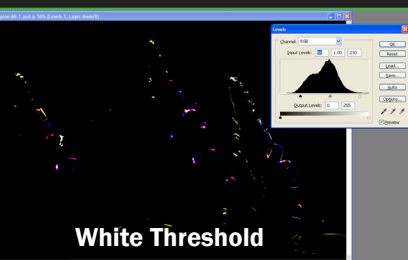
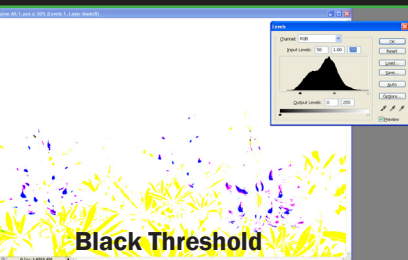


Technique of the Month



Blacks, whites and midtones are critical to the tonality and color of any photo. All should be checked if you want the best photos. With practice, this can be done very quickly. You can also set up a Photoshop Action to start the process even faster.



Blacks, Whites & Midtones

Dark areas in a photograph have a huge effect on color and tonality in the final use of the image, whether a print, used on the printed page or in a slide show. Weak shadows and poor blacks can be a serious problem with digital images, and will often frustrate photographers used to solid blacks from film. Balancing the correct blacks with the right whites and midtones is also important in finishing the image.

There are many reasons why a digital image might not have the proper blacks and whites: for example, image flare and atmospheric effects; and some cameras don't capture a solid black. This can be misleading; even pros

have been known to use Hue/Saturation to then correct for color when, in fact, the color needs to be first adjusted by setting the blacks.

Consistently, I find that digital photographers (from pros to photo enthusiasts) have weaker color than they need to because blacks are not set properly in the image. A caution, though: Some scenes, such as a foggy landscape, should not have strong blacks.

The solution is to set your blacks in Levels (Photoshop: Image> Adjustments>Levels) by checking the black threshold. Do this by holding down the Alt (Windows) or Option (Mac) key as you move the left, black slider in Levels. This gives you a threshold screen

that shows exactly what is black (colors are maxed out areas of color channels).

You can use the same technique in Photoshop Elements and Photoshop Lightroom, though the adjustment is called Shadow and not Levels).

A note: strong tonal adjustments to an image in Photoshop can have an exaggerated effect on colors. You have to decide if this is good or bad for your image. For many nature photographers, that exaggerated effect mimics the old Velvia film and they prefer it.

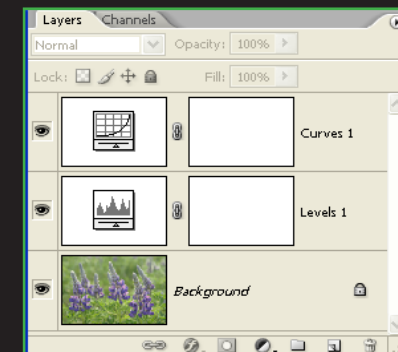
Just setting blacks, however, will first give you simply a dark photo. Usually you must check whites (using the same technique with

the right, white slider in Levels or exposure in Lightroom or Elements) and midtones (Curves is best, but you can use the middle slider of Levels or the Brightness slider of Camera Raw).

Setting of Blacks is Very Subjective

You need to decide what your photograph needs. Try different approaches to the blacks and see how the image changes. As blacks get stronger, the photo will get darker and will need some midtone adjustment (use the middle gray slider in Levels, or better, Curves).

Learn to Use Adjustment Layers



It is worth learning to use adjustment layers for all of the adjustments described here, rather than simply adjusting the photo pixels directly. The adjustments work the same, but you control them better with layers because you can adjust and readjust as needed without any quality issues, plus you can limit the adjustments on and off parts of a photo with the use of the associated layer masks.



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