Fixing Uneven Objects

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In this lesson, I want to discuss a problem that can occur when you process HDR images or when you are adjusting an image in Lightroom or Camera Raw and end up moving the Shadows or Highlights slider to the extreme.

If you have any objects that extend into a bright area of the image (a sky, for instance), those objects may end up being unintentionally darkened a bit as a result of the processing. This will be something you'll need to compensate for with another adjustment.


After initially adjusting this image, the top part of the Pure sign became darker than the bottom.

Isolate the Object with a Selection (Timestamp 1:28)

Select Subject command In order to fix an object that is darker than it should be, you'll need to begin by isolating the object with a selection. There are many ways of making selections, but I like to start by trying out the Select Subject command. This is the easiest and most automated method, but it doesn't often work really well. It will work better on simple images where the subject is well defined. This command can be found under the Select menu.

The Object Selection Tool If the Select Subject command does not work well, you'll need to turn to another tool. The next tool I would try is the Object Selection Tool, which is grouped with the Quick Selection Tool in the Toolbar on the left side of the screen.

With this tool, you will click and drag out a shape around the subject and the tool will attempt to contract the selection to only contain the subject. Use the Mode menu in the Options Bar (above the image window) to determine whether you will drag out a rectangular shape or use the Lasso to manually drag out a custom shape. I also like to turn on the "Enhance Edge" check box, which is also located in the Options Bar.
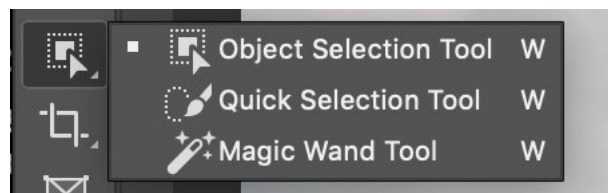
The Object Selection Tool is grouped with the Quick Selection Tool in the Toolbar.
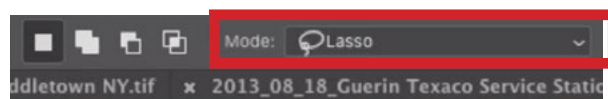
Use the Mode menu to decide between Rectangle and Lasso.

Use the tool to click and drag within the image, drawing a loose shape around the object that needs to be corrected. It doesn't need to be a perfect shape. You just need to make sure that the object is contained within the shape that you draw (if you're using the Lasso option). In the video example, I used the Lasso option and drew a loose shape around the sign that needs to be corrected. When you release the mouse button, the tool will shrink the selection in an attempt to isolate only the object.

LEFT: The Object Selection Tool is being used to draw out a shape around the sign. RIGHT: After releasing the mouse button, the tool contract the selection to contain the subject.

Sometimes, the result will be great. Other times, you will need to fine-tune the selection. If there are any parts of the object that were not selected, you could try using the same tool to add them to the selection. Hold down the Shift key (this tells the tool to add to the selection instead of create a new one) and drag a shape around the area that still needs to be selected.

The Object Selection Tool is being used to add to the current selection. Hold down the Shift key in order to tell a selection tool to add to a selection (instead of create a new one).

If there were areas that became selected, that should NOT have been selected, you can use the same tool to remove part of the selection. Hold down the Option key (Alt on Win) and drag a shape around the area you would like to remove from the selection. (Holding down the Option key tells a selection tool to subtract from the selection.)

Refine with Quick Mask Mode The selection will likely still need to be refined, and you can do that in Quick Mask Mode. In this mode, all selected areas look normal and all unselected areas have a red overlay. You can refine the selection in this mode by painting with white (to remove the red overlay) or black (to add the red overlay). Enter Quick Mask Mode by tapping the Q key on your keyboard. Then use the Brush Tool to paint with white in any areas that should be selected but currently contain the red overlay. This will remove the overlay, adding the area to the selection. Paint with black in any areas that should not be selected but currently have no overlay. This will add the red overlay, deselecting the area. Tap the X key to swap the foreground and background colors. This can be a fast way of switching from painting with white to black and vise versa.

Tip: If you'd like to paint a perfectly straight line, click once with the Brush Tool, then hold the Shift key and click again. The tool will draw a perfectly straight line between the two areas where you clicked.

The Brush Tool is being used to refine the mask in Quick Mask Mode. The part of the mask with the red overlay is the part that is NOT selected.
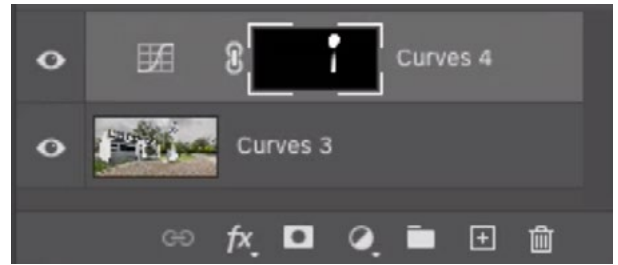
Option: Save Selection Once you're happy with the selection, tap the Q key to exit Quick Mask Mode. You'll be left with a "marching ants" selection on the image. At this point, you can opt to save the selection if you think that you might need it at a later time. Do this by clicking on the Select menu and choosing Save Selection. In the dialog that pops up, give the selection a custom name and click OK. To access the selection at a future time, click on the Select menu and choose Load. Then choose the name of the selection from the dialog that pops up.
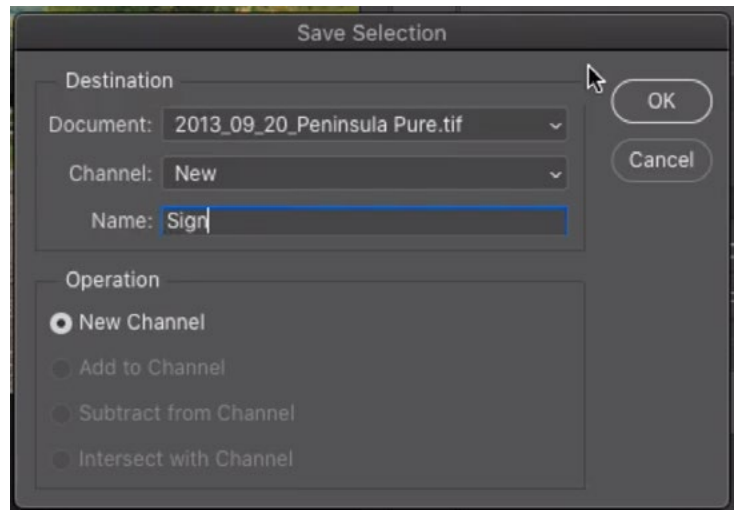
The selection is being saved for future use and we're typing in a name for the selection.

Curves to Adjust Brightness (8:23)

Now it's time to adjust the image, limiting the adjustment to only the area that is selected. Curves is a good adjustment for fixing this type of mismatched brightness. Click on the Adjustment Layer icon at the bottom of the Layers Panel and choose Curves from the pop-up menu. A Curves adjustment layer will be placed above the image layer in the Layers Panel. Because

A Curves Adjustment Layer was added and the selection was applied to the layer mask.

there was an active selection when you created the adjustment layer, that selection will automatically be applied to the layer mask that's attached to the layer. The selected areas will be the white part of the mask, which is the part of the layer that will be visible. When we change the Curves settings, it's this area that will have the visible effect. The unselected areas will be the black parts of the mask. The adjustment will not be visible in these areas.

The Properties Panel will display the Curves settings. Make sure the Targeted Adjustment Tool is active. It looks like a little hand icon on the left side of the panel. With this tool active, hover your cursor over the part of the object that is too dark. When you do this, you will see a little circle appear on the curve chart within the Properties Panel. The circle
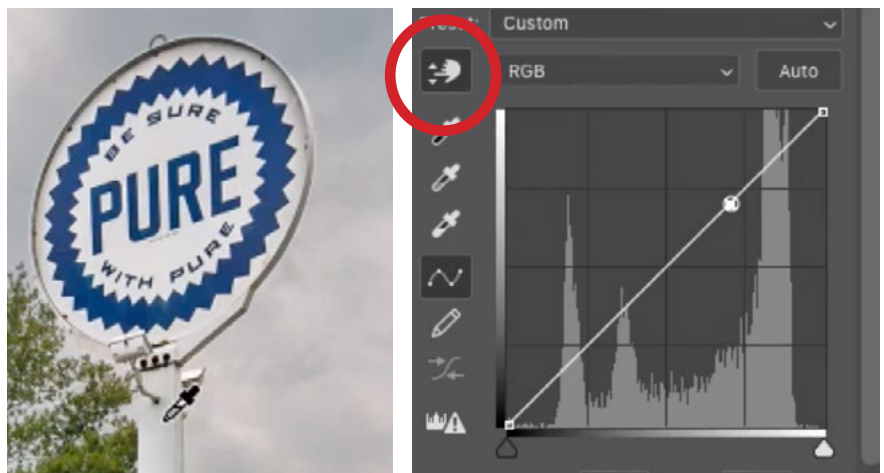
The Targeted Adjustment Tool (circled) is used to click on the target area, placing a point on the curve.

indicates how much light is in the area that is under the cursor. If you want to adjust the area, click with your mouse to place a point on the curve. You can move this point up or down to make the area brighter or darker.

The goal is to adjust the dark area so it matches the brightness of the other areas on the object, but how can you tell how far you'll need to move the dot? Hover your cursor over the part of the object that has the correct brightness and look at the Curves settings. Below the chart, there is an Output number. This tells you how much light is in the area where your mouse is. Take a note of this number.
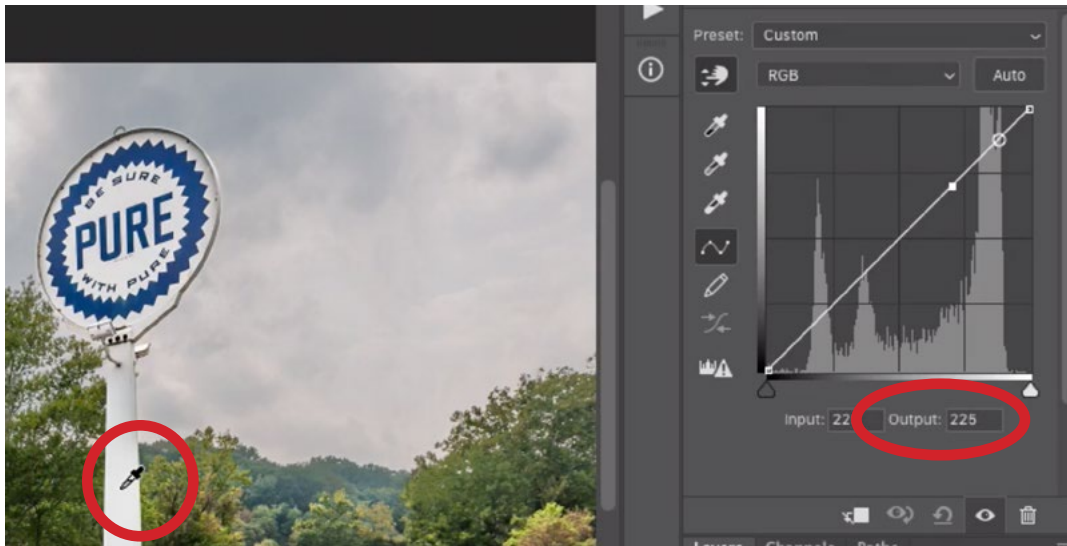
The Targeted Adjustment Tool is being hovered over the area with the desired brightness. We are noting the Output number in the Properties Panel.

The dot that you placed on the curve should still be active, which means you can type the number you noted into the Output field in order to reposition the dot. You will see the targeted area become lighter to match the targeted brightness. The problem is that the surrounding areas became brighter as well. This is because we moved the dot, which caused the entire curve to move, affecting the different brightness ranges at varying levels.
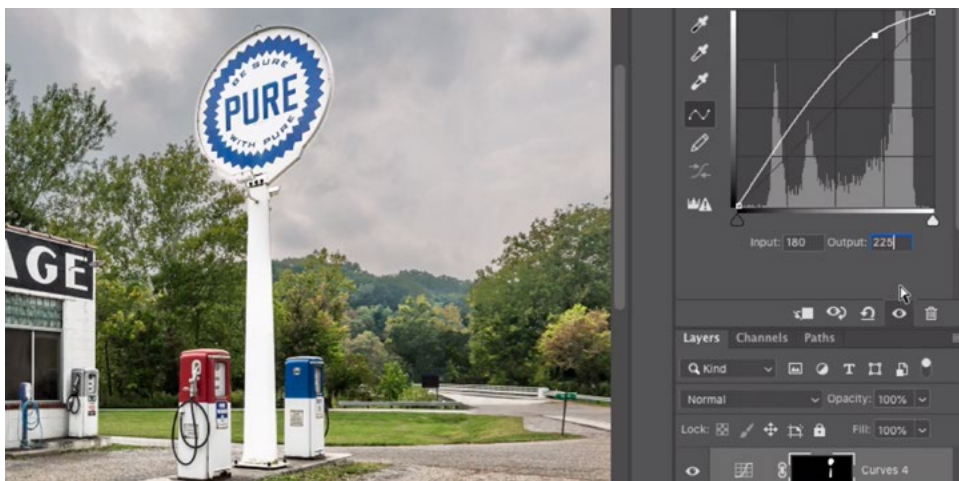
The dot on the curve was moved up. This lightened the target area, but because the entire curve moved, it lightened some surrounding areas as well.

To correct this, we can paint on the layer mask attached to the Curves adjustment layer. Adding black to the mask will hide the adjustment. Activate the Brush Tool and make sure that the foreground color is set to black. In an instance like this, you'll want to use a very soft brush, and you can specify that within the brush settings in the Options Bar above the image window. In the video example, I set the Hardness slider all the way down to zero.

Then, use a large brush to paint over any areas that unintentionally became brightened. You only want to brighten the area that was initially too dark.

LEFT: With the Brush Tool active, we are using the settings in the Options Bar to choose a very soft brush. RIGHT: The Brush Tool is being used to paint with black (on the mask) in the areas that should NOT get the curves adjustment.

If you'd like to view the layer mask to make sure you didn't miss any areas, hold down the Option key (Alt on Win) and click on the layer mask thumbnail in the Layers Panel. This will show you a view of the layer mask directly within the image window. Option+click again on the thumbnail to exit the view.
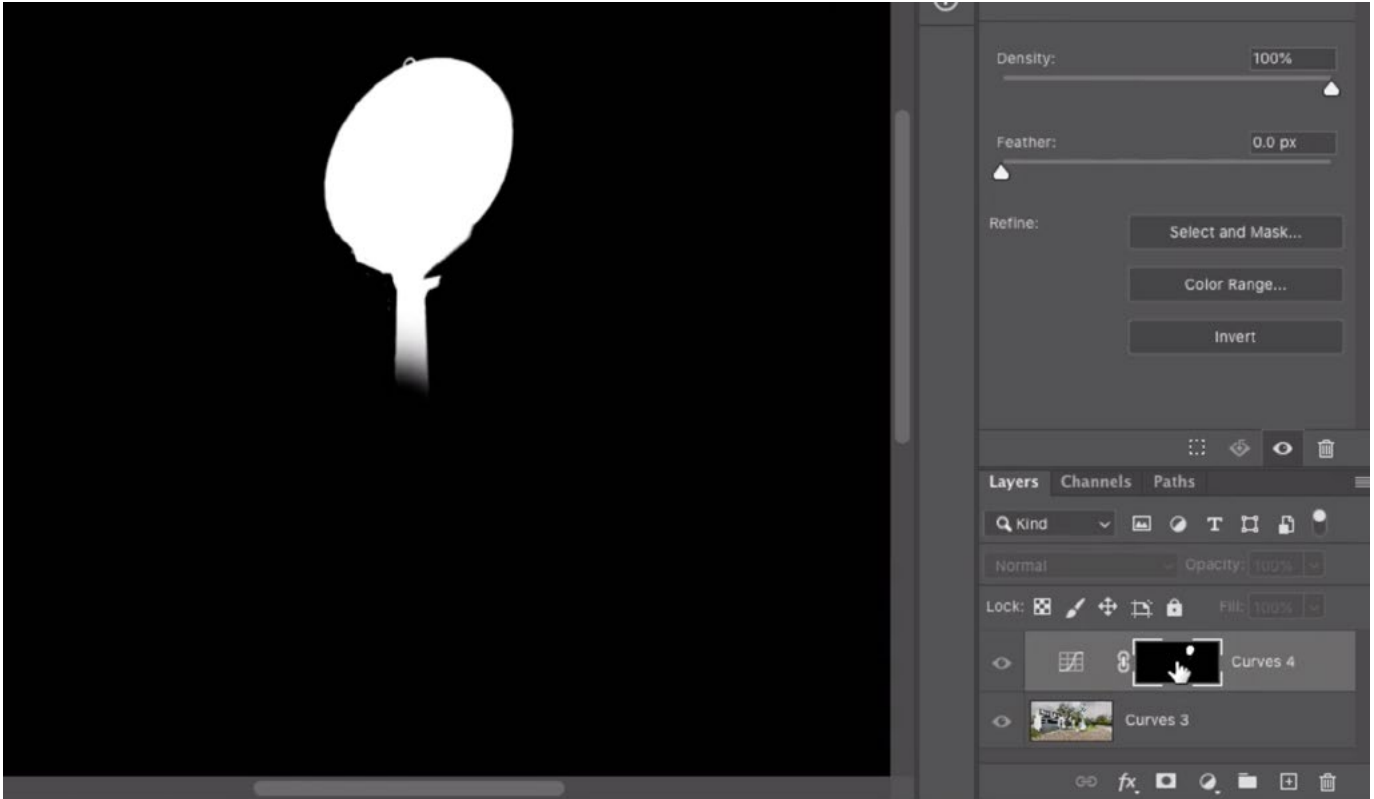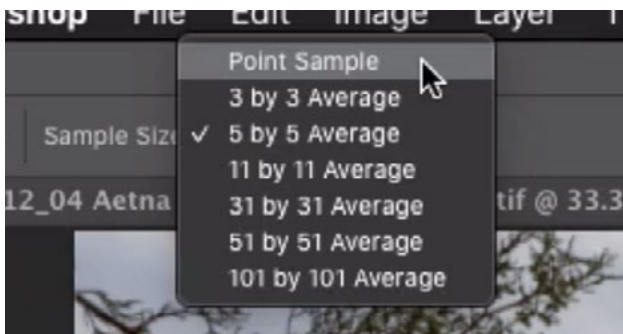

Option+click (Alt+click on Win) on the layer mask thumbnail in order to view the mask in the main image window.

After isolating the sign and applying a Curves adjustment layer, the sign is now even in color.

Extra Tips

Targeted Adjustment Tool Sample Size The Targeted Adjustment Tool is used to target a specific tone in the image and to place a point on the curve, representing that tone. If the area you're targeting is very small or narrow, you may need to pay attention to the Sample Size menu, located in the Options Bar when the Targeted Adjustment Tool is active. This setting determines how large of an area will be averaged when you click to sample. The Point Sample option will tell it to sample only one pixel. I usually do not use this option because it could be inaccurate if the image contains noise, dust, etc. I generally use somewhere between a 3x3 average and an 11x11 average. When you need to sample a small or thin object, you'll want to choose a smaller sample size so that the sample area is all contained within the object. In the video example, we used the 3x3 average setting to sample a thin pole.

When the Targeted Adjustment Tool is active, the Sample Size menu can be found in the Options Bar.

Select point on the curve to make it active If you need to activate a point on the curve (in order to move it), it can be tricky because it's so sensitive. Sometimes, just clicking on the point will end up moving it a bit, and that's not likely what you want. A safer way to select a curve point is by using the plus or minus keys on the keyboard. Using the plus key (+) will choose the next point up on the curve. Using the minus key (-) will choose the next point down on the curve.

Adjusting Color There may be times when you want to match uneven color in addition to brightness. For example, there may be a color cast in the object you're adjusting. Another adjustment layer can be used for this. Start with a selection of the object. Then click on the Adjustment Layer icon at the bottom of the Layers Panel and choose Hue/Saturation from the pop-up menu. A Hue/Saturation adjustment layer will be created and the selection will automatically be applied to the layer mask.

In the Properties Panel for the adjustment layer, make sure that the Targeted Adjustment Tool is active and click on the color you would like to fix. This will target that color in the Hue/Saturation Properties Panel. Then, you can use the sliders in this panel to make the color in the area look more like its surroundings. In the video example, the object had a red color cast. We targeted the area and then dragged the saturation slider to the left, removing more of the red from the area.
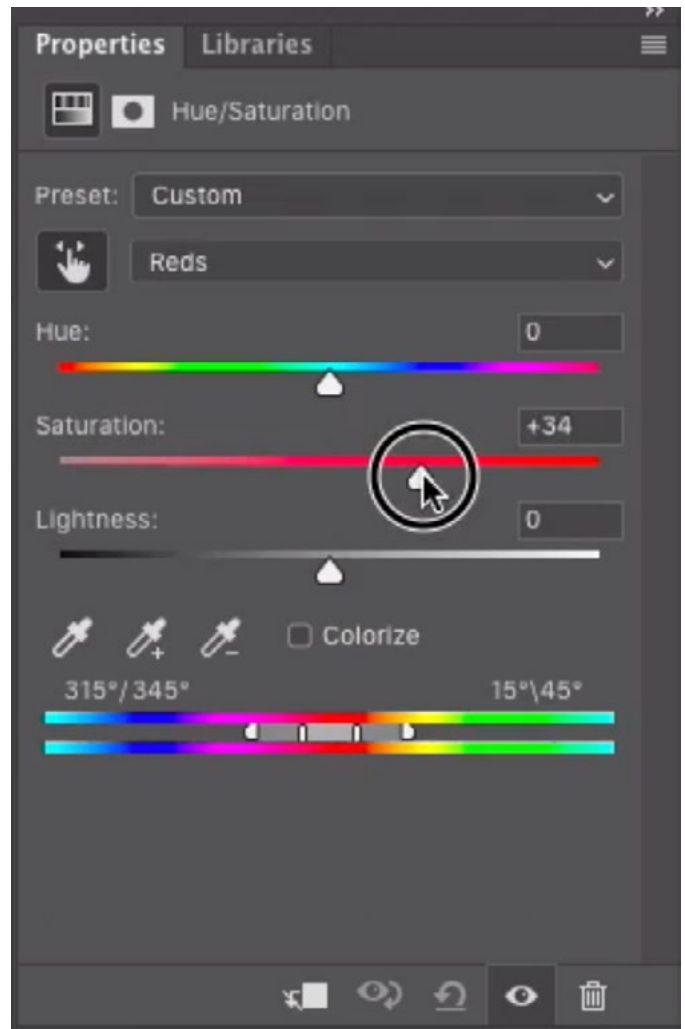
After targeting the red hue we wanted to adjust, we are moving the Saturation slider to the left in order to desaturate the reds in the targeted area.