



One of the great challenges for any nature photographer is to use photographic tools, such as lens, filter, film, flash and digital camera choices, to control the photographic process so that you can interpret the world true to how you saw the scene. Perhaps an even greater challenge, though, is to use tools with discretion and craft—in other words, use that lens choice in a way that enhances the subject, the filter so that its use doesn't overpower the subject, the film so colors aren't garish and the flash so it doesn't look alien.

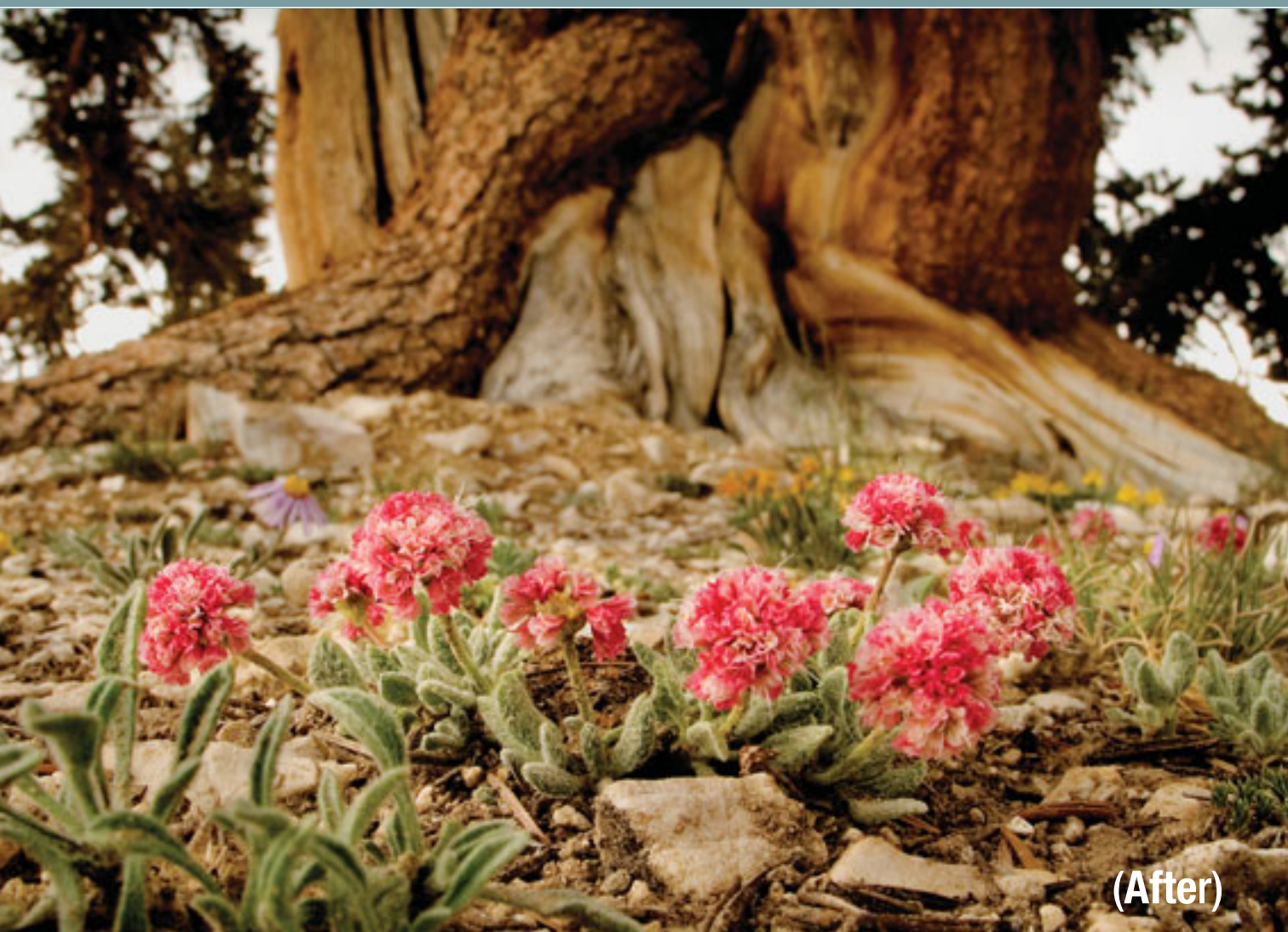
On these pages, you'll see an approach to using Photoshop that applies that craft to the digital darkroom, inspired by the great darkroom workers such as Ansel Adams. This is based on the new book *Outdoor Photographer Landscape and Nature Photography with Photoshop CS2* (which includes a chapter about using Adams' disciplined approach in Photoshop). On the *Outdoor Photographer Website*, www.outdoorphotographer.com, you'll find this article with larger images and more screenshots. Also, you can download the photo and try these things yourself.

Craft &

[One Step At A Time]

I believe in working an image one step, one layer at a time. This has a lot of advantages to both the photographer and the photograph compared to trying to do multiple adjustments at once. You'll see that here; plus, this shows a distinct workflow for working on an image:

- ▶ You can see exactly how each adjustment affects the overall image by turning its layer on and off
- ▶ You can easily go back and analyze your steps and find where certain adjustments did well or poorly
- ▶ You can optimize specific parts of a photo easier and more effectively
- ▶ Isolating adjustments also allows you to more easily go back and make corrections



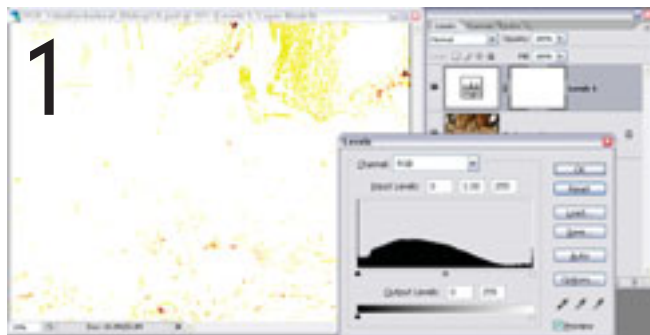
Control In Photoshop

[Evaluating The Photo]

This miniature landscape is from the Ancient Bristlecone Pine Forest in the Inyo Mountains east of Bishop, Calif. The little cushion buckwheat flowers are just a few inches tall. While the photo at this point has a strong feeling of place and setting, it doesn't have the emphasis that I saw when looking at the flowers. I could have used flash to brighten the flowers and make the background dark, but I didn't feel that would look very natural.

[First Steps]

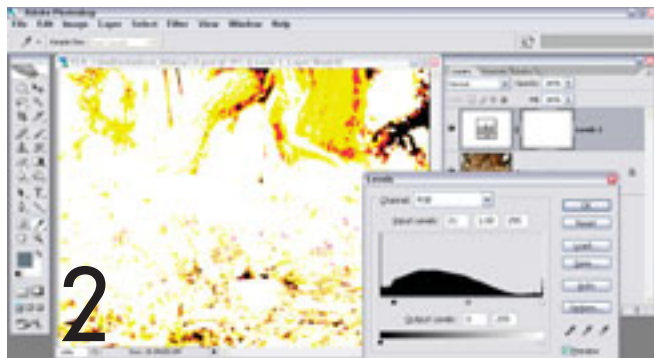
The first thing to do is set black and white points. These have a great effect on the contrast and color of the image. I



use Levels with the threshold screens (press Alt/Option while moving the black or white sliders) to see where the blacks and

whites appear in the photo. In this image, I could use the black slider more aggressively, similar to the way Fujichrome Velvia affects dark areas and contrast.

1 This shows the black threshold of Levels without any changes. This image has a good exposure and blacks are just starting to appear.



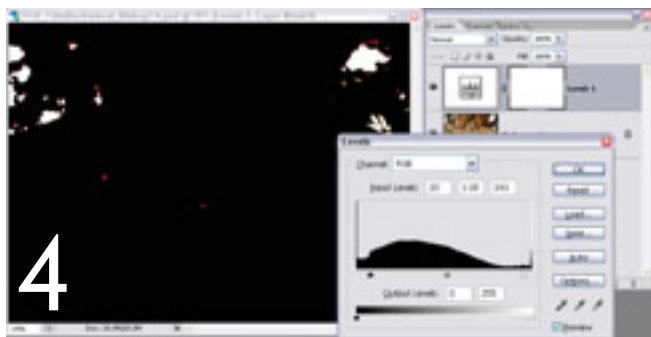
2 The black slider of Levels has been used more aggressively. You can see the blacks strongly appearing in the branches at the right.



Before you can make a complete evaluation, you need to set whites. This is very subjective, and you have to decide what's important in the photo. You may find, as seen in this image, that the photo would be better served with a brightening of the whites, which means the sky gets a little washed out in places. That makes the highlights livelier.



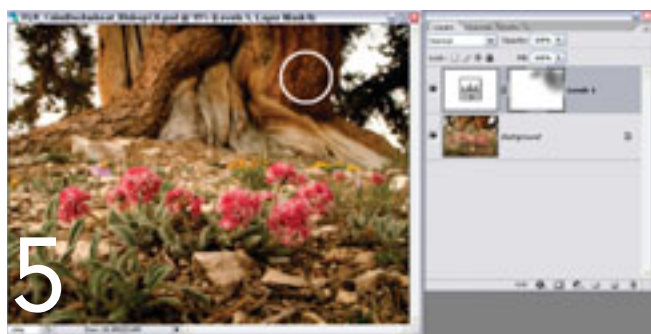
3 The unadjusted whites clip (lose detail) in the sky.



4 This shows a more aggressive change of the white slider. The sky is mostly clipped, and some bright details are appearing below.



In this case, I liked the blacks in the lower portion of the photo, but felt the darkness at the right side of the tree looked heavy. I used the layer mask associated with the adjustment layer to tone down the adjustment (black painted into the mask removes the effect, white brings it back).



5 The adjustment is toned down by painting black with a low opacity in that area (the circle is the brush showing its size).

[Midtones]

Once black and white were set, I worked to make the overall image brighter or darker by adjusting midtones. My preference is to start with a simple use of Curves, although you can work midtones with the middle slider of Levels, too.

I made an overall lightening move with Curves, watching what was happening to the flowers. I thought that the dark areas could be opened a little. I added a new, raised point at the lower part of the curve to open the dark areas, but found that made the brighter areas too bright. I moved the higher point (by clicking and dragging) back toward the center to compensate.

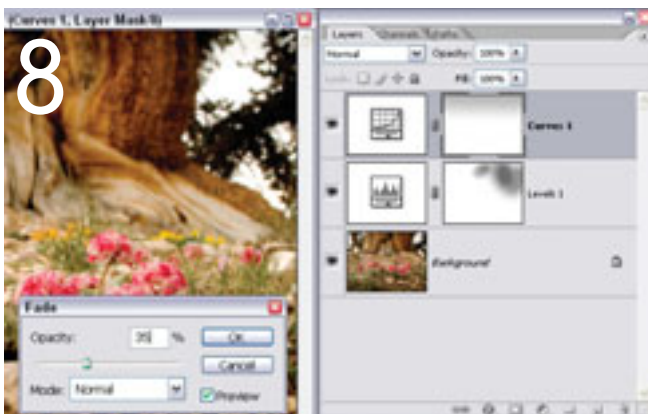


6 Curves blends its changes from maximum (at the set point) to none at the ends.



7 A gradient in the layer mask limits the curve's effect on the image.

This adjustment made the top of the frame too light. I used a Gradient in the layer mask to remove the effect of the mid-tone change up there. It seemed to be too much, however, so I relied on the Fade control (Edit > Fade tool) to fade the gradient down to about 35%.



8 You have to use the Fade control immediately after doing any adjustment to the image, but it lets you fade whatever you just did.

At this point, several things have been changed, yet because I worked with Adjustment layers and layer masks, this work happened very fast. Sometimes there's the idea that using Photoshop can take a long time. Mostly, you can work quickly by using the procedure described here.

[Naming Layers]

Because my first two layers are almost always Levels (for blacks and whites) and Curves (for midtones), I don't always name them. As the layers add up, however, I name them so I can keep track of all the layers as they increase in number. In CS2, you simply double-click the layer name to rename it.

[Color Work]

At this point, the photo looked much more interesting and closer to my original vision. I wanted to enliven the color of the flowers and leaves a little without making them look garish (or overadjusting the whole photo). I started with a Hue/Saturation adjustment layer. I had no need to do an overall adjustment, so I went right to the individual colors (click on the Master choice for a dropdown menu) and favored red first, then green.

This could be done in two separate layers if the colors were close (either in actual hue or proximity) and needed more isolated control. Notice that I adjusted the hue and saturation. I happen to know that the camera I used for this shot tends to make greens a little more yellow than they really are in life, so I compensated for that here.



9 Hue/Saturation is now set to favor the red flowers in the image.



10 Here, the green leaves are being adjusted. The actual color listed says "Yellows 2." For some reason, Photoshop designers narrowly limit what they call green and will rename your choice Yellows 2 (even though in color theory, yellow is quickly degraded to orange or green, but green is considered a wider range color).

Although you limit adjustments to certain colors with Hue/Saturation, parts of the whole image are affected. I turned off the layer's effects by filling the mask with black, then I painted in the mask with white where the flowers and leaves were.

Details

Life At Altitude These cushion buckwheat plants were photographed at about 12,000 feet in the open, dolomite rock landscape of the Ancient Bristlecone Pine Forest in California. There's little protection from wind and cold or sun and heat in this rocky soil—even the bristlecones struggle in these conditions. But small plants like these have adapted. Their stature makes them less susceptible to drying winds, while hair on the leaves minimizes evaporation from wind and heat from high-altitude summer sun. They must flower and produce seed quickly once the snow melts in late spring, finishing before early fall cold and snows.



11 The Hue/Saturation adjustments are hidden by filling the layer mask with black.



12 The Hue/Saturation adjustments are then revealed by painting over areas with white in the layer mask.

You may notice something interesting and important going on with the photo now. Adding, but limiting the color saturation change to the buckwheat flowers and plants has given the photo more depth because the color has come forward. Saturated colors will always look like they're in front of less saturated colors and will increase or decrease the depth of a photo. In addition, the flowers are beginning to become more dominant in the photograph, coming closer to the way I first saw the flowers and their environment.

[Defining Tonalities]

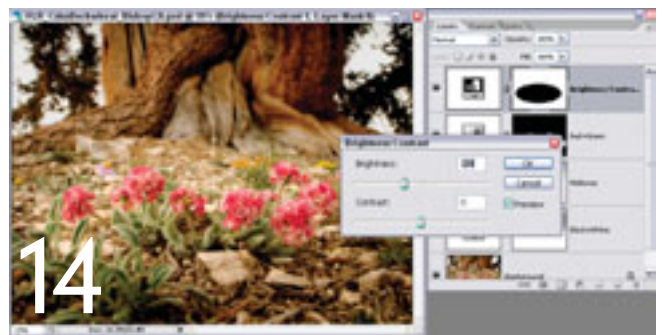
Now is the time to start better defining the photo in terms of tonalities so that they support the original vision of the scene as visualized, as Ansel Adams referred to it. I wanted to keep the area around the flowers at the adjusted tonalities and color, while bringing down the rest of the image at least slightly in tone in order to visually emphasize the flowers.

Since the area around the flowers was pretty well defined, I used the Elliptical Marquee (selection) tool to select the area around the flowers. Since I wanted to darken everything except the flowers, I inverted the selection (Select > Inverse).



13 All of the photo except the flowers has been selected.

I opened a Brightness/Contrast layer and immediately got a layer mask based on the selection. It's at this point sharp-edged, but this is a quick and easy way to get started. I used a moderate amount of darkening by moving Brightness to the left about 25 points. (Note: Everyone tells you not to use Brightness/Contrast, which is good advice for overall adjustments. For this darkening use, the tool's capabilities and limitations are an advantage.)



14 Opening an adjustment layer after making a selection creates a layer mask based on the selection.

To blend the edges of the layer mask, I used Gaussian Blur (Filter > Blur > Gaussian Blur). This is a very controllable blur for making the mask blend into the image.



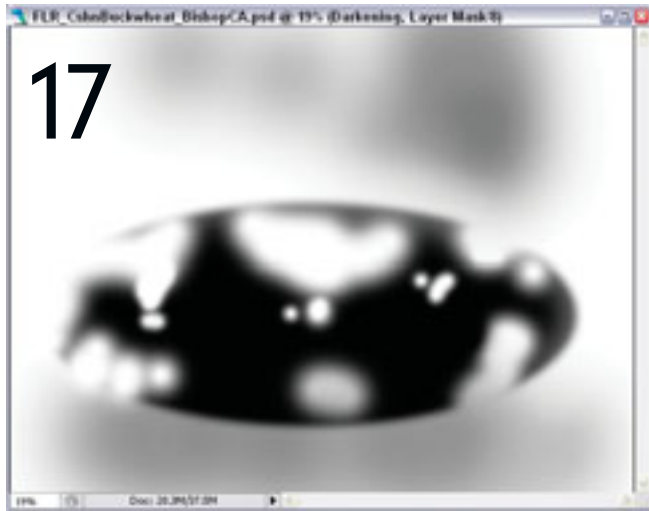
15 Gaussian Blur is applied to the layer mask until it blends in.

This tonal adjustment, the elliptical selection, only gave me an approximation of what was really needed. The light stones behind the flowers were a bit too bright for proper balance, the dark part of the foreground was a little too dark, and the tree was a bit dark as well. I used the layer mask again, painting in white over the stones (bringing in the darkening effect), then a reduced-opacity black (change the brush opacity) over the foreground and background.



16

16 Additional painting on the layer mask refines the adjustment so it only applies to the areas that need it.



17

17 This shows the layer mask itself that features the work done on adjusting this darkening layer. This screen can be turned on and off by Alt/Option clicking the layer mask.

[Reexamining The Photo]

The changes made to balance and adjust a photo can affect the overall composition and how you now perceive your subject. In this case, I wondered if I could darken things around the flowers to make them stand out even more. I reopened the Brightness/Contrast control for the top layer and tried moving the slider to the left. The image certainly looked dramatic, but the change was a bit too strong for my tastes. It didn't look very natural. I tried other amounts, but none looked good to me.

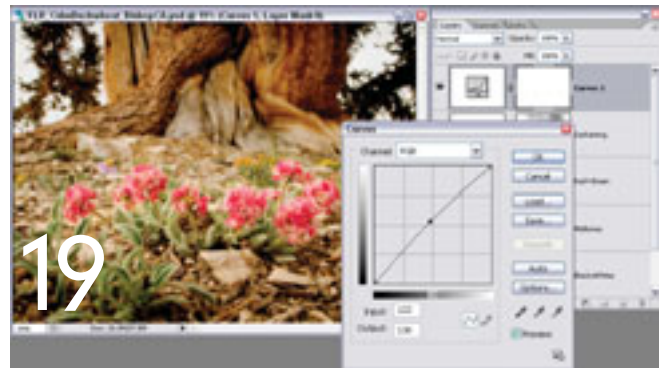


18

18 Too much darkening of the photo around the flowers looks unnatural.

So I wondered if darkening the area around the flowers

wasn't the problem, but maybe they were a little too dark. I added a Curves layer just for them, then filled the layer mask with black and painted back in the flowers' area. But I didn't like that either. This is such a great thing about Photoshop—these experiments take little time to do.



19

19 A Curves layer brightens the overall photo with all of its adjustments.



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20 The brightening is limited to the flowers by using the layer mask.

Next, I tried something else. I darkened the rock around the flowers by using a new Brightness/Contrast layer, filling the mask with black and painting in the darkness where needed. That made a big difference; the photo had come alive.



21

21 A new layer specifically darkened rocks around the flowers.

Now the foreground appeared to include more than was really needed for the composition. I cropped it as shown in the finished image. I liked what that did to the photo. It finished it off nicely.

OP