

ADDING A LITTLE BIT EXTRA

We all like a little extra sometimes. Cinnamon on our coffee, a scoop of ice cream on our peach cobbler, a bit of chocolate to fill in the gaps. At times, your photos may look just fine, but they need something a little extra. Something to take a photo from being a "nice shot" to a "great shot". Something to put that cherry on top.

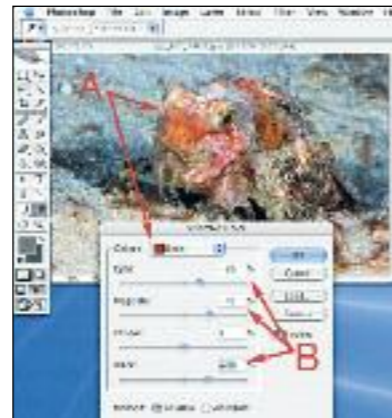
Photoshop and Elements have tools to help you tweak your shots to take them from the ordinary to the extraordinary. However, like having too much sugar in our coffee or stuffing ourselves with chocolate, too much of anything can be a disaster, or just plain tasteless. Years of trial and much error has taught me that when it comes to tweaking your photos, less is more. A grossly over saturated and/or sharpened image is a blight to the eyes. Even nauseating. It's like gulping down a cup of honey or chomping into a mouthful of wasabi. So, in all these following suggestions, you should find that a small application will do the job. By all means, experiment and go overboard. It will help you see where the "sweet spot" is when applying adjustments. But your final saved image should not be that drastically different from your RAW image file conversion.

First, let's look at a process that you possibly have done many times before. The addition of colour saturation. If your camera saves your files in jpeg format, there is a good chance that the factory has tweaked the process to add a bit of sharpening and often a lot of colour saturation. Now, since you are saving the RAW file as well, or just the RAW file, open it with your conversion software. I will use Photoshop in my examples as it is just one less program for me to open, but you can use either another third party program or the one that was supplied on disc when you purchased your camera.

With the RAW conversion window open, reset the camera RAW defaults or reset your converter back to the factory base settings. This will remove any 'remembered' adjustments from previous conversions. It will be the best neutral setting to start with. Do not be alarmed if your colours go all whacko. You can now use the adjustment sliders or the eye dropper tool to adjust the colour and exposure. Normally, a flash lit photo will look fairly close to what you would expect. Obviously the RAW converter is a very powerful tool and we could spend all day fiddling around, but we just want a basic conversion at this point. Open the file with your adjustments.



An overall saturation of +30 looks OK for this image but I felt that the cyan background was too strong, particularly as it was reflected off the turtles shell. Selecting the Cyan channel (A) I reduced the cyan saturation back to the original setting by applying -30% (B). I could reduce the intensity a little more by doing something similar with the Blue channel. Some of the shadow areas are also a bit heavy in red so I would use the History brush set to 20-50% Opacity to reduce the red saturation there, or use the Sponge tool set to Desaturate with the Flow option set to a similar amount.



My unidentified scorpionfish looked a bit flat in the reds, from what I remember of the animal. It was not a saturation problem as increasing the red saturation just made it worse. Selective Colour was the tool to use, targeting the Red channel (A) I fiddled with the colour sliders (B) to get a mix that gave me what I wanted. In this case the Black slider was also used, something that I would normally leave alone.

Colour saturation of your image, at this stage, will be moderate. If you go to View>Gamut Warning, which shows you the colours that will not print in CMYK in a magazine or newspaper, you will usually find that no areas are greyed out. Maybe some in a shot with a sun burst, but not a lot. The colours are all there, just not over saturated. Now open the Hue/Saturation dialogue box (Image > Adjustments > Hue/Saturation) and drag the Saturation slider across to the right. With my camera and set-up, I find that a setting somewhere between +20-30 gives me a nice punchy result. Sometimes I need more, sometimes less.

I find that for my taste, a level of, say, +30 makes a colourful image look just fine, but the cyan of the water can look too saturated while the other colours are spot on. So, select Cyan

from the drop down menu on the dialogue box and drag the Saturation slider back. At times, I drag it all the way back to "normal". In this case it would be -30. Every image is different, so play away until you get something that looks good to your eye.

If you are diving in dirty water, Green may need a little tweak as well, desaturating that colour channel a little may make all the difference. If you have mid water showing, go back to the Cyan channel. Drag the Hue slider a little to the right, maybe just +5 will do it. A greenish mid water colour can be nudged into blue with just a small adjustment. Or, everything looks just fine with a +20 Saturation adjustment but tweaking the Red channel to +30-40 can add that touch of cinnamon to your coffee.

Speaking of Red, divers faces can sometimes look a little green or too pink. Or a red area looks not quite how you want it. Saturating makes it look worse. You can try Image > Adjustments > Selective Color. In the dialogue box that opens, choose Red as the colour channel and try moving the Cyan and/or Magenta sliders. That will change the base colour and will most probably fix your dilemma.

Remember, we are not taking a pig's ear and turning it into a silk purse. A badly lit, back scatter bedevilled, out of focus photo is not going to be transformed into a gold medal winner. It will still look like a bad photo, no matter what magic NASA and the guys at Adobe have been able to provide for you.

The sharpening filters are another tool that, when applied sparingly, can make your image jump out. All digital image files, no matter how produced (by a digital camera or a scanner creating a file from a piece of film) will produce a file that needs sharpening applied. What you must realise is the sharpening is applied to the file, not the photograph. What I mean by this is that an out of focus photograph is not "sharpened". The sharpening filters add an area of contrast between dark and light areas. The result is to make a digital image file appear sharper. For example, a grey shark on a blue water background will have a white border placed around the shark to make it stand out from the background, making it appear sharper. The more sharpening is applied the greater the effect. However, overdoing it will make electronic noise, texture and already sharp areas, become over emphasised, providing you with an image that is quite jarring to the eyes.

In Photoshop and Elements, the filter you want to use is the Unsharp Mask filter (Filter > Sharpen > Unsharp Mask). First, double click the zoom tool to enlarge your image to 100% on the screen. This is always the best setting to apply the filter, even though you can only see part of the image. If you wish, scroll around to find something, such as the eye of your subject or other important area, and have that in the middle of your screen. Open the Unsharp Mask dialogue box. You can scroll the preview



My seahorse portrait was shot with a cheap generic lens, giving me cheap generic sharpness (A) when viewed at 100% zoom. Applying some sharpening (B) to the overall image made up for this, at least to some extent, providing me with a much sharper image (C). Using a better quality lens would have meant using less sharpening to get a smoother result.

window by placing your cursor on it and dragging. Set the Threshold to "0" and Radius to "1.0" then drag the Amount back and forth until you see the result you want. A small file will need less, a large file will need more. For example, a 600-700 pixel wide image intended for a web site or email use will get away with 70-120% while an A4 sized print may need double that.

While I did say that this filter does not effect the camera focus it does have a minor effect. For example, if you have a lens that is less than optimal, as long as the subject is in focus, this filter will actually provide you with a result similar to a better quality lens. You just have to add a little more sharpening.

Kelvin Aitken is a Melbourne-based professional photographer and diver passionate about the big blue and the big sea creatures to be found out there. He's dived from the Arctic to the extremes of the South Pacific and if there's a new marine dive adventure to be experienced or invented,



he's always the first to put up his hand. He's also dived the southeastern Australian continental shelf and photographed shark species nobody knew would be found out there. Kelvin is a BBC Wildlife Photographer of the Year marine category winner

and his unique work is on www.marinethemes.com

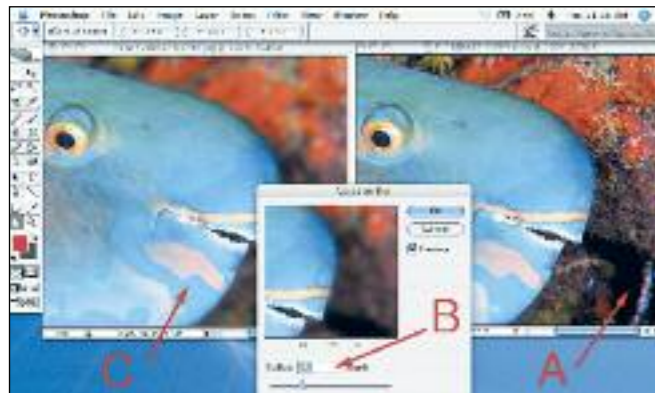
digital photography

Only apply Unsharp Masking as a final step and only once. Doing it twice will really bring out the nasties in your photo, emphasising digital artefacts and making your image much less satisfying. There are many third party filters that you can buy which purport to provide a better result. You can try them if you wish but under normal conditions (i.e. not creating a 6m long banner for the local dive expo) the supplied filter will do a pretty good job. Some suggest changing from RGB to LAB colour (Image > Mode > Lab Color) then sharpening the Lightness Channel (to see your Channel palette, go to Window > Channels) then reverting back to RGB. But, again, I don't find a huge difference.

Some recommend, when enlarging images beyond the maximum provided by your camera, that you enlarge in small, say 10%, steps while applying a small amount of sharpening at each step. I have yet to see a major difference between just one enlargement step and then applying a single sharpening action. But you are welcome to try and compare the results. I would tend to put the money spent on these third party filters towards a better lens and/or camera. I have had better sharpening results using the Nik Sharpener Pro when working with very large (3m plus) files for display print use.

One final sharpening 'trick' you can try is selective sharpening. If one area of your image works best with, say 220%, but that makes the rest of the image look like a late night TV test pattern, try selecting the area you want to sharpen, add the sharpening then select the opposite area (Select > Inverse) and apply a lesser amount, say 50%, to that area.

When playing around with the Filters menu, you may find that some filters are greyed out or unavailable. This is usually the case if you have opened your file in 16 bit as many filters, at this time, will only work with 8 bit files. This is more of an issue with older versions of Photoshop. Converting to 8 bit after doing your major colour and exposure adjustments will fix the problem. Also, working with a monochrome or black and white image may limit you as well.



At times you may find your background a little distracting (A). I selected the background then applied the Gaussian Blur filter set to 5 pixels (B) giving me a result that I was happy with (C).

The new Dust and Scratches filter (Filter > Noise > Dust and Scratches) is another very useful tool. While careful lighting will eliminate back scatter, it will not eliminate the fact that there are suspended particles in the water. If you don't like the fact that on a particular rough day, while out photographing Grey Nurse Sharks, there is a distracting array of specks in the water then this filter will help. Select the open water area then apply this filter. I would tend to use this only in heavily speckled water. For small amounts I would use the clone tool or healing brush. A far superior filter is made by Polaroid which allows you to select either dark or light areas to remove. Install it in the Plug-ins folder then restart Photoshop. It will now be available under Filters > Polaroid > Dust & Scratch Removal. Oh, and the good news: it's totally free. Just the right price.

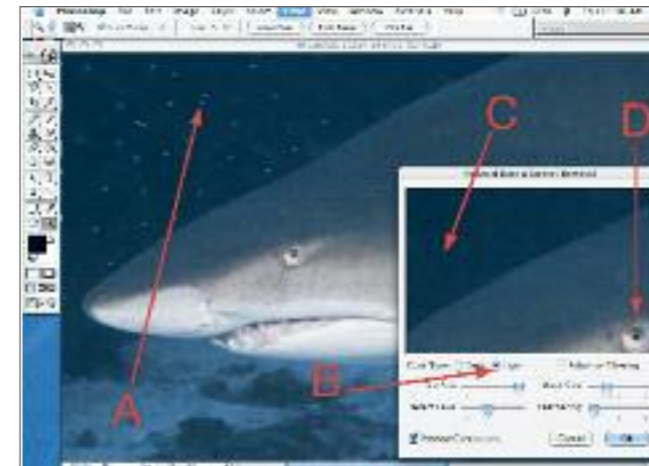
Both the Polaroid and Adobe filters will work particularly well on scanned files as faults show up as dark spots which both filters can target. I always use this filter with a selection, as just making a blanket application will remove texture and detail where you need it most and/or introduce digital artefacts in high contrast areas. Most scanner software now has dust and scratches built in to be used during the scanning process. I would be very wary in using the filter while scanning, as it will often remove detail you do not want targeted. Keep your photo adjusting in your image manipulation software and leave the scanning set-up with both Dust and Scratches and sharpening turned off.

Sometimes you don't want to sharpen an area, you want it to be less sharp. For example, you may want the background of an image to be less sharp to emphasise your main subject or an object in the foreground is attracting too much attention. In that case, the filter of choice will be Filters > Blur > Gaussian Blur. It is extremely simple to use, just move the Radius slider to the right to increase the amount of blur added into your selection. I would usually darken the area a touch as well, but that will vary depending on each situation.

Another nifty blur filter is Motion Blur. Great for applying to animals, divers or other items in the background. Or you can apply it to your foreground subject then use the history brush to remove the blur in areas that need to remain sharp, such as the eyes or face of a fish, shark or diver. The Motion Blur dialogue box allows you to adjust the amount and direction of the blur.

Nestled in among the many folders of the Filter menu is one item that you probably would not normally think to be useful. Under Filters > Texture > Grain you will find a filter that adds grain to your image. Where would this be used? If you have made a selection and added in a solid colour, or maybe a gradient, the area that has been filled will have no texture at all, making it appear out of sorts with the rest of the image. This is particularly the case when using fills or patches on scanned image files which retain the grain of the original transparency or negative. In dark areas you may have a low level of electronic noise which can be matched with the similar Noise filter (Filter > Noise > Add Noise).

One other filter, not in the Filter menu, can be found under Image > Adjustments > Photo Filter. Here a given photographic filter can



While I could light my shark so that no backscatter was present, my fins had stirred up the sand so that sharp, focused specks were included in the photo (A). I opened my Polaroid Dust and Scratches Removal plug-in and set the Dust Type to Light (B) to tackle the white sand specks. The preview window shows a fantastic quick result (C) though, if you look carefully (D), you will see that applying the filter to the entire image removed highlight detail that outlined the shark's eye. Selecting the background or the patch of sand specks would eliminate that problem.

be applied to an entire image or selected area. This would have the same effect as having that filter screwed into the front of your lens. In the dialogue box there is even an Underwater filter which adds a cyan cast to your photo. I almost never use these filters, preferring to use my colour adjustment methods, but they do have their uses in applying a complex colour adjustment with a simple click, which can then be faded back using the Edit menu immediately after application.

You can fill many a rainy afternoon exploring the multitude of filters. Under the Filter > Artistic category can be found some interesting alternatives to straight image presentation. Watercolor and Paint Daubs, while radical in effect, can transform a "blah" image into something much more interesting.

No matter what you are using, try to keep your changes subtle. Serving up an over saturated, over sharpened, over produced mess will not do you any favours. Extreme application may work at times, such as when using some of the Artistic filters, but generally a spoon full of sugar and a dash of cinnamon is all you need to make that coffee taste great.

> LINKS

<http://av.adobe.com/russellbrown/AdvancedSharpening.mov>
<http://av.adobe.com/russellbrown/SmartSharpenSM.mov>
<http://www.5min.com/Video/How-to-Use-the-Motion-Blur-Filter---Adobe-Photoshop-165849611>
<http://www.rnel.net/tutorial/Photoshop/13971>