll have a selection of that area.

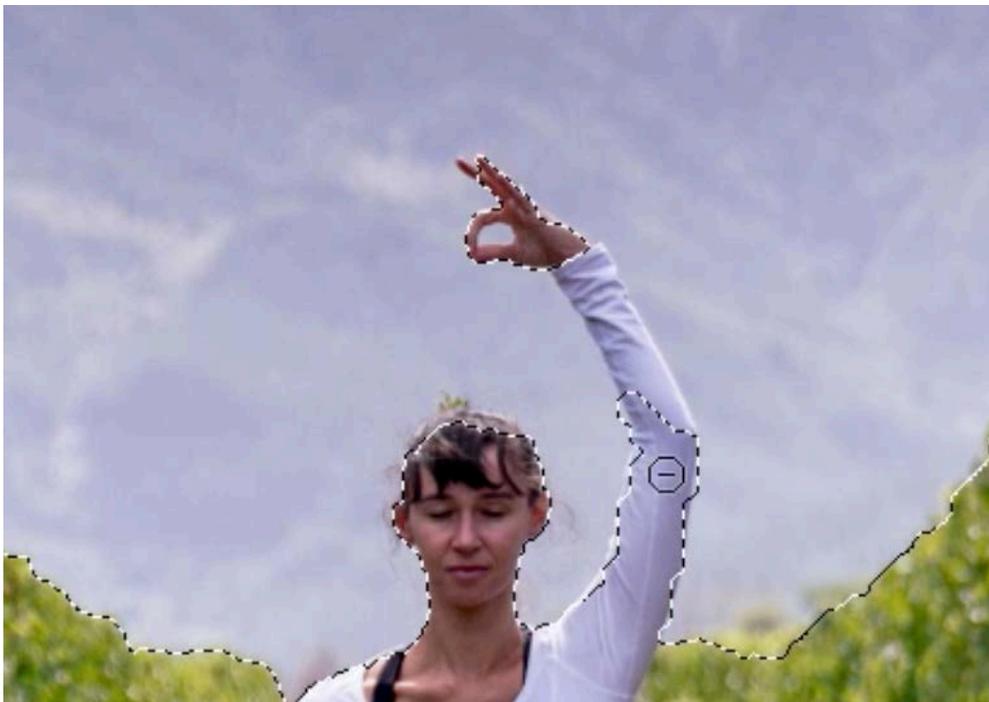


The Quick Selection Tool (circled) is being used to make a selection of the sky and mountains. This selection will be used to create a layer mask, hiding the layer in all areas except the sky and mountains.

We'll zoom in on the image to inspect the selection and we can see that we need to fine tune it in some areas. To deselect an area that was accidentally selected, use the settings in the Options Bar above the main image window to choose the tool icon with the minus sign next to it. This tells the tool to remove from the selection instead of add to it. You can change the size of the brush by using the left and right bracket keys ([]). In this instance, we need a very small brush to paint over Karen's arm, which was accidentally selected. We'll switch between the add and subtract settings for the Quick Selection Tool in order to fine tune the selection as much as possible.



With the Quick Selection Tool active, these settings (located in the Options Bar) can be used to tell the tool what to do. When we choose the icon with the minus sign, the tool will subtract from the selection instead of add to it.



The Quick Selection Tool is set to subtract from the selection and we're using it to remove the selection from the subject's arm.

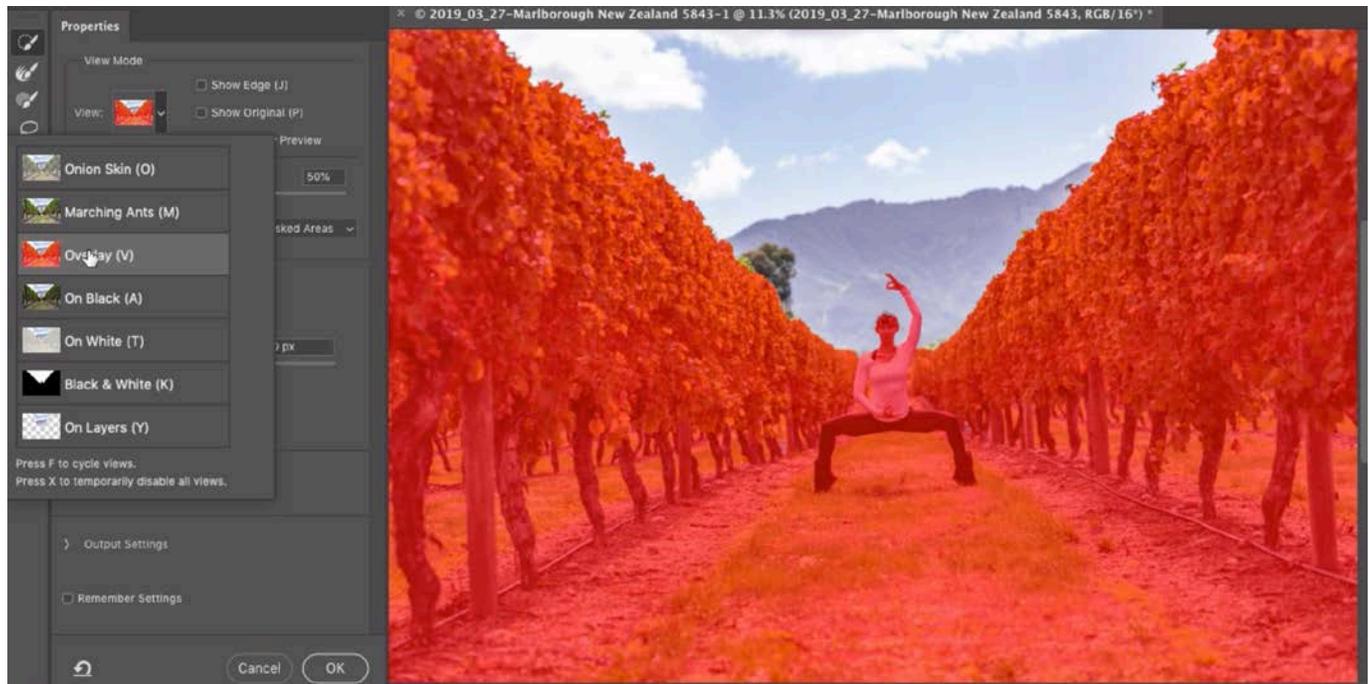
We can get an alternative view to evaluate the selection by tapping the Q key to enter Quick Mask Mode. This will place a red overlay on the image in the areas that are NOT selected. While in this view, we can zoom in on the image and see that there are parts along the edge of the selection that are not quite precise. These areas are too small and detailed for the Quick Selection Tool, so we'll need to use another technique.



We tapped the Q key to enter Quick Mask Mode, which places a red overlay on the areas that are not selected.

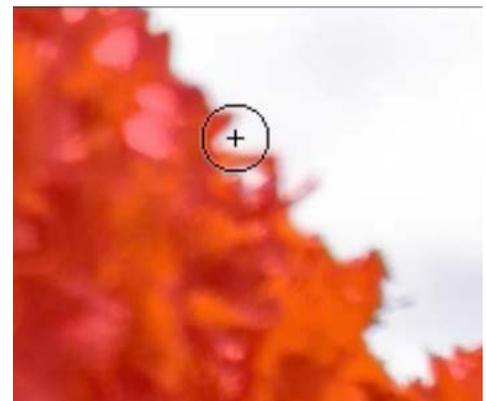
We'll tap the Q key again to exit Quick Mask Mode and then we'll access a different feature by clicking on the Select menu and choosing Select & Mask. Note that this Select & Mask feature is best used for subjects that are furry, fuzzy, hairy or overly complex. The Select & Mask window will open and all of the options appear on the left side of the interface.

We'll use the View menu to choose the option called Overlay, which gives us a red overlay similar to the one you see in Quick Mask Mode. With this view, we can paint on the image to add or remove from the selection.



In the Select & Mask window, we're using the View menu to choose the Overlay option, which places a red overlay over the non-selected areas.

We'll zoom in on the image and activate the Refine Edge Tool, which is the second tool down in the Toolbar. This tool allows us to paint on the image to determine what is selected. Using a small brush, we'll paint over the areas where the red transition does not look appropriate. This will give Photoshop permission to refine that area. There is a way to give Photoshop control over the entire selection edge and that is by using the Radius slider. It can sometimes be useful to move this slider up just a small amount so that the selection edges are smooth. We'll set the slider to three, giving Photoshop control over a 3-pixel radius around the entire selection.



The Refine Edge Tool is being used to paint over the edge of the selection, giving Photoshop control over the selection in the areas where we paint.

We'll continue to paint along the rough edges with the Refine Edge Tool, cleaning up the area where the leaves meet the sky. Once we're finished, there is another problem that we'll need to tackle because there are gaps in the leaves where the sky shows through. We'll need to include these gaps in the selection so we'll use a small brush and start to paint over the gaps, giving Photoshop more control over the selection there.



There are gaps in the leaves, revealing the bright sky, so we'll need to include these gaps in the selection.

The red overlay can make it difficult to see where the gaps in the leaves are, so we'll change the view menu to an option other than Overlay. The "Onion Skin" option will make the non-selected areas partially transparent and you can control the transparency level using a slider. Another great option is "On Layers," which overlays the selected area onto the underlying layers in the Layers panel. Just know that the underlying layer needs to have its visibility turned on in order for this view to work.

We'll continue to paint over the gaps in the leaves and any other edges that need a cleaner selection. When we're satisfied with the result, we'll click the OK button to exit the Select & Mask window. This will bring us back to Photoshop's main interface and we can see the new "marching ants" selection around the sky area. We're going to use this selection to limit where that top layer is showing up so we'll make sure the sky layer is active and then we'll click on the Layer Mask icon at the bottom of the Layers panel. This will apply the selection to the layer mask, hiding all parts of the layer except for the area that was selected (the sky).

Now we can zoom in on the image and inspect the mask. The mask edges look smooth in most places, but there are a few problem areas where the transition looks off. One of these areas is around the subject's hand. There is a way to view the mask in the same way that we would view a selection in Quick Mask Mode,

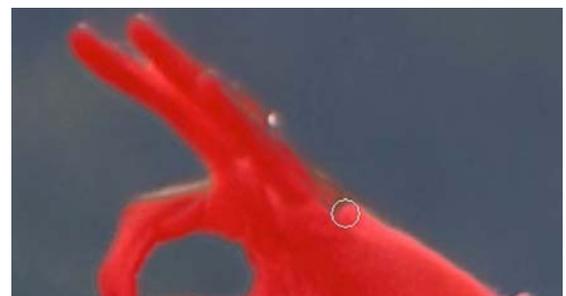


The selection of the sky was converted into a layer mask, so only the sky area is visible in the layer. You can see the mask in the Layers panel on the right.

and this can help us to see and fix the problem. We will tap on the backslash key (\) and a red overlay will cover the image in the areas that are NOT selected. This view of the mask will make any problems more obvious.

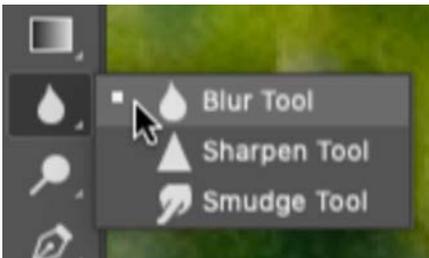
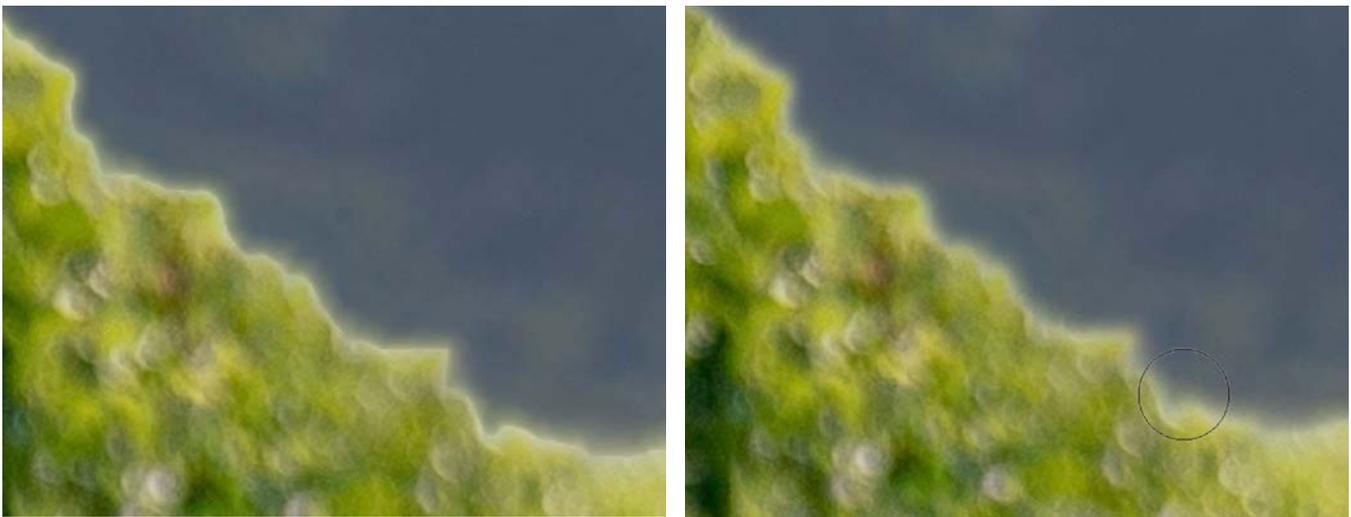
With this red overlay visible, we can use the Brush Tool to fine tune the mask. Painting with black will hide areas (adding the red overlay) and painting with white will reveal areas (removing the red overlay). We just need to make sure that we're painting on the mask instead of the layer itself. Looking at the thumbnails in the Layers panel, the mask thumbnail should have little white brackets around it. This means that the mask is active. If the layer thumbnail contains the brackets instead, we can click back on the mask thumbnail to make it active.

We'll use a small, relatively hard brush and paint with black over the part of the hand that was not masked correctly. We'll scroll around the image, looking for any other areas where the mask needs touching up and we'll use the brush to paint on those areas, refining the mask as much as possible.



In Quick Mask Mode, we're touching up the selection using the Brush Tool.

There are some parts of the mask that have a transition that is too abrupt. For example, the area where the soft, blurred greenery meets the sky is a hard line, but it should be a soft transition because this area is slightly out of focus. To adjust this part of the mask, we'll activate the Blur Tool, which looks like a water drop icon in the Toolbar. We'll use this tool to paint over the hard edge to blur the mask in this area. If it's not becoming blurry enough, we can increase the Strength setting in the Options Bar above the main image window.



ABOVE LEFT: The edge of the selection is too hard.
LEFT: The Blur Tool is being activated in the Toolbar.
ABOVE RIGHT: The Blur Tool is being used (painting on the layer mask) to soften the transition.

Optimize the shirt

Now that we have the sky layer optimized and masked, let's create another version of the image and use it to optimize the subject's shirt. We'll activate the bottom layer (because it doesn't already contain a layer mask), click on the Layer menu and choose Smart Objects > New Smart Object Via Copy. This will create a new smart object layer that can be adjusted independently of the other layers.

We'll double-click on this new layer to open the image in Adobe Camera Raw. Here, we'll use the sliders to adjust the shirt, ignoring all other parts of the image. When the shirt is optimized, we'll click OK to close ACR and go back to Photoshop's main interface. Now we only want the shirt to be visible in this layer, so we need to make a selection of the shirt and then add a layer mask. We'll activate the Quick Selection Tool and we'll turn on the Auto Enhance setting in the Options Bar. This will give us a smoother selection. Then, we'll use the Quick Selection Tool, set to a small brush, to paint over the shirt. Once we have a decent selection, we'll tap the Q key to enter Quick Mask Mode. This will place the red overlay on the image in areas that are not selected and we can use the Brush Tool to refine the selection in this mode. We'll zoom in on the shirt and use a very small brush to fine tune the selection. Remember, painting with black will add the red overlay, therefore deselecting the area. Painting with white will remove the red overlay, therefore adding to the selection. If the foreground and background colors are set to black and white, you can easily switch between the two by tapping the X key. This shortcut swaps the foreground and background colors. Once the selection is refined, we'll tap the Q key again to exit Quick Mask Mode.



After processing a copy of the image to optimize the shirt., the Quick Selection Tool is being used to make a selection of the shirt area.



In Quick Mask Mode, we're using the Brush Tool to refine the selection.

With the selection active, we'll add a layer mask by clicking on the Layer Mask icon at the bottom of the Layers panel. This will convert the selection into a mask, where the entire mask is black except for the area where the shirt is. This part of the mask is white and is therefore the only part of the layer that is visible.

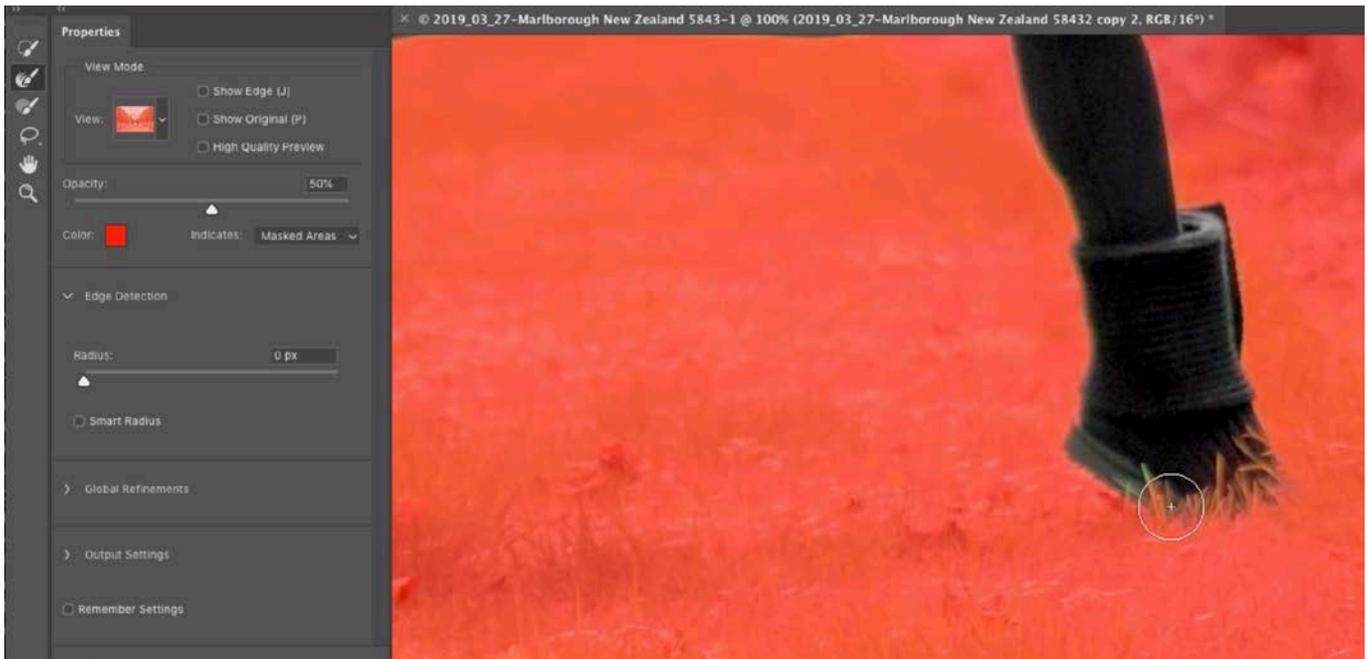
Optimize the pants

We will now create yet another version of the image that is optimized for the subject's pants. To create another version, we need to copy one of the layers, and we can choose any of the layers to copy. We'll copy the bottom layer because it doesn't already have a layer mask attached to it. We'll activate that bottom layer, click on the Layer menu and choose Smart Object > New Smart Object Via Copy. The new layer will appear and we'll double-click on the layer thumbnail to open the image in ACR. Here, we'll adjust the image to optimize the pants and we'll ignore the rest of the image while doing so. Once the pants look good, we'll click OK to return to Photoshop's main interface. The pants look good, but the rest of the layer is now too bright, so we need to mask the layer so that only the pants are visible. Just like in previous layers, we'll first create a selection around the pants. Again, we'll use the Quick Selection Tool to do this. Using a small brush, we'll paint with the Quick Selection Tool so that the pants are completely selected.



The Quick Selection Tool is being used to make an initial selection of the pants.

The challenging part is where her boots meet the grass. This is a complex edge, and would therefore be more suited for the Select & Mask feature that we used earlier to mask the leaves against the sky. We'll click on the Select menu and choose Select & Mask. When the Select & Mask window opens, we'll set the view menu to Overlay and this will give us the red overlay in the areas that are not selected. We'll activate the Refine Edge Tool, which is the second tool in the Toolbar on the left, and we'll use it to paint over the area where the boots meet the grass. We might also bring up the Radius slider to maybe a setting of 4, which will give Photoshop control over a 4-pixel radius around the entire selection. When we're done with the Select & Mask settings, we'll click OK to go back to Photoshop's main interface.



The Select & Mask window is open and we're using the Refine Edge Tool to paint over the area where the boots meet the grass. This is giving Photoshop control over the selection in this area.

To inspect the mask, we'll turn on Quick Mask Mode by tapping the Q key. In Quick Mask Mode, we can use the Brush Tool to fine-tune the mask if need be. When we're sure the mask looks good, we'll tap the Q key again to exit Quick Mask Mode. This leaves us with the marching ants selection, and we will convert that selection into a layer mask by tapping the Layer Mask icon at the bottom of the Layers panel.

Optimize the skin

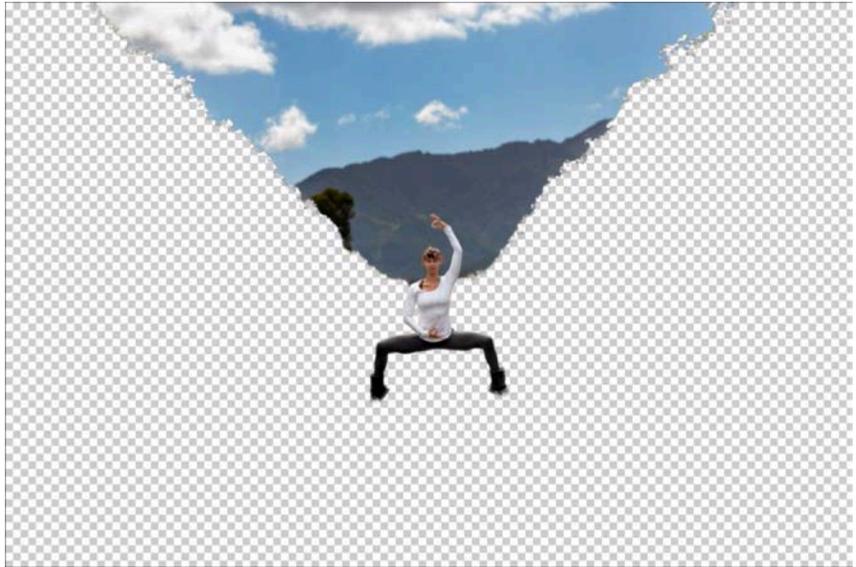
We're going to repeat the process to optimize the skin. We'll duplicate one of the existing layers by clicking on the Layer menu and choosing Smart Objects > New Smart Object via Copy. We'll double-click on the thumbnail for the new layer to open the image in Camera Raw. We'll use the adjustment sliders to optimize her skin, ignoring everything else in the image. When the skin looks good, we'll click OK to exit Camera Raw and go back to Photoshop's main interface.

Now, we need to make a selection of the skin areas so that we can convert that selection into a mask that hides all other parts of the layer. At this point, we've already created many layer masks, including masks that surround the skin area. If we turn off the visibility of all layers that do not contain layer masks, we'll see the individual masked areas that are making up the image. Looking at these, we can



The visibility is turned off for all layers that do not contain a layer mask. You can see that the masked layers help us to mask the face. The Lasso Tool is being used to make a rough selection around the skin.

see that the other masked layers completely surround the skin area. Because these other masked layers are positioned above the skin layer in the Layers panel, the mask for the skin layer does not need to be perfect, as the other layers are going to obscure the edges. We can simply use the Lasso Tool to make a very rough selection around the skin and then click the Layer Mask icon to convert that selection into a layer mask.



The visibility of the masked skin layer is turned on.

Refine the image as a whole

Now we have five different versions of the picture that have been blended together into one document. If we want to refine the result as a whole, we can place the layers into a folder, or group, and then create retouching and adjustment layers on top of that group. To place all of the layers into a group, we'll select all of the layers in the Layers panel and then click on the Folder icon at the bottom of the Layers panel. This will create a new group with all of the layers placed inside of it. We can double-click on the group name and rename it to "Image Blending" so that we remember the purpose of the group later.

Next, we'll click on the New Layer icon at the bottom of the Layers panel. This will create a new, empty layer at the top of the layer stack. We can rename this layer to indicate that it's the retouching layer. Now, we can use the retouching tools

(the Spot Healing Brush, Clone Stamp Tool, etc.) to clean up any areas of the image that need some cleaning up. With the retouching tool active, we'll need to make sure that the Sample All Layers settings is turned on and that can be found within the Options Bar above the main image window. We'll use the Spot Healing Brush to remove any distracting elements in the foreground of the image.

Next, we can use adjustment layers to further refine the image. Any adjustment layers should go at the top of the layer stack.

The first adjustment layer will be used to desaturate the distracting blue objects that appear near the subject's legs. We'll click on the Adjustment Layer icon at the bottom of the Layers panel and choose Hue/Saturation. The Properties panel for the Hue/Saturation adjustment layer will appear. We'll make sure that the Targeted Adjustment Tool is active. It looks like the little hand icon near the top left side of the panel. We can use



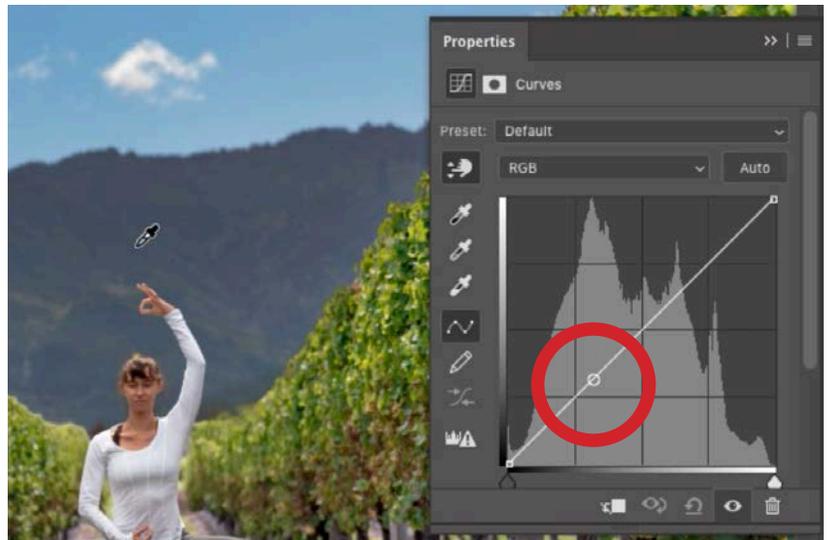
A Hue/Saturation Adjustment Layer will be used to desaturate these blue objects.

this tool to click on one of the blue objects. When we do this, Photoshop will look at the color of the object and automatically set the color menu to the appropriate color. Now we can use the sliders to adjust the targeted color. We'll drag the Saturation slider all the way down and we can see that those blue objects turn more of a muted gray color. The problem is that the blue sky was also affected. We'll need to use the mask that is attached to the adjustment layer to hide the adjustment in the sky area. Using a really large brush, we'll make sure the foreground color is set to black and we'll paint over the entire sky area, hiding the adjustment in that part of the image.

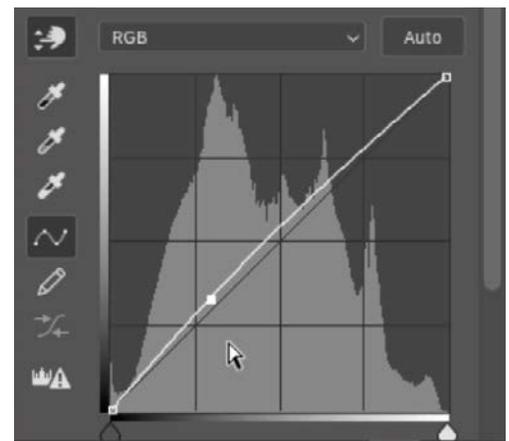
The second adjustment layer will be used to lighten up the part of the mountain area that looks darker than the rest of the mountains. We'll use a Curves Adjustment Layer to achieve this. We'll click on the Adjustment Layer icon at the bottom of the Layers panel and choose Curves from the pop-up menu. The Curves Properties panel will appear. We'll again make sure that the Targeted Adjustment Tool (the little hand icon) is active and then we'll simply hover the cursor over the area of the mountains that already looks ideal and look at the Curve chart. There will be a little circle on the curve that represents the area where the cursor is. We just want to remember the height of that little circle, because this is the height where the brightness of the mountains looks ideal.

Then, we'll click on the area of the mountains we want to correct. This will place a dot on the curve. We want to take that dot and move it to the height of the ideal brightness that we made a mental note of. We can move it by simply clicking and dragging the dot.

Now we want to limit where this adjustment shows up because it's currently applying to the entire document. To prevent it from applying to the entire document, we'll start by filling the entire mask with black. To do this, we'll click on the Image menu and choose Adjustments > Invert.



With the Targeted Adjustment Tool active, we're hovering the cursor over the ideal part of the mountain and noting the position of the circle on the chart.



We placed a dot on the curve for the part of the mountain we want to fix. The dot is being dragged up to brighten the area.

We'll use the Quick Selection Tool to make a rough selection of the mountains. This selection will contain a rough edge, and the edges of the mountains are soft, so we'll need to soften up the selection. We'll click on the Select menu and choose Select & Mask. Here, we can use the Radius slider to give Photoshop control over the edges of the selection. We'll set the Radius relatively high, to a setting of 19, and then click OK to exit the Select & Mask window. Now we have an active selection around the mountains. We don't want to fill the entire selection, but we



We are painting with white on the layer mask to reveal the lightening effect from the Curves Adjustment Layer. The selection is limiting the paint stroke to the mountain area.

can use the Brush Tool to paint with white over the area where we want the adjustment to be visible and the selection will prevent us from getting paint overspill into the sky area. We'll use a large, soft brush and paint over the part of the mountain that needed some lightening. This will reveal the Curves Adjustment in the area where we paint.

In conclusion, with this lesson, we learned how to interpret an image with more than one set of adjustment settings and we were able to do that by opening the image as a smart object (because it contains a copy of the original raw file), creating new copies of that smart object with different adjustment settings applied and then masking the individual layers.