Tip: Photoshop Clone Tools – Glenn Pure

Sometimes nature doesn't cooperate. You have captured a bird in a great pose and excellent light. The image is sharp and well-exposed. It's a really exciting result – except for the fact that there's a twig running right behind the bird's head that is really interfering with the visual appeal of the shot. In this tip, I'm going to briefing outline the clone tools in Photoshop and Photoshop Elements that can fix problems like this. I'm not going to get into the ethical question here of whether a photo should be altered in this way.

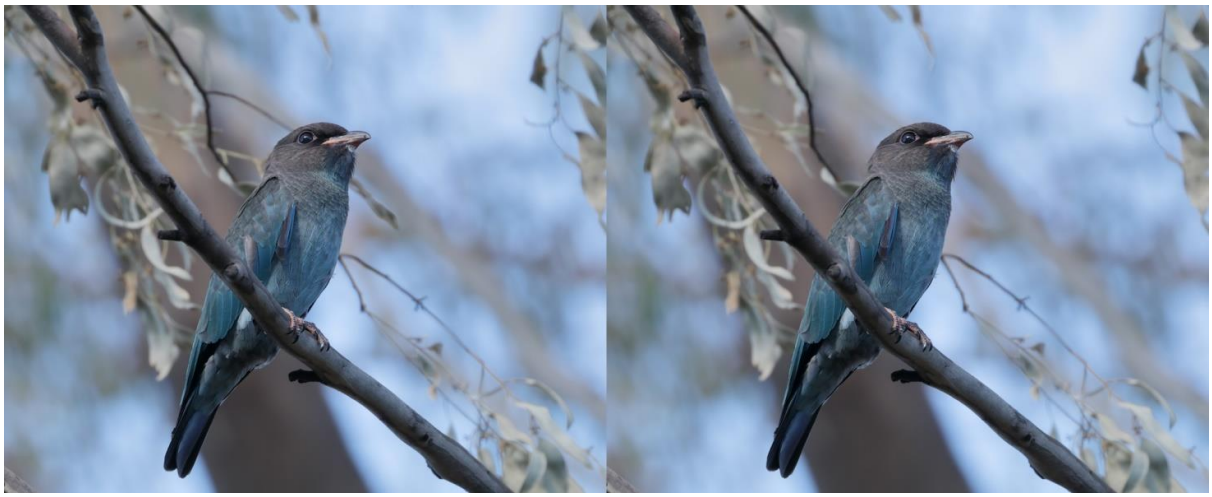

Figure 1. Left: A shot that can potentially be improved with a little cloning. Right: In this case, a couple of twigs behind the bird's head have been seamlessly cloned out.

Most of us know about the clone tool in Photoshop and Photoshop Elements. It's officially called the '**Clone Stamp**' tool and enables the user to easily and precisely copy pixels from one part of an image to another part to 'paint' over unwanted objects. But it's only useful if there is a suitable part of the image that you can clone from.

Figure 2. This is what happened when I tried using the clone tool to start removing one of the twigs. There was no matching part of the image to clone from so I picked an area that I thought was closest. Unfortunately, the match was just too poor and cloning produced an unacceptable result.

There is a lesser known tool in Photoshop and Photoshop Elements that can solve this problem. It's called the '**Healing Brush**' tool and it has a close relative called the '**Spot Healing Brush**' tool. The Healing Brush tool works almost identically to the Clone Stamp tool except that it copies the patterns from another part of the image but does not copy the colours and tones. Instead, it blends in with the colours and tones of the area you are painting over. The Spot Healing Brush is similar but doesn't rely on you selecting a source to use. Instead it simply copies colours, tones and patterns from nearby pixels around the area

being painted. The Spot Healing Brush is great for quickly removing spots and smaller blemishes.

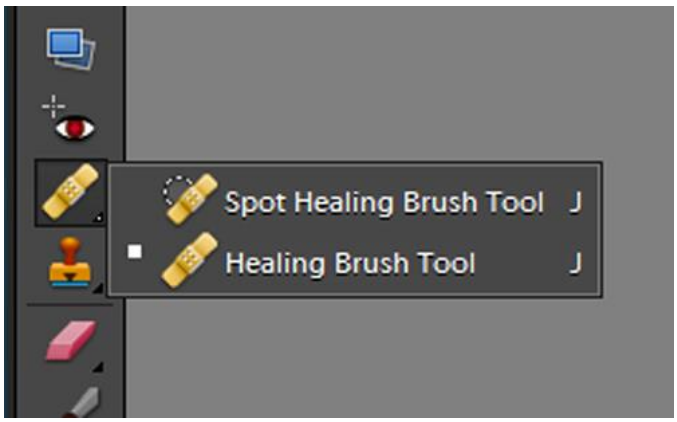

Figure 3. The Healing Brush and Spot Healing Brush tools in my old copy of Photoshop Elements (version 9). These sit immediately above the Clone Stamp tool. I have displayed both tools in this screenshot by right clicking on the tool icon on the left.

So, provided you can find some suitable patterns in your shot as a source, it won't matter if the colours and tones don't match the area you want to paint over. So far, so good. Unfortunately, the Healing Brush tool creates its own problems. It will not only blend in with the pixels you are painting over but will also try and create a smooth gradient to any nearby area that is a different colour or tone. For example, when I use this tool right next to the bird's head (Figure 4), you will notice a darker smudge as the tool has 'seen' the darker pixels of the bird's head and attempted to create a smooth gradient to them. While not too obvious here, in other images it can be quite noticeable.

Figure 4. The Healing Brush has created a dark smudge next to the bird's head.

The simple solution here is to first use the Healing Brush, then tidy up with the Clone Stamp tool by copying some of the nearby areas that were painted with the Healing Brush tool. To reduce the risk of painting over the edge of the bird, simply use a very small clone brush size or create a selection that runs around the edge of the bird. (Hint: the Blur tool can fix any residual edge left by the Clone Stamp tool.) The Clone Stamp and Healing Brush tools will only work in the area currently selected. Annoyingly though, Healing Brush will still 'see' and try to blend with pixels even if they are outside the current active selection. According to Adobe's online help for this tool, the current version of Photoshop CC has a setting for the Healing Brush tools called 'Diffusion' that will limit the influence of nearby pixels, but this does not appear to be available in Photoshop Elements.