Improving your Image – Tom Oliver

Editor's Note: This article was published in the BirdLife Southern Queensland Photography Group Newsletter of March 2013, and is re-produced with their permission.

This Black-fronted Dotterel image submitted by Peter Crane created a great deal of interest from members, with Marj Webber, Rob Parker and Mike Thomsett submitting amended images and post-processing steps applied.

Photo by Peter Crane ©

As I've advised in earlier newsletters it helps to develop a plan for what you want to do with the image. Rob said that one of the problems with the unprocessed image is the distracting elements in the background (BG). The out-of-focus (OOF) front left branch and the white patch, just to the left of the bird, were the main offenders. I would also add the bright rock just above the bird's tail could also prove distracting, particularly if the image is cropped. There is also potential for "blown" highlights in the white neck feathers if not processed correctly. All three respondents did an excellent job with the post processing and their workflows were almost identical. Both Rob and Marj used Photoshop Elements for their post processing, whilst Mike used a combination of Photoshop and Lightroom. Rob provided a detailed list of steps taken during his workflow and these are shown below.

Black-fronted Dotterel Digital Workflow – Rob Parker

Step 1: Crop/resize to 1024x768, using the technique published in the December 2011 PhotoBOCA Newsletter. This gets rid of the deadwood completely.

Step 2: Select Enhance | Adjust Lighting | Levels. The histogram showed a gap at the black end, but adjusting that to about 8 darkened the image more, so left it at 0. Adjusting the mid-point to 1.15 lightened the background without affecting the colour tone on the bird, so set it at that value.

Step 3: The white distraction left of the birds head needed to be toned down so selected it with the Magic Wand tool (several clicks to ensure all selected). Feather the selection (by 6 pixels) so that changes will blend into rest of image. Enhance | Adjust Color | Color Variations, then just click Darken button (in section 3 of the dialog box) until happy with result.

Step 4: Same process used to darken light, out-of-focus rock behind the bird; this required less darkening to eliminate distraction problem.

Step 5: Use the Quick Select tool for in-focus rock in foreground and work from bottom-right to select all the rock. Select Filter | Blur | Gaussian Blur, then adjust radius value until happy with result (value selected was 1.4).

The final adjustment is to sharpen the image. I still have the rock selected, but I don't want to sharpen that - I've just blurred it! Therefore:

Step 6: Select | Inverse to select everything except the rock. Now, because the only in-focus thing in the selection is the bird, I don't need to select just the bird for sharpening - there's nothing else that will be sharpened to become a distraction.

Step 7: Select Enhance | Unsharp Mask then, with Preview checked so I can see result immediately for whole image, adjust sliders until happy with result - Amount 107, Radius 1.1, Threshold 3.

Finally, save the image:

Step 8: Select File | Save As, enter a new filename (since I don't want to destroy the original). In the JPEG options dialog, click Preview to get file size displayed, then reduce quality to get below 512K limit; keep as high as possible for best quality (value 11 for this image).

The amended images below were post processed by Rob Parker, Marj Webber, Mike Thomsett and Tom Oliver.

Amended by Rob Parker

Amended by Marj Webber

Amended by Mike Thomsett

Amended by Tom Oliver

It's interesting that all four members cropped and resized the image to produce a similar result. Two members left various BG materials in the frame, whilst the two other members chose to remove the BG distractions. I know the quality of a bird image is purely subjective to the person who captured the image. I'm also aware that some members may not agree with the options presented, so I look forward to their comments. Remember, bird photography is very subjective, so any of the images could be accepted as the correct way to go.