

How To Replace Sky or Background

Presented to Pilchuck Camera Club November 11, 2010 by Bill Dewey

These techniques work best with a solid color background, such as a clear sky.

Photoshop, using ‘Blend-If’ techniques and ‘Layer Masks’

Reference Links: a Google Search for “Blend If Photoshop” finds many good articles such as:

<http://www.adobepress.com/articles/article.asp?p=686520>

<http://www.graphics.com/modules.php?name=Sections&op=viewarticle&artid=572>

Starting with images of the same dimensions makes the copying and creation of layers much easier. The two images in this demonstration have been sized identically. The first image, Orig_D015727.jpg is the base image with a boring solid blue sky, no clouds. The second image, SkyClouds_D020565finished.tif, is the image of an empty sky with clouds. The plan is to replace the boring sky in the original image with a nice sky containing fluffy clouds.

1. Open the two files in Photoshop
2. Drag the Sky image onto the Orig image, the Osprey will disappear
3. Double-click on the Lock Icon in the Layer Palette for the Background Layer to convert to a normal layer
4. Select the top layer in the stack, the Sky layer, right-click and select Blending Options
5. Be sure that the “Blend If” setting in the bottom dialog is set to “Gray”, we will be working with the “Underlying Layer” sliders as we want the bottom image to blend through
6. Alt-Click on the Black triangle to separate the two sliders, move the right half to the right. As you do you will see the darker parts of the image blending through
7. Do the same on the White triangle, moving the pieces of the triangle to the left
8. Continue until you are happy with “the look” You may notice that not all of the underlying image has come through, or that you lose too much of the Sky layer if so, follow on to Step 9, otherwise on to 12
9. Change the layer to a Reveal layer by choosing the Layer Mask-Reveal All option from the Layer menu. This will allow us to “Reveal” the underlying layer
10. Be sure you have the brush enabled, set to a size of your choosing and set the foreground color to black
11. Brush over the parts of your image that you want to “Reveal” until you are happy. If you “Reveal” too much, or in the wrong place, switch your foreground color to White and brush back over what you did not want to reveal
12. Flatten your image, save as needed

You can also just use the Layer Masks techniques to accomplish much the same; I find that Blend If makes it easier to have very smooth transitions. Most often I use a combination of the two. Here is a reference for using Layer Masks:

<http://photoshoptips.net/2006/07/25/layer-masks/>

Photoshop Elements 9, Gradients, Selections and Layer Masks

Three methods will be shown to create the same type of effect within Photoshop Elements. Elements does not include the Blend If option, but some workarounds do exist.

Layer Mask Technique

The first method is to utilize the same Layer Mask technique used above noted in the Photoshop section. This is the simplest method to use where Blend If is not available. Many, including me, find this easier than trying to do a Selection of your subject, especially if the subject has complex edges, such as hair and feathers.

1. Open both images
2. Copy the Sky image as a New Layer on the Orig image
3. On the new layer create a Reveal All Layer Mask, Layer->Layer Mask->Reveal All.
4. In order to make work easier, set the Opacity on the Sky layer down to something around 60% so you can see what you wish to expose
5. Be sure your foreground color is set to Black and that the Layer Mask thumbnail is active on the Sky layer
6. Select the Brush tool, set the size as appropriate and brush over your image until the parts you want are exposed

If you brush too far, select White as your foreground character which will expose the Sky layer again

Background Selection and Removal Technique

This technique uses Selection and background removal to replace a sky or background. When you use this technique the part that I find most difficult is in refining the selection around complex images. The full set of instructions is found here: <http://graphicssoft.about.com/od/pselements/ss/replacedullsky.htm>

Create Gradient Maps

This technique describes the creation and use of Gradient Maps to mimic the Blend If capabilities of Photoshop. While it is interesting, I find this the most difficult of the techniques to use. The tutorial can be found here: <http://retouchpro.com/tutorials/?m=show&id=111>

Note that this tutorial does not contain a full description of sky replacement, although it does show the method and use of the gradient map. This tutorial also contains a good write-up on the use of Blend If in Photoshop.