

From Levels to Curves

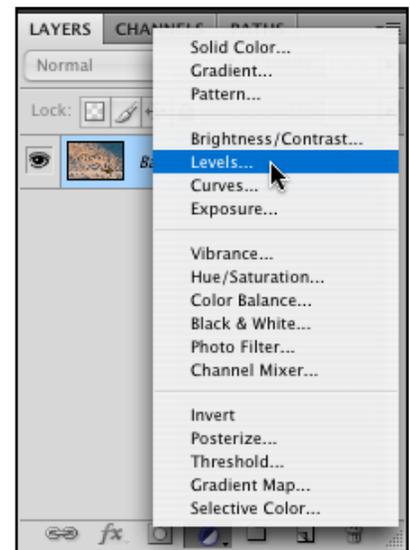
There seem to be few topics that can strike fear into digital photographers more than conquering Adobe Photoshop®'s **Curves** tool. There are also few tools that offer the power and control over your photograph that curves does. With the right approach, learning to use this fantastic tool is really a simple and straightforward exercise. This guide gives some tips and explanations for those who are already familiar with the **Levels** tool and would like to take the next step and learn **Curves**.



To start, I've brought up an image in Photoshop®. If you'll be starting with a RAW picture, you will want to process it with a RAW processing software like Adobe's Camera RAW, or Apple's Aperture before opening it. We'll be making some adjustments to the luminosity and contrast in this image first with **Levels**, and then again with **Curves**.

From an aesthetic perspective, this image is starting out alright, but it could use the highlight and shadow areas to be set better, and perhaps a little more contrast to give it that extra "Pop".

I will first begin by clicking the half-black half-white circle at the bottom of the layers palette to bring up my **Image Adjustment layers** menu. From here, I will select **Levels** to create a new **Levels Adjustment Layer**.

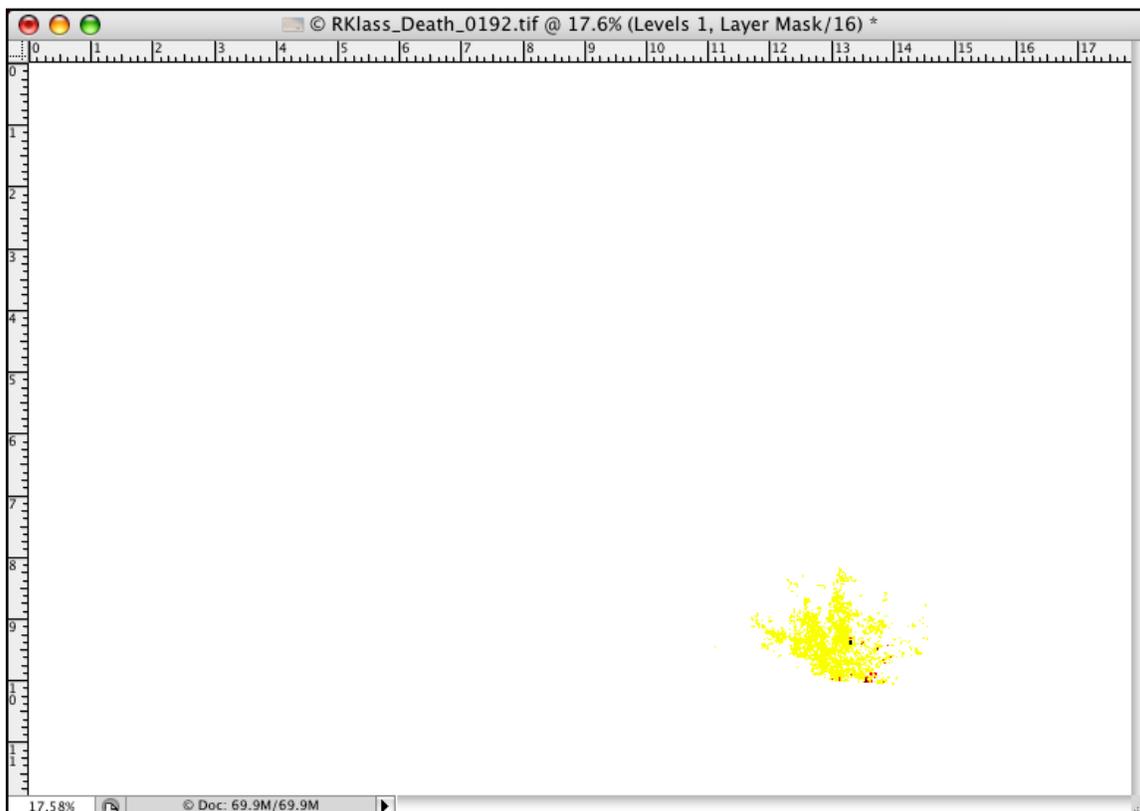
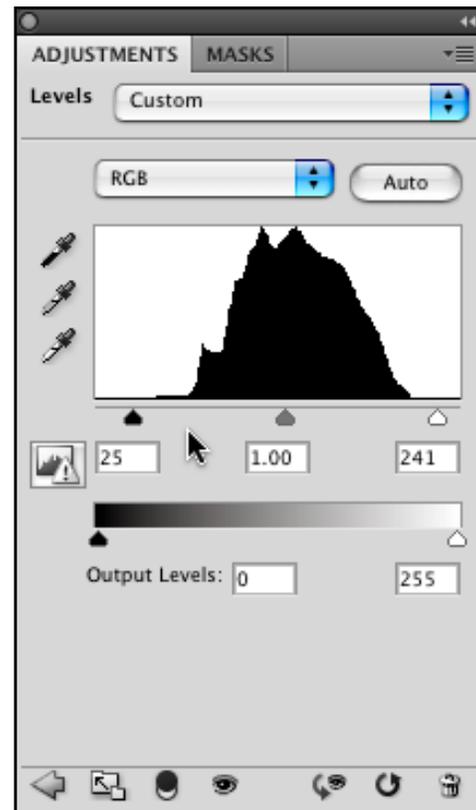


This brings up the **Levels** tool, and allows you to adjust the tonality of the image. Just as a reminder, we will be using the three triangles underneath the histogram to adjust our white, black, and middle tone points.

The left slider - the black one, sets the “black point” for the image. This means that as you are sliding it from left to right, it is setting the pixels to black directly above and to the left of its location on the histogram. Anything to the left of this slider will be pure black.

Typically the goal here is to have nice rich dark tones, without losing detail. This means we will need to set the slider so that the pixel information is dark, but not a detail-less black.

There is a trick here, if you hold down the **Option** key, while sliding the left, black slider, the image turns white, and shows you which areas if any, have blacks in them. For most images, you want just a hint of black, so use your slider so that there are just a few small areas showing. Just as I’ve done in the image below. Don’t worry, when you release the **Option** key, your image will come back in full color.



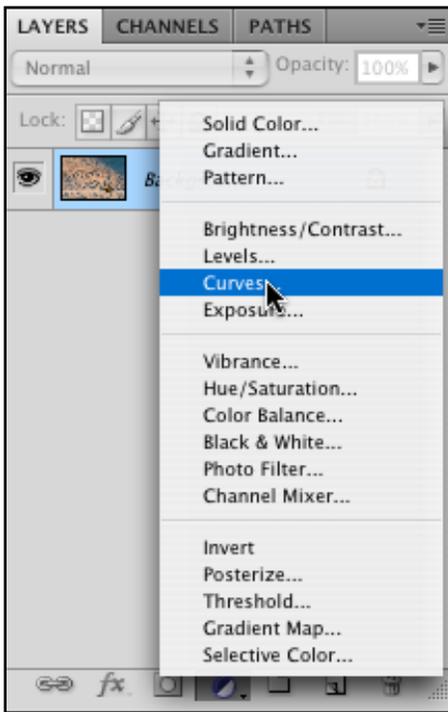
After you have finished with the left slider, we'll skip the middle, and go for the right slider next. This is the white slider. It sets the lightest point in the image, and anything to the right of this slider will be a pure white, so you want to set it so that just a small area of the image is actually pure white.



The *Option* trick also works here, though in this case, it turns the whole picture black, and areas begin to appear from the darkness. Here you notice that just a small portion of the picture is red - so I know there is a small area of the images that is very light, and detail in the image is preserved.

With the two end sliders adjusted, the middle slider can be used as a gross adjustment of the overall tonality of the image. Unlike the white or black slider, the middle gray slider affects the white and black objects the least, while affecting the overall feel more than anything else.

The control offered by *Curves* includes all of these adjustments we made in levels, and also includes a way to give the ripples in the sand more "Pop" by adding contrast specific to that tonal range.

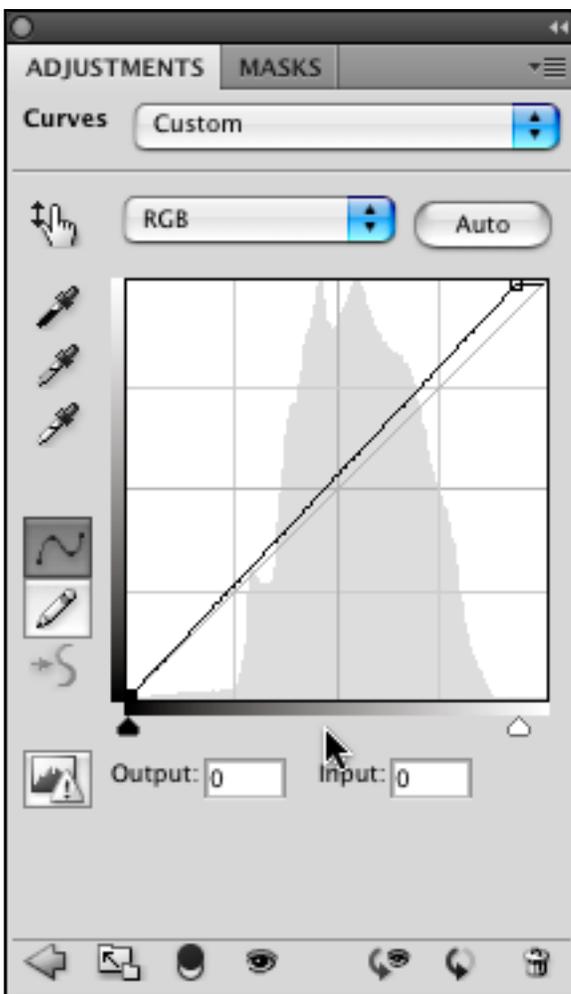


Now that we've made the adjustments using *Levels*, let's try the same changes using *Curves*. What's nice here is that the same theories and techniques apply.

The first step, is to click on the half-black, half-white circle at the bottom of the layers palette and then select *Curves*. This creates a new *Image Adjustment Layer* for the *Curves* adjustment.

There are some similarities between the *Curves* and *Levels* tools. First off, you'll notice that there is a histogram in the large window, and two familiar sliders underneath.

Adobe has eliminated the middle slider in *Curves*, because it is unnecessary with all the other adjustments that are possible.



The slider on the left, is still the black slider, and still works to set the black point in the picture. The same trick we used in the *Levels* dialogue also works here.

I hold down the *Option* key, and drag the slider to let Photoshop® show me when I am clipping information. I then repeat this step with the white slider, just as I did for the *Levels* tool.

With these two steps, we have set both the darkest and lightest points in the picture, and have achieved an overall look.

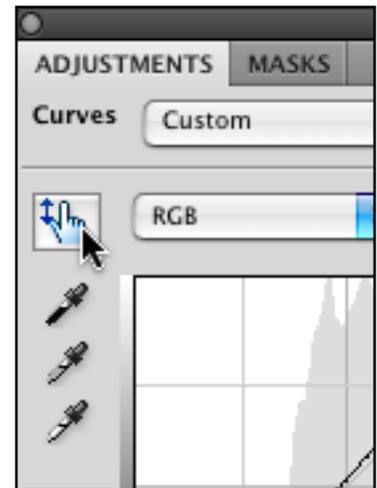
It's not time to take advantage of the extra options that using *Curves* allows. We're going to add a little more "Pop" to the sand ripples by adding extra contrast between the darkest sand, and the lightest sand. First, we'll select the curves hand adjustment tool.

This is located in the upper left hand side of the *Curves* palette.

This tool allows us to pick a spot on the image, then click and drag to place a point on the *Curve* at that particular tonality, and modify it's brightness.

The important thing to remember here is that we are going to achieve "Pop" by increasing contrast. That means making the lighter sections, lighter, and making the darker sections, darker.

Anytime you drag a point down or to the left, you are making it darker, and anytime you drag a point up or to the right, you are making that point lighter.



The first step in increasing the contrast is to identify the darkest area in the sand dunes that I want to affect with this contrast change. I then bring my mouse over there, click, and drag down to make this spot darker.

After I've done the dark part of the sand dunes, I release my mouse, and repeat these steps for the lightest area. Only this time, I drag up to make area lighter.



Effectively we have just increased the contrast and gave the image a little more "Pop". It's important to use this technique in moderation, as more contrast can enhance an image, but too much will make it look unnatural, unless that's what you're looking to achieve.

If you look at my finished curve to the right, you'll notice the subtle steep section - this is quite literally the area that Photoshop is increasing the contrast throughout. This targeted contrast adjustment is just one of the big advantages of using curves rather than levels.

