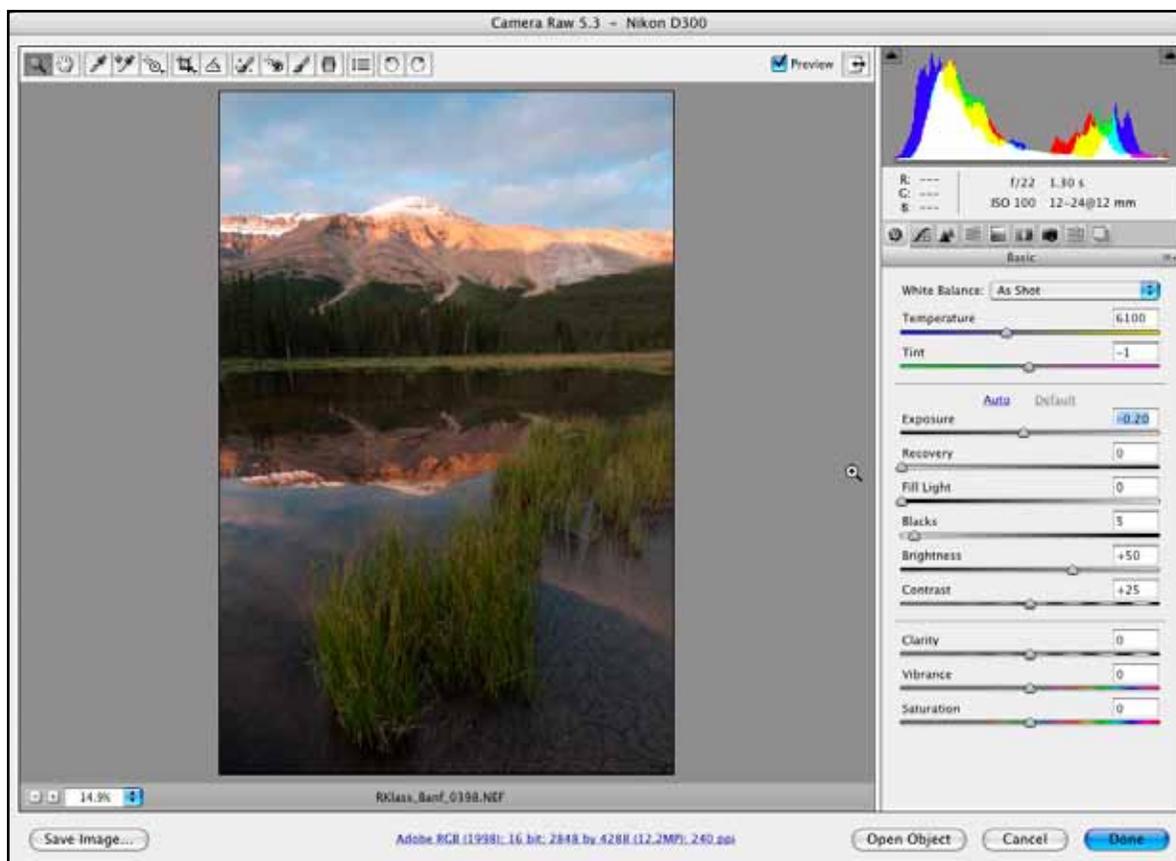# Camera Raw Techniques: The Adjustment Brush

by Photographer Raymond Klass

The adjustment brush is a relatively new tool available in Camera Raw through both Photoshop and Adobe Lightroom. Make sure that your version of Camera Raw is updated to take advantage of this new and exciting tool for making selective corrections to your image. If you're familiar with masking, this tool does a very similar job in a new, quick, and intuitive environment.

I've brought up an image from a recent trip to Banff National Park in Canada. The scene was shot at dusk, and a graduated neutral density filter was used to help bring both the sky and foreground into the camera's dynamic range. With some simple raw adjustments (I set the exposure to -0.2), the image has an good histogram, and detail in both the sky and foreground are preserved.

Exposure wise, it's not a bad image, but I think it would be a whole lot better if I could just darken the sky a bit, and lighten the grasses in the foreground a hair. The grasses were meant to be a first read - an initial place for the viewers eye to travel to. With them as dark as they are, and the sky so bright, I can't help but go straight to the sky, and I think with some selective adjustments this image could really stand out.

In order to use the adjustment brush, you'll need to select it from the menu at the top of the camera raw window. If you don't see the brush, make sure that your version of camera raw is updated - this tool is only available in the camera raw versions compatible with Adobe CS4 or later.
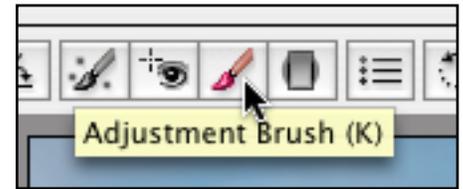
Selecting the Adjustment Brush changes the entire look of the right side of the Camera Raw window. You'll notice many of the sliders have similar names from those you've likely used for adjusting images previously.

The *Exposure, Brightness, Contrast, Saturation, Clarity, and Sharpness* sliders are analogous to what the these sliders do in the more familiar Basic window Camera Raw starts up in. The adjustment brush is a method for applying a change, such as increasing the exposure or contrast, in a selective manner.

In the basic tab, these tools apply their effect to the entire image, the adjustment brush allows you to decide which part of the image you would like to apply the effect to.

The *Color* choice is an option to impart either a warm or cool cast in a certain area. This makes the area you choose to affect more yellow, or more blue. You can access these color casts by clicking the + symbol for warmer, or the - button for cooler.

The *Size* slider refers to the size of the brush you'll be using to apply the effects. The larger the number, the larger the brush.

The *Feather* slider refers to the softness of the brush. I prefer to use a soft brush most of the time, as it hides selective adjustments well.

The *Flow* slider refers to how much effect the brush has as compared to its maximum (100). With a choice like 30, the brush only applies 30% of its affect with each stroke of the brush. This allows me to paint once over areas that need a slight adjustment, while painting several times over areas that need more adjustment.

The *Density* slider limits the effect of the brush to a certain percentage of its capability. I typically leave this at 100, and use a flow between 10 and 40 to allow me to affect some areas more than others.

The *Auto Mask* option is a fun feature that allows the tool to look at where you first click the brush, and try to select only similar areas to be effected. I've got this checked because I want first to affect the sky of the image. The sky being of a similar color and tone throughout, the brush should do a good job of discerning the area.

Lastly, the *Show Mask* feature allows you to see what areas the current adjustment is affecting. After painting, we'll turn this on to see how well the tool did at selecting the sky.
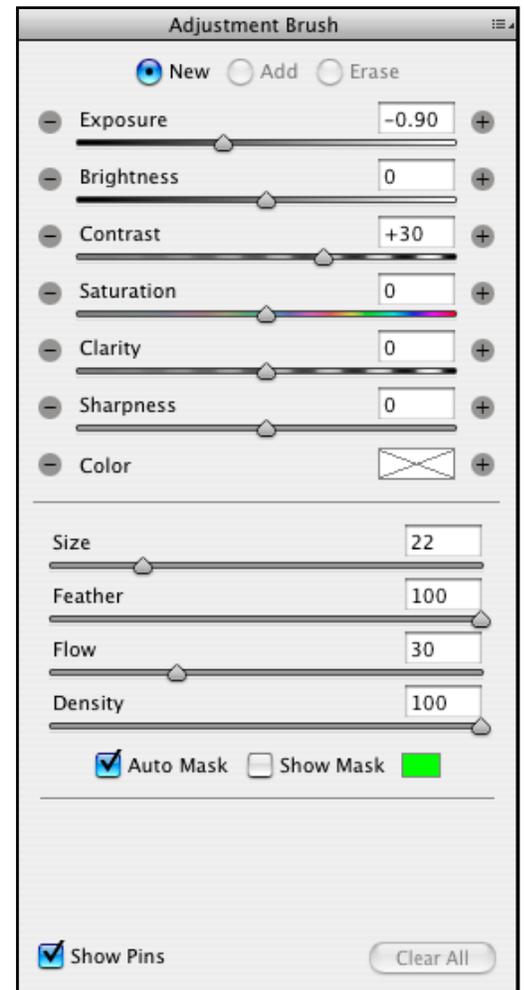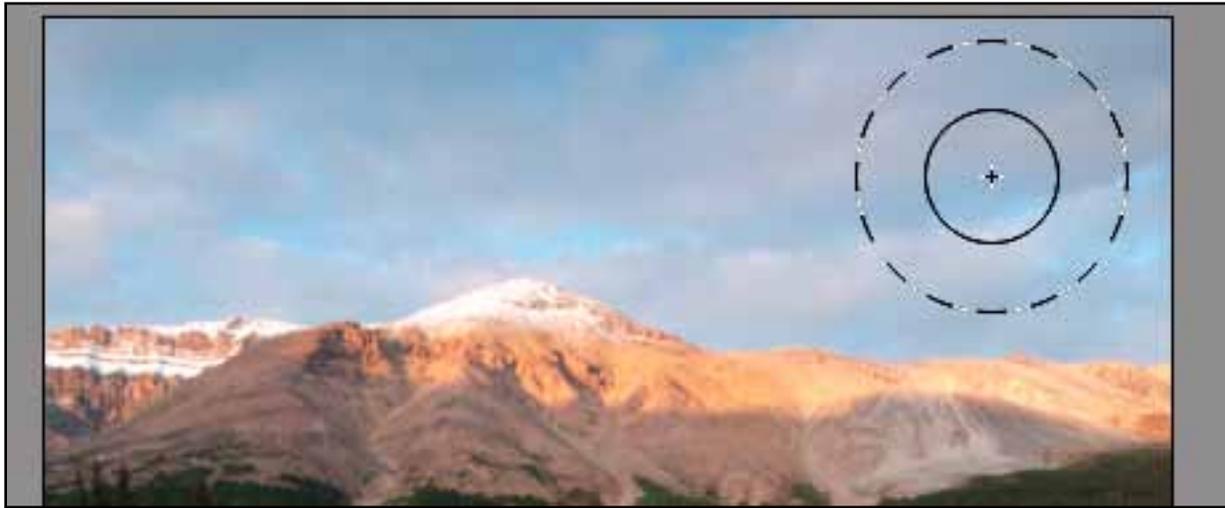
For the first adjustment, I want to make the sky a bit darker, and increase the contrast a little to make the clouds pop out from the blue of the sky some. I've adjusted the exposure to minus a stop or so, and the contrast to a starting point of plus 30. You will have the ability to change these settings after you make your selection and can see the effect. I typically start out with some general settings, and then plan on refining them later.

The brush looks a little different here than it does in Photoshop. The solid black ring represents the area the brush will be painting solidly. Remember that we set the *Feather* to 100, so the brush has a faded edge - the dotted ring indicates the end of the soft edge.

I've got *Auto Mask* checked, and I simply click in the plain open sky, and drag the brush throughout the sky. The tool recognizes which areas are similar, and includes them in the selection. It also sees areas like the mountain which are quite different, and doesn't include them in the selection. In this way I will only be affecting the sky with my adjustments.

Below is an image after the adjustments have been applied. The green circle in the upper right is called a pin, and represents the adjustment I just made. It won't print with the image, it is simply there as a representation, and allows me to return to the adjustment at a later time to fine tune my choices.
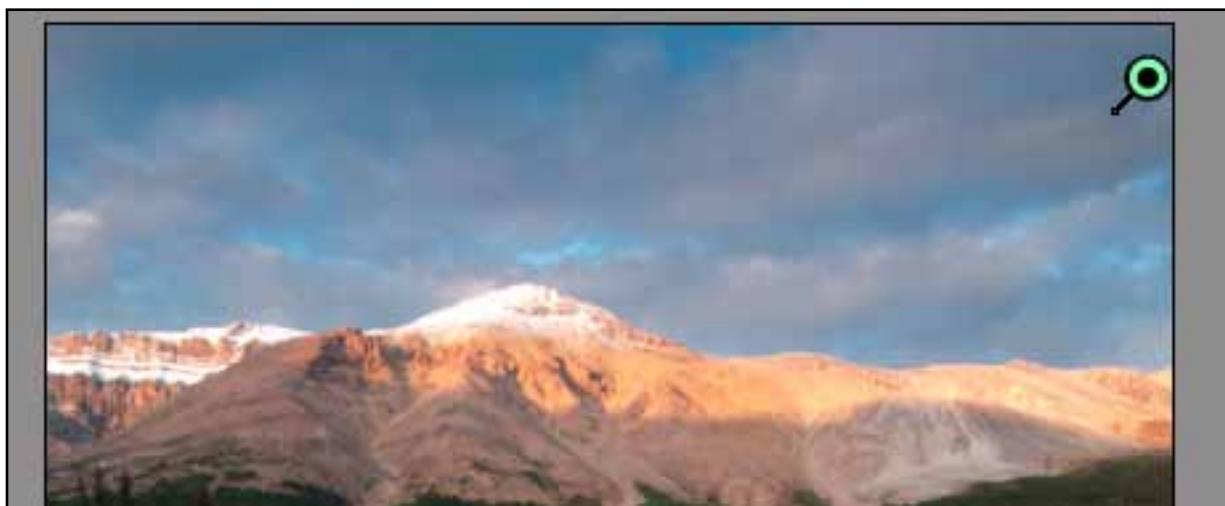
By clicking on the **Show Mask** option at the bottom of the right hand menu, we can see how good a job the adjustment brush did of selecting just the sky.
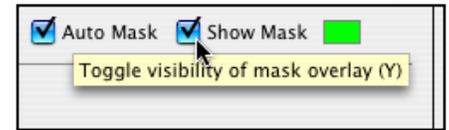

This turns any areas that are being affected a representative color. My color is set to green - the box to the right of the **Show Mask** button allows you to change this color, the default is often a red.

As you can see, the tool did a very good job of just selecting the areas that were sky, and not mountain, or trees, or anything else. Its a nice feature, as it allows me to quickly paint with a large brush the general area I want to affect. As long as the specific area is distinguishable enough, the program figures out the exact edges.

If necessary, you can paint additional areas to add to the selection, or even select the *remove* option to remove some of the areas that are currently part of the selection.
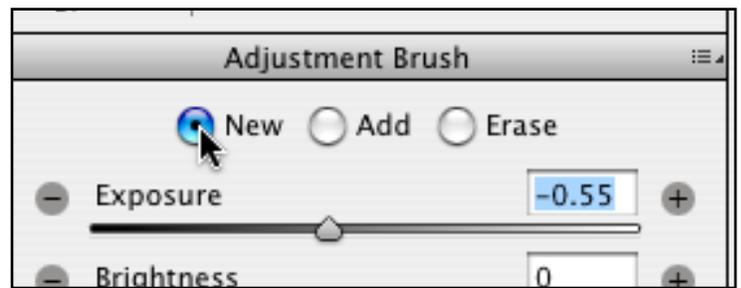
With the area pretty well set, I then return to my bar of sliders to the right and fine-tune the controls. Notice that your adjustments are only affecting the area selected by the brush. In this case, only the sky will be changed.

Once I've got the sky looking the way I want, it's time for me to work on the second goal I had for this image. The foreground is simply too dark and flat to have enough aesthetic weight to pull the viewers eye there. I want to make a second adjustment with the brush, this time for the foreground grasses.

At the top of the box to the right, I choose the **New** option, for a new adjustment. For the foreground grasses, I'm going to adjust the exposure to plus half a stop or so, and the contrast can remain at plus 30 to give it that extra pop. I'm also going to take off the option to **Auto Mask**, as the whole lake is really the same tone, and I just want to affect those foreground grasses.

This is where having a nice wide, feathered brush is good. Its diffuse edges hide the lightening effect, and it gives just a soft brightness to the area that highlights it, but doesn't jump out at the viewer as a manipulation.

I just stroke over the general area a couple of times, seeing the lightening happen, and reacting to which areas could use a little more. Remember that with the **Erase** option checked, you can eliminate parts of the mask, if you've gone too far. When I've got the mask where I want it, I fine tune my adjustment effect with the controls.
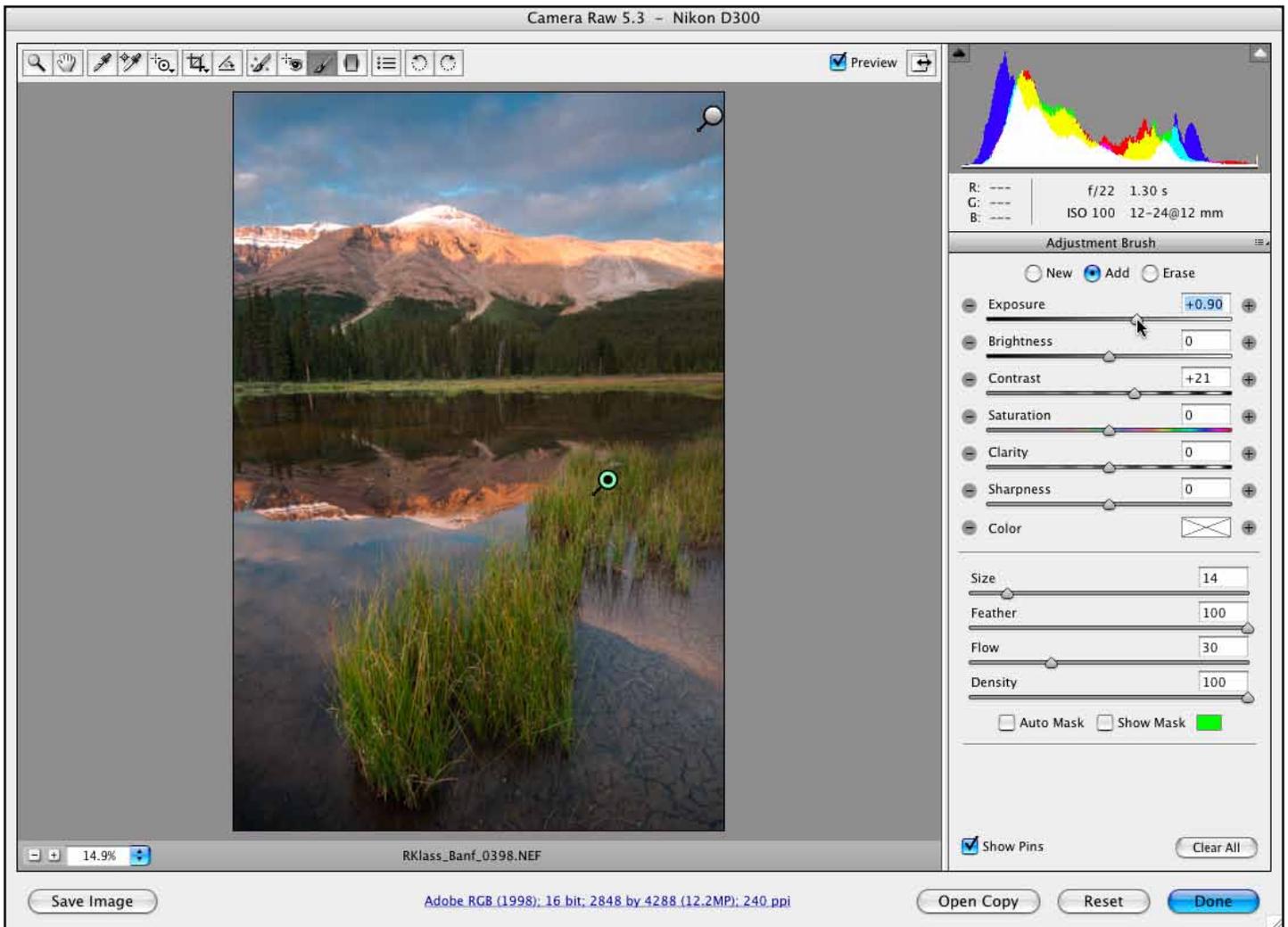
The pins created when you first click to adjust the image represent that particular adjustment. In the above image, the top pin represents the darkening of the sky, while the bottom pin represents the lightening of the grasses.
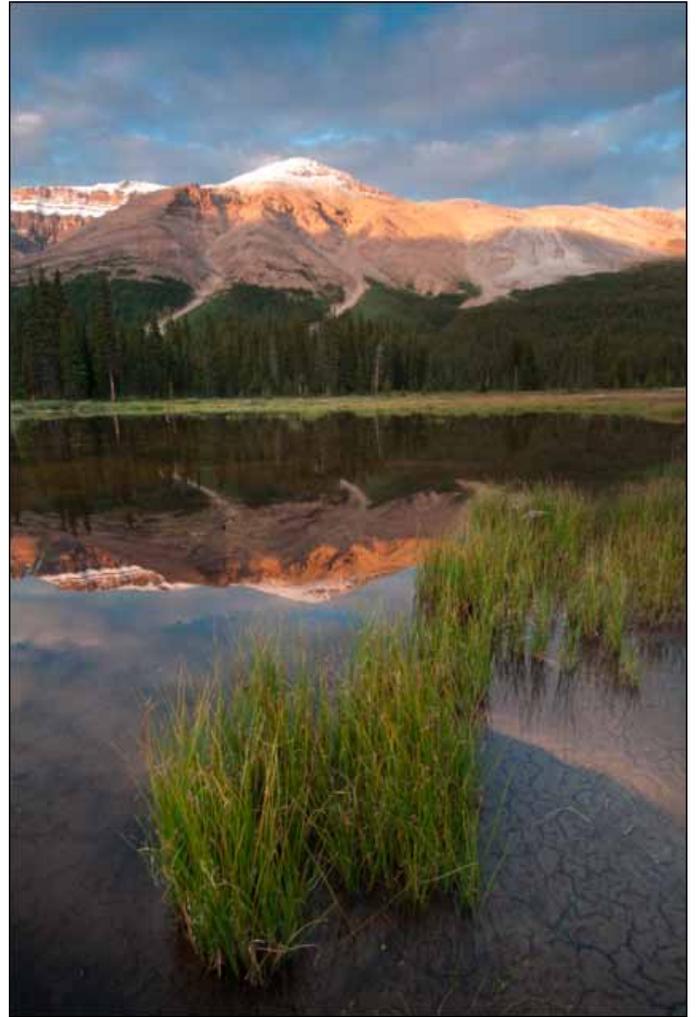
By clicking on a pin (it should light up green) you can revisit previous corrections. With the pin selected, you can use any of the sliders on the right side to adjust the area, paint further to add or erase parts, or use the *Delete* key on the keyboard to delete the adjustment entirely.

Just like the other corrections in Camera Raw, the adjustment brush is a non-destructive tool to edit and correct your image with. Its manipulations are saved under their representative pin, and can be revisited, edited, or deleted at any time.

The following page shows the before and after of the image. Notice where your eye is drawn in the two examples. The before leads the viewer first to the upper section of the sky which is the brightest. The second, corrected image, allows the viewer to begin at the now brighter and higher contrast grasses, and work their way up to the sky. Not only has the color and contrast become more effective, but aesthetically the viewer is taken through the image in the way I intended when I took the exposure.

Before

After