

Fundamental Editing Case Study #1

HIKERS, PLACING EMPHASIS IN NATURE SETTINGS

By Kent DuFault



Image 001 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

Image 001 is the original file as it came from the camera. The original file was created in the camera RAW format. It was converted to .JPEG during the editing process.

More often than not, we come across a great photograph rather than setting one up. This was the case for Image 001.

I climbed up over some rocks and saw the young woman across the river looking through binoculars. I quickly raised my camera and took a picture. I then went to adjust the camera settings. As you might expect, she almost immediately lowered the binoculars and sat down with her friends.

The picture was gone. I managed to get one frame.

It was underexposed and not entirely framed the way I wanted it, but it was well within the range of 'fixing it' with the proper sound fundamental editing steps.

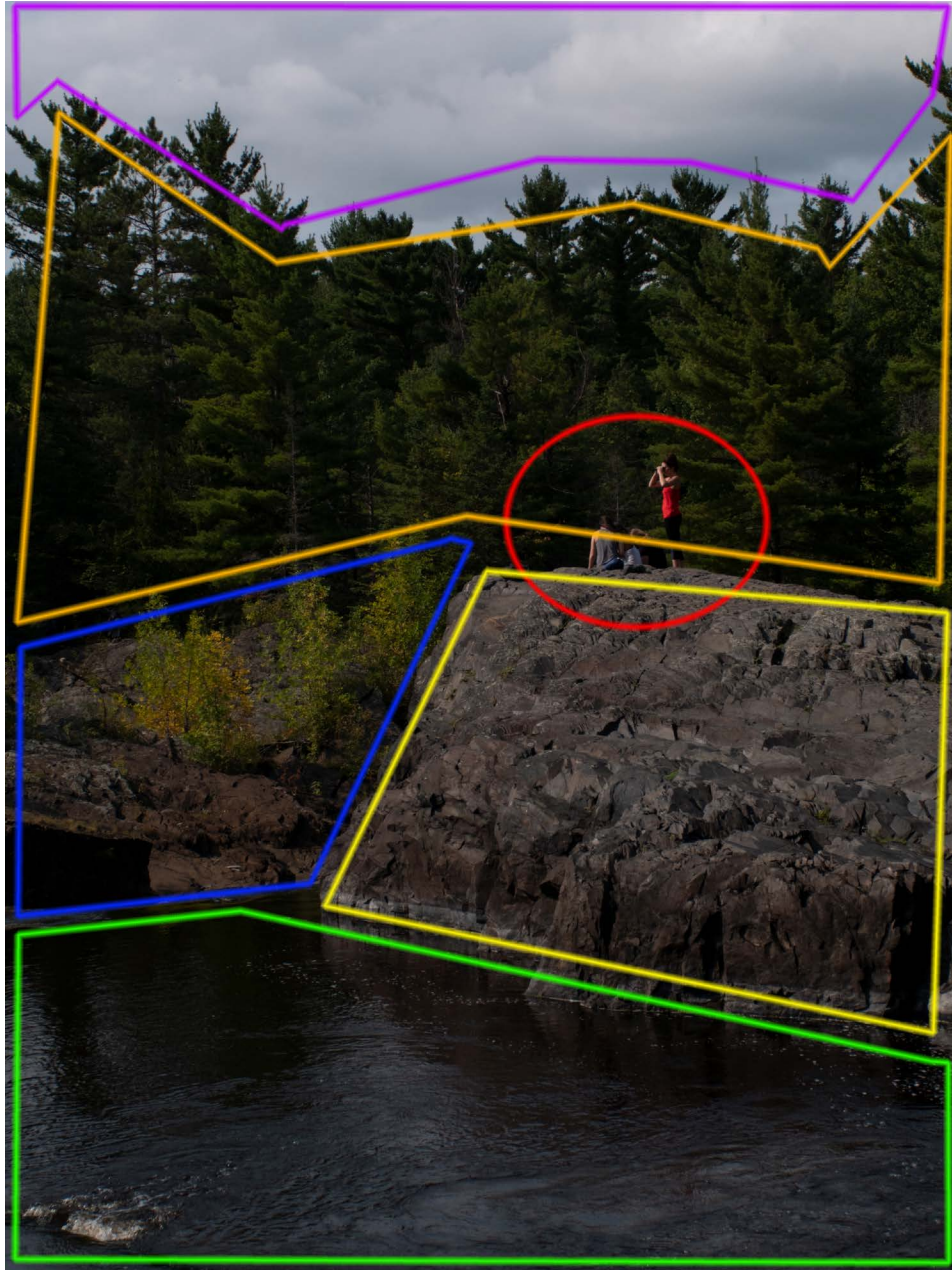


Image 002 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

*My initial interest was the woman. However, my mind immediately dissected the composition into puzzle pieces. This is the stage of fundamental editing that I call **establishing intent**.*

For the 'Intent' step of FE (fundamental editing), you want to study your photo and figure out what you were trying to say with it. Then, using your composition skills, you decide on how the FE process can maximize your intent.

As you can see in Image 002, I often draw on a copy of the original image as a road map to keep me on track with my FE steps.

For this picture, I want the woman and her companions to be the subject. This means I'm going to have to really emphasize their presence against a much more extensive background.

With the puzzle pieces concept, as shown in Image 002, I will accomplish that through the use of layering.

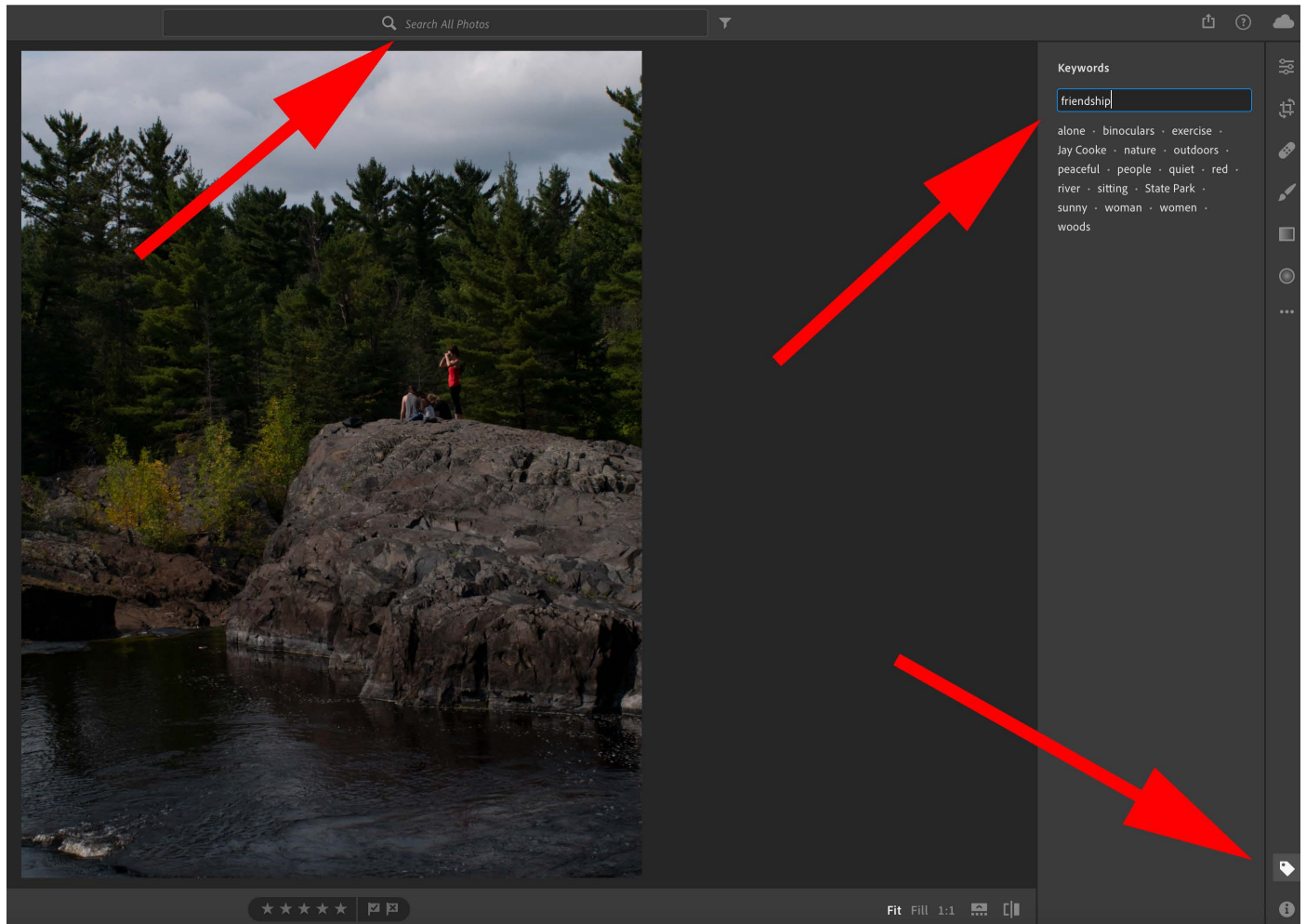


Image 003 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

Entering keywords is a crucial first step in the FE process.

Have you ever had trouble locating one of your digital pictures? Of course, you have! We all have! Keywords are an essential resource to help you find your pictures later on.

I place the keyword entry step right at the beginning of the process. Otherwise, I have a tendency not to do it. And of course, I genuinely regret that later when I'm trying to retrieve a particular picture.

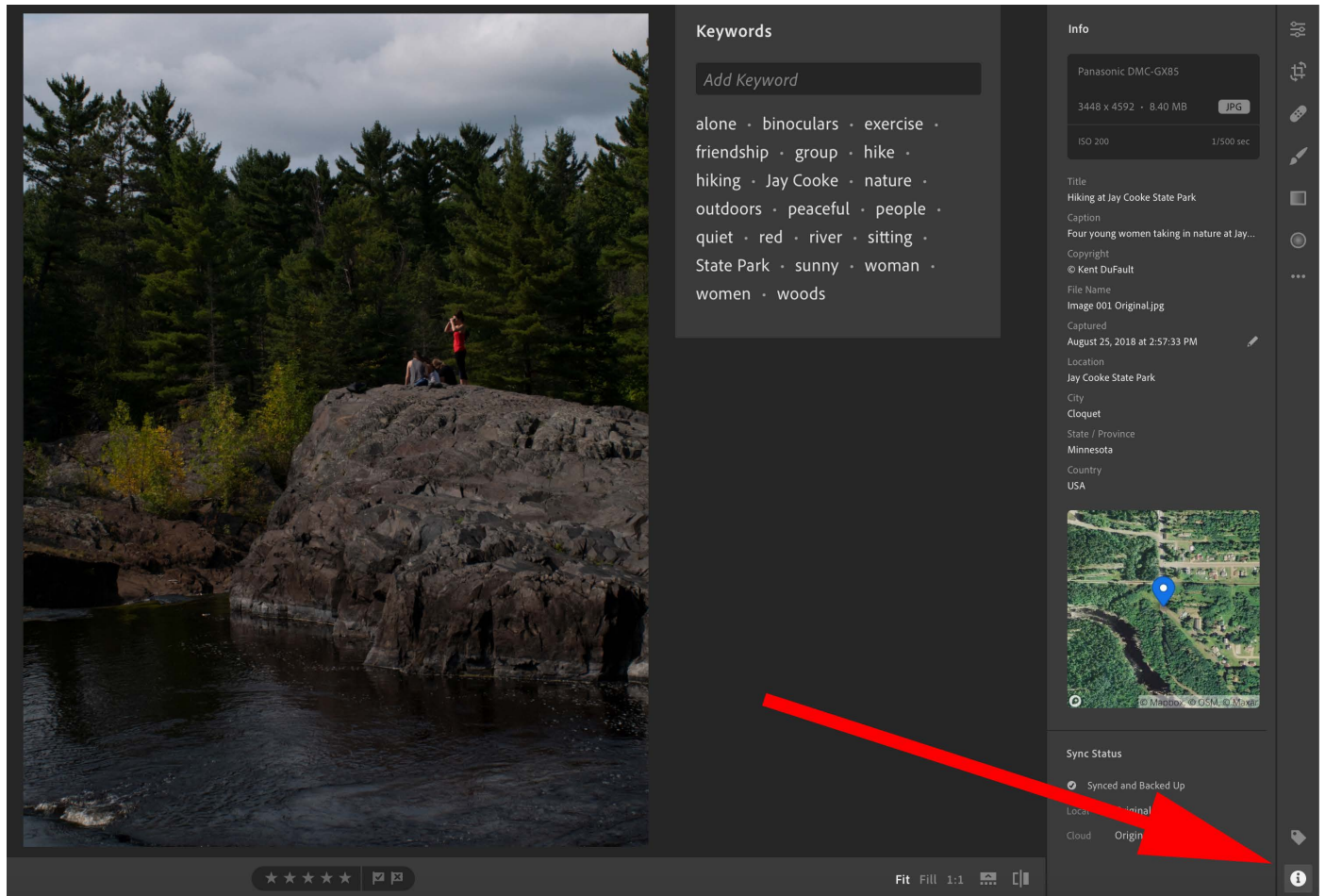


Image 004 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

The info button is located in the lower right of the Lightroom workspace. Here you can input crucial picture details such as Metadata.

Metadata travels with your image file. I think it's essential to complete this area as much as I can. It helps to protect my image from theft. It can also help me sell it by providing details that a buyer might want to know.

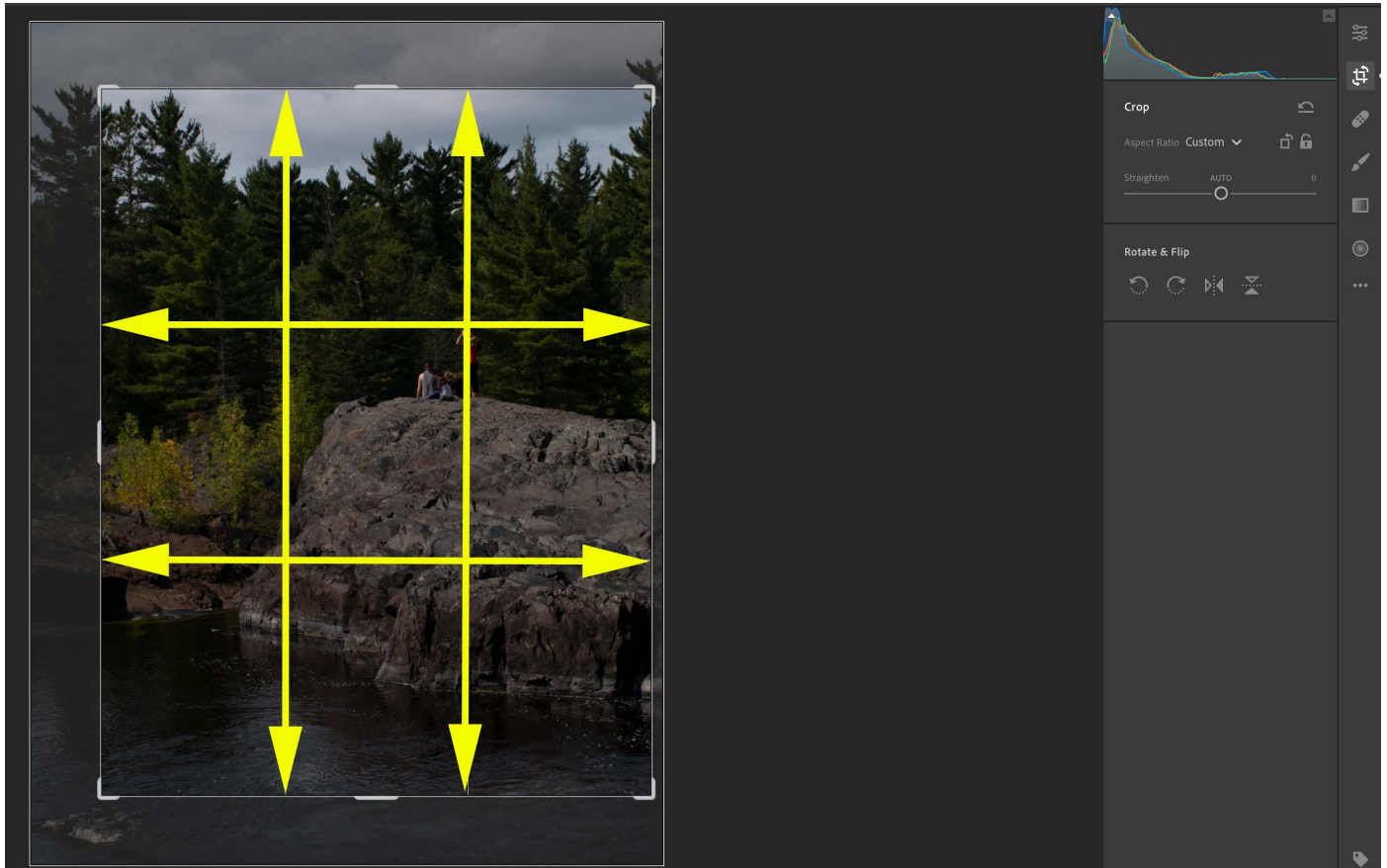


Image 005 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

My next step in the FE process is to crop, if necessary. In this case, it is needed.

This photograph suffered from two flaws coming out of the camera. It was underexposed, and it wasn't composed to fill the frame with a relevant area. Cropping helps to resolve the second problem.

Notice that the girl with the binoculars is now placed right on the crosshairs for the Rule of Thirds. I also eliminated unnecessary negative space from the river and the sky areas.

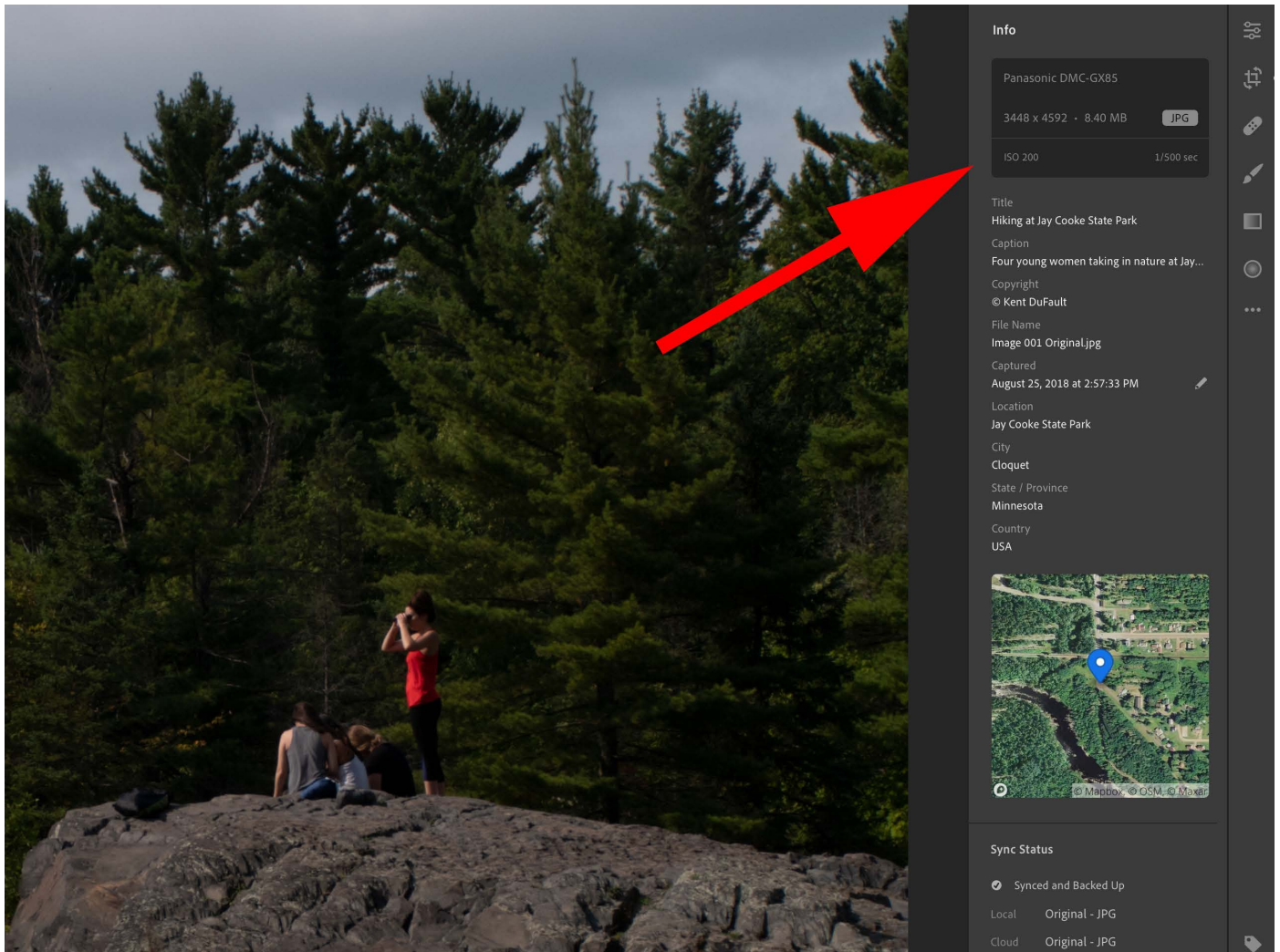


Image 006 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

My next step is always to check for noise. It's a good idea to eliminate noise as early in the FE process as possible.

I always check for noise while previewing the photo at 100% and sometimes 200%.

This photograph was shot at ISO 200 and under proper light. Initially, it didn't display any noise.

However, underexposed pictures that are brightened up will often reveal noise further along the process. So, I will cycle back and review the noise again later in the fundamental editing (FE) steps.

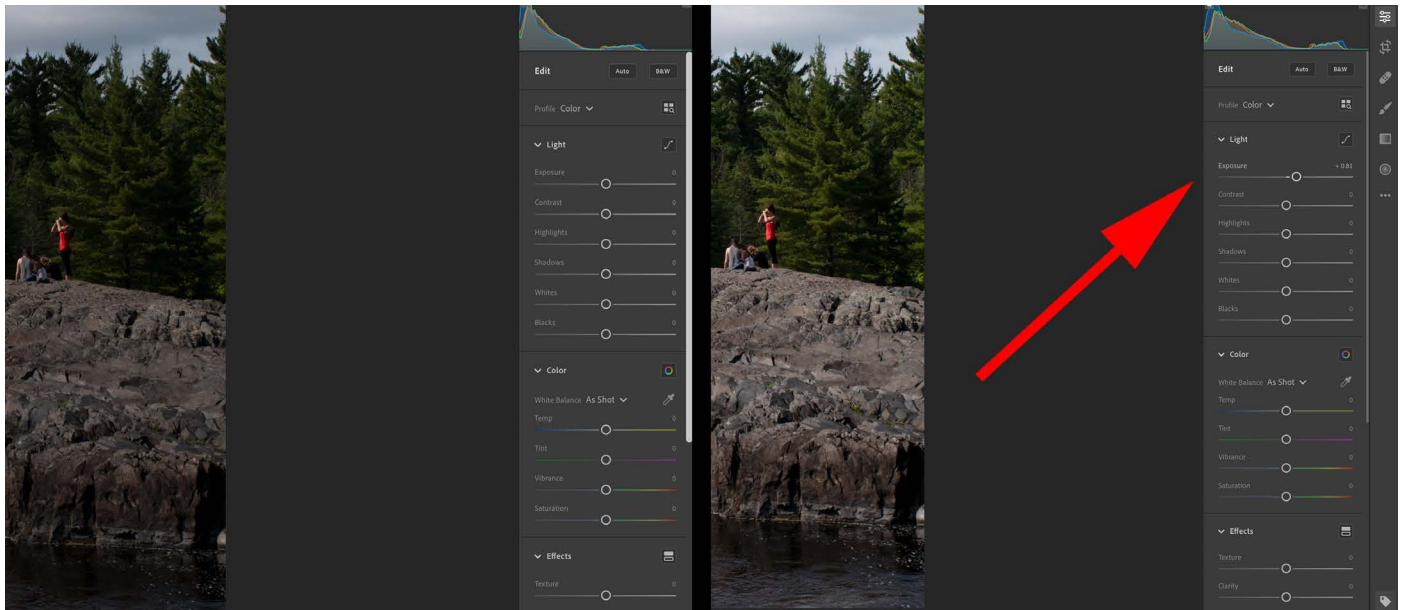


Image 007 – Screenshots by Kent DuFault

The global exposure adjustment is next.

Note: When you see the term 'global,' this means that the adjustment is applied equally across the entire frame. When you see the word 'local' or 'localized,' this means that an edit is applied to just one area of the frame.

When considering the global Exposure adjustment, look at the contrast of the picture. Images with high contrast rarely benefit from this adjustment tool.

My case study photo has a controlled contrast that is fairly even and well within the boundaries of the camera's dynamic range.

I adjusted the global Exposure to +0.81. That significantly brightened the picture.

Look at the two histograms in Image 007. The one on the left is the original, and the one on the right is after the global Exposure adjustment.

The histogram has moved slightly to the right, but the elevations didn't change that much. This is a direct result of the contrast being within the dynamic range.

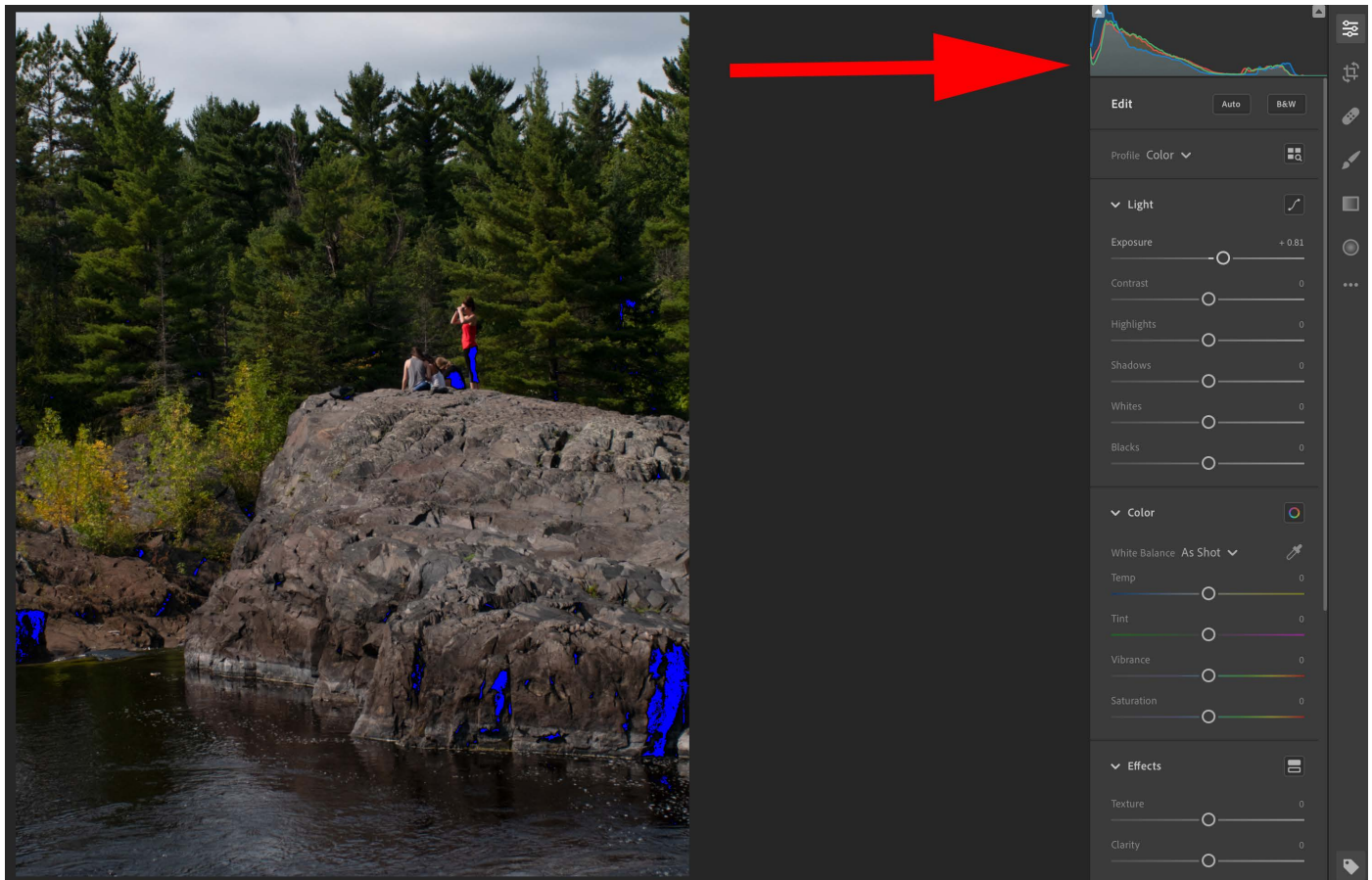


Image 008 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

Before making any other adjustments in FE, it's time to make sure that your clipping indicators are turned on.

It's this step and the following step, in FE, that set your black point and white point.

Knowledgeable placement of these two points is important because they establish a full tonal scale within the picture. Also, if they are misplaced, they can ruin your image through negligent clipping.

Image 008 displays the Black clipping indicator (the blue areas).

Note: Clipping is a term that describes when all detail is lost in a photograph. Shadows clipping means that the clipped area is entirely black. There is no detail in the blacks and sometimes within the shadows. Highlight clipping means that the clipped area is completely white. There is no detail in the highlights and sometimes in the whites. In most cases, you will want some small and insignificant region of the photograph to be clipped on both ends. Why? It ensures that your picture contains a full scale of tones.

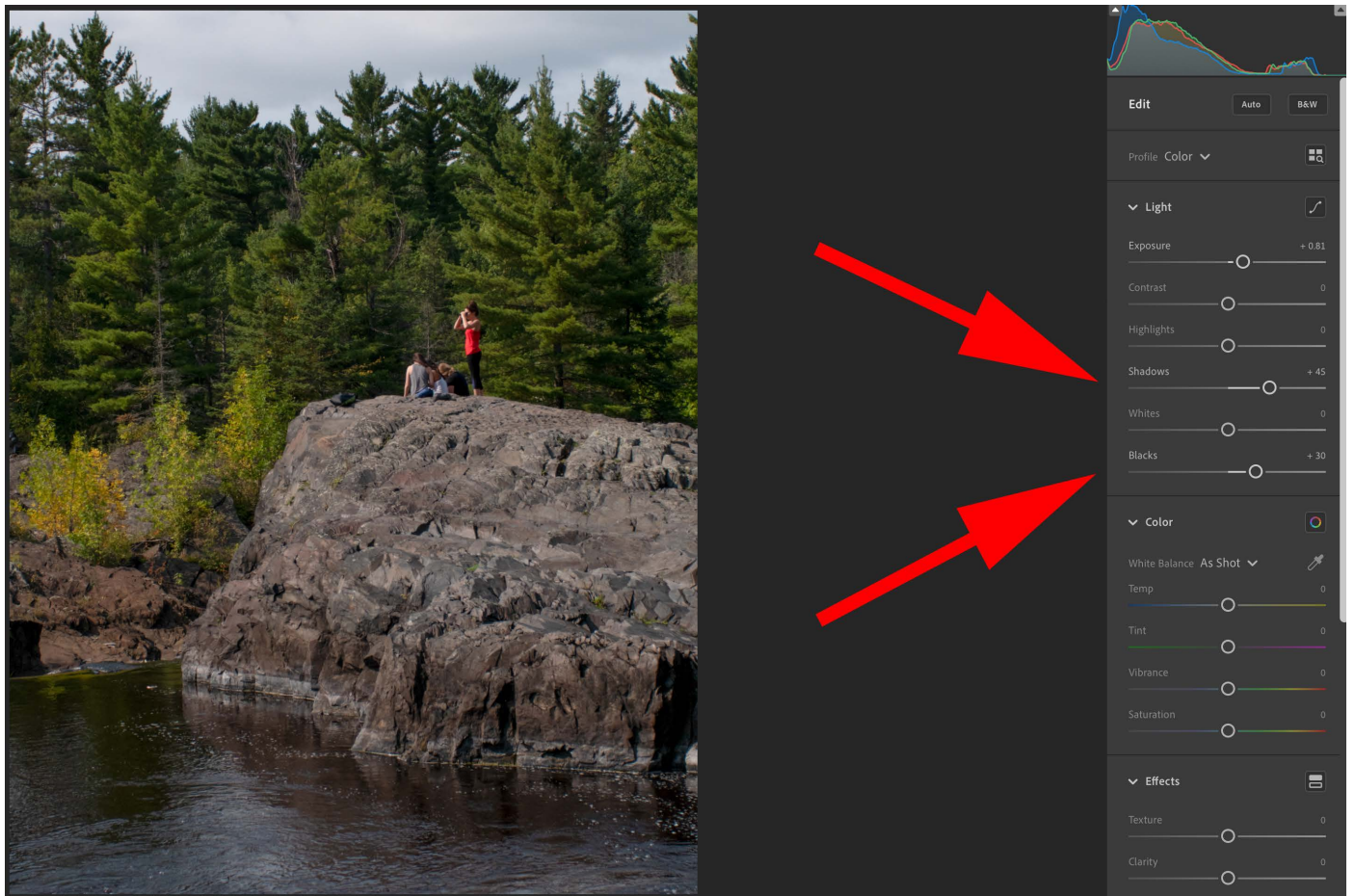


Image 009 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I have raised the Shadows slider to +45 and the Blacks slider to +30 to reduce the shadows that were being clipped.



Image 010 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

Even after making my Blacks and Shadows adjustment, I still have clipping.

Depending on the lighting in a photograph and the subject being photographed, you may not be able to eliminate all of the clipping.

You shouldn't try to, as it will give your shot a washed-out appearance.

The Blacks and Shadows sliders are global adjustments. I raised them as far as I could before the lighter shadowed areas in the trees began to look gray and anemic.

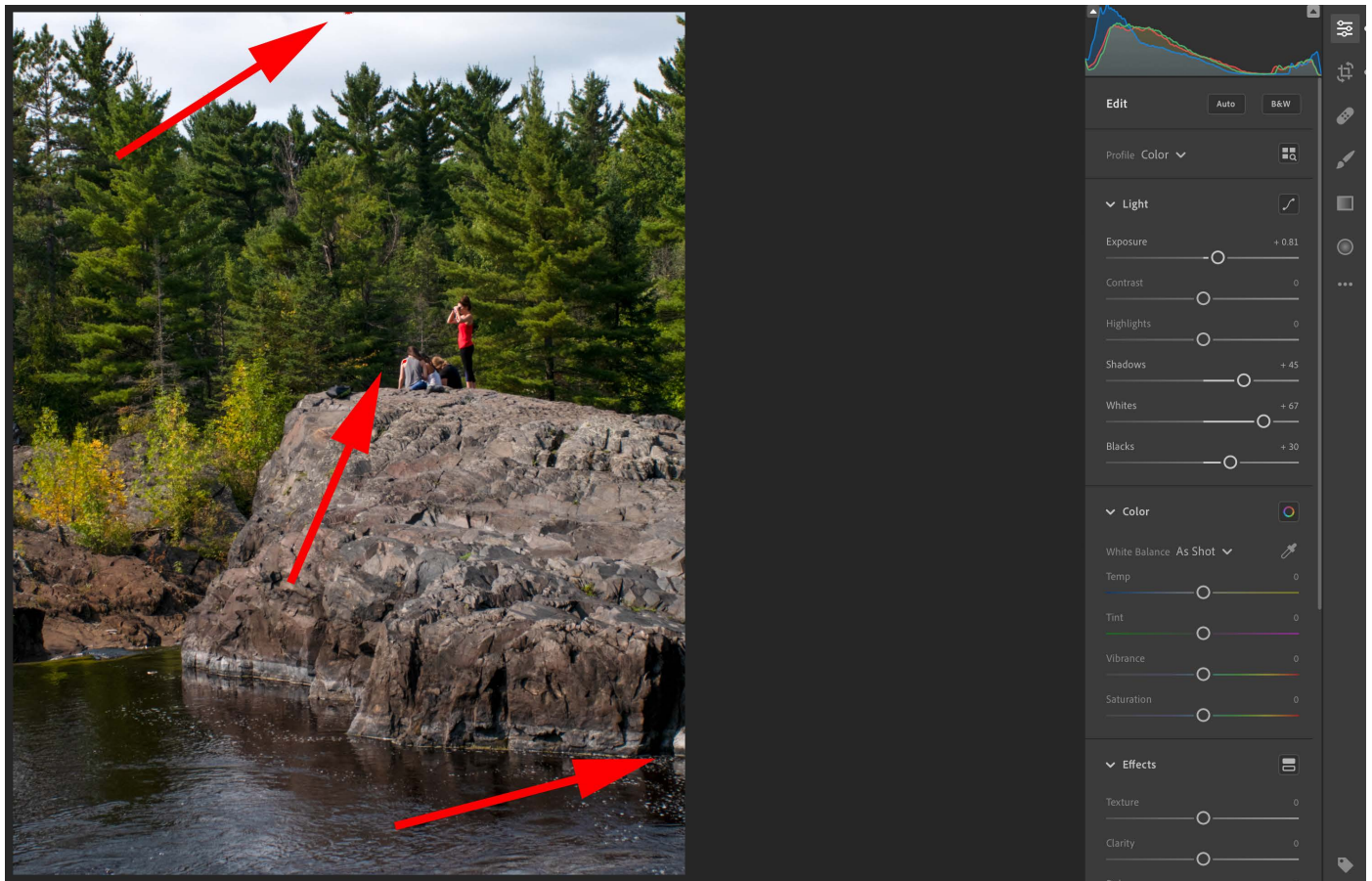


Image 011 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

Our case study photo has minimal highlight clipping. There is a tiny clipped spot in the sky and also one on the woman's shoulder. I won't worry about this minimal highlight clipping at all.

During the Highlight clipping step, I noticed the whitish rock on the lower right (see the red arrow). I'll want to eliminate that eventually as it draws attention away from my subject.

Note: In most cases, it is advantageous not to locate any high contrasting or brightly saturated object, light or dark, on the edge of the frame. These are known as eye snags. Due to their contrast, color, and placement along the border, they pull visual weight away from the subject.

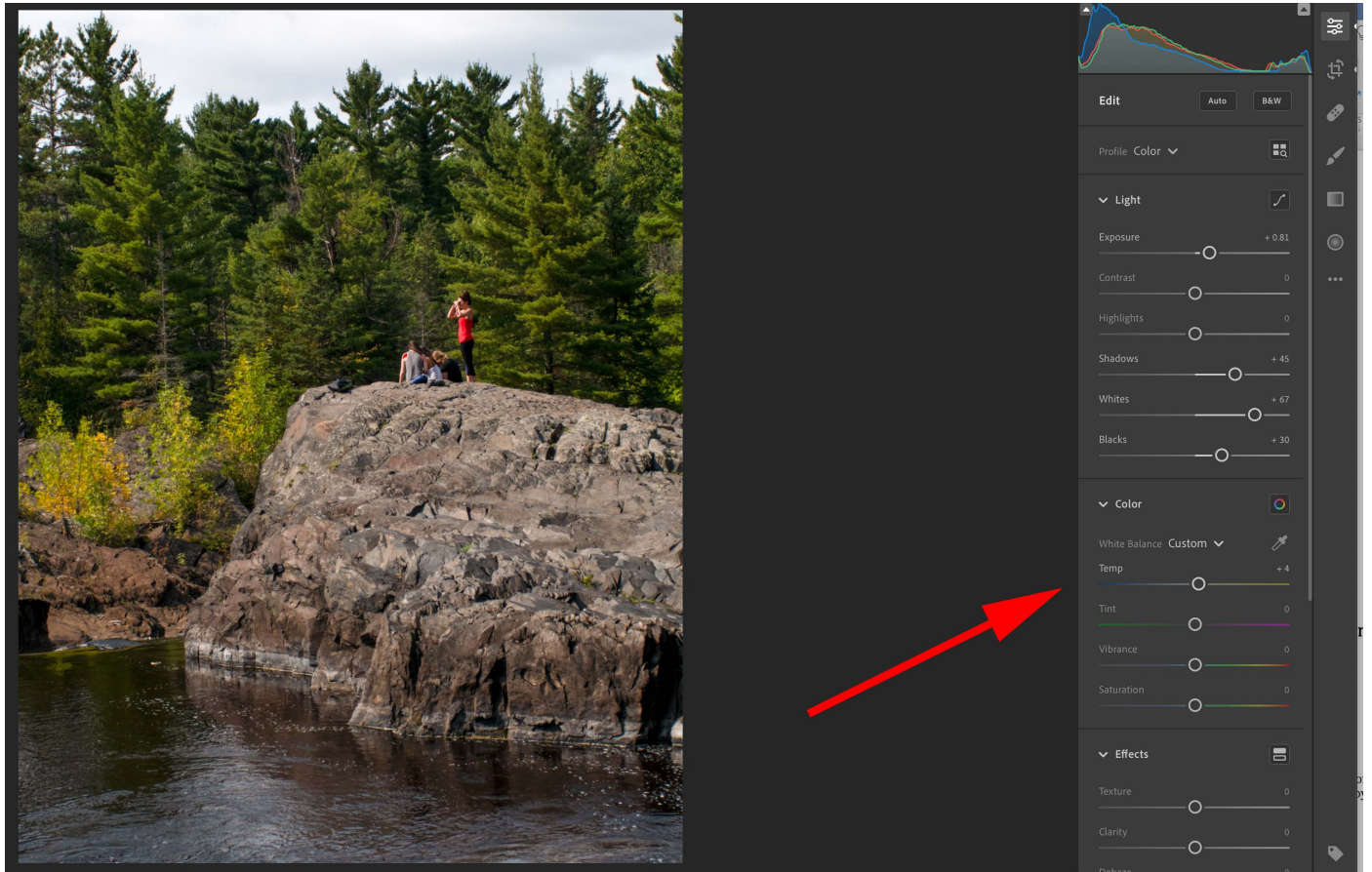


Image 012 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

The next step in the Fundamental Editing list is the White Balance Temp adjustment.

The case study photo was taken in midday light with the sunshine peeking through the dense, intermediate cloud cover. The Auto white balance, as shot, was pretty good. I warmed it up slightly by adding +4 yellow to the temp setting. This was totally a personal choice.

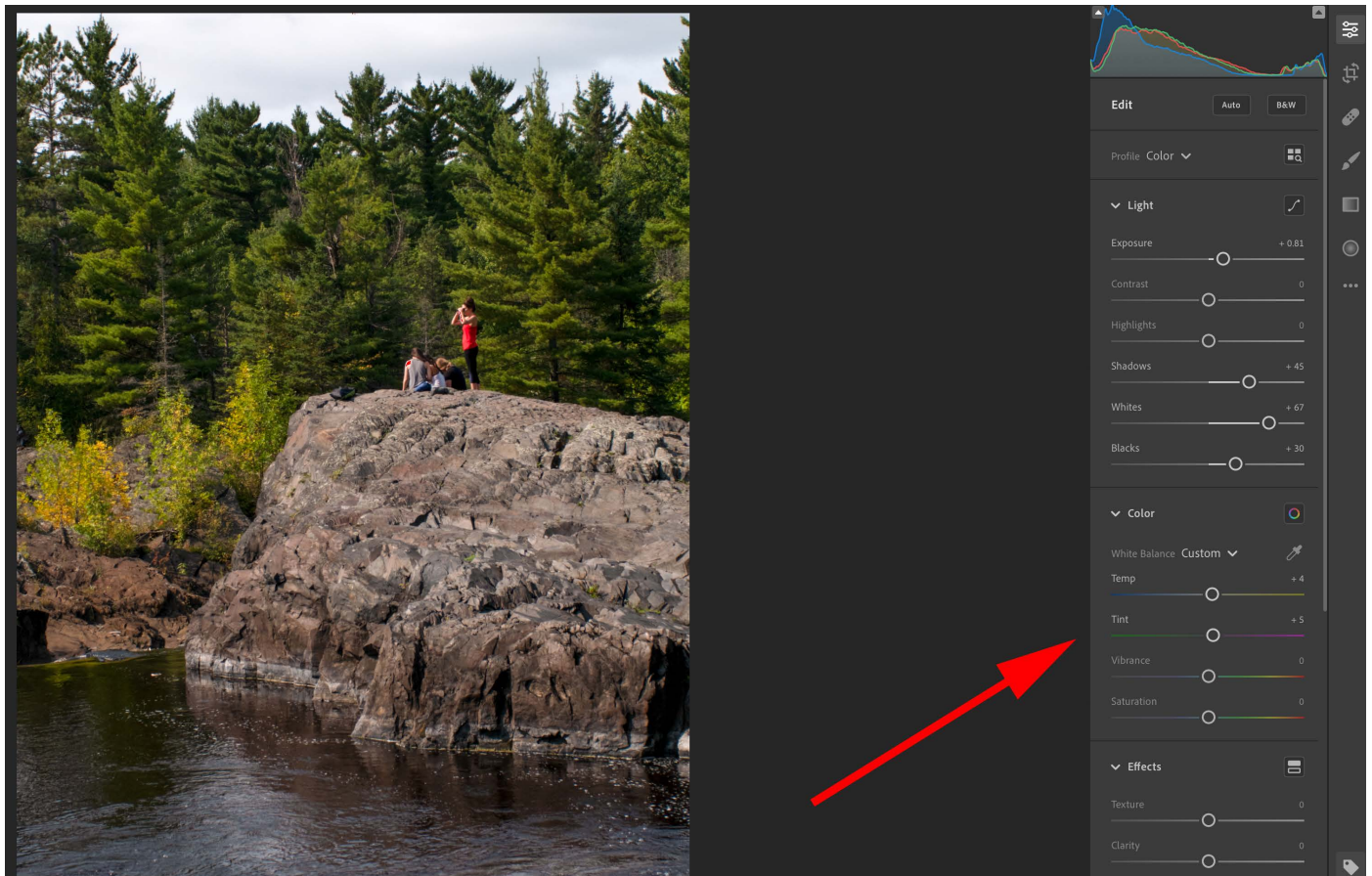


Image 013 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I'm also going to adjust the WB (white balance) by adding +5 to the tint. My reasoning is that the rocks have more of a reddish color to them than was captured by the camera. The adjustment is minimal but appears closer to reality in my eyes.

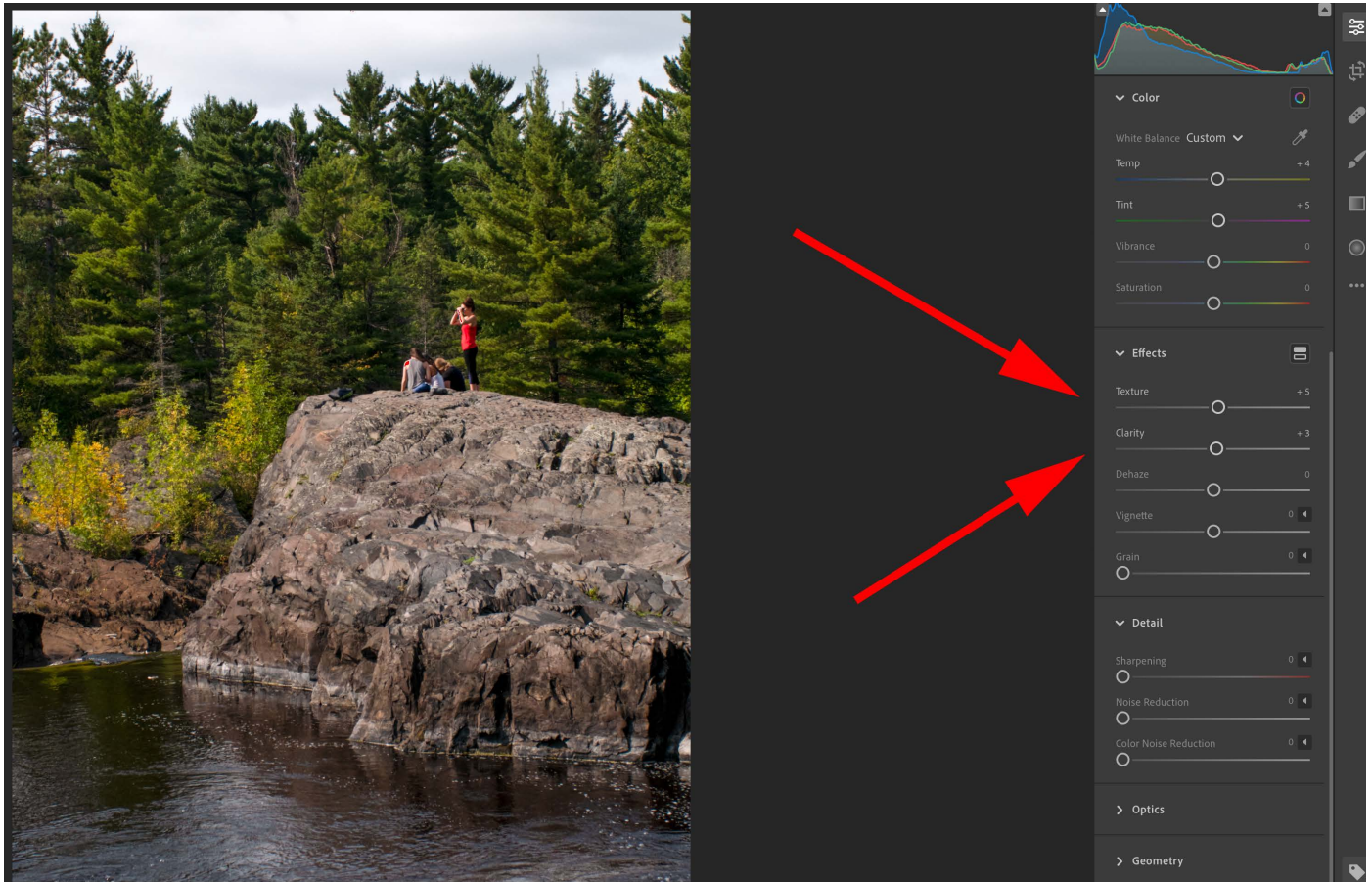


Image 014 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

Texture is a new tool that has been added to Lightroom and Photoshop since the Fundamental Editing Guide was written. I will discuss it repeatedly throughout these 10 case studies.

For this case study image, the Texture worked nicely for the rocks in the foreground, and the Clarity slider helped bring definition to the trees.

The Texture was set to +5, and the Clarity was set to +3.

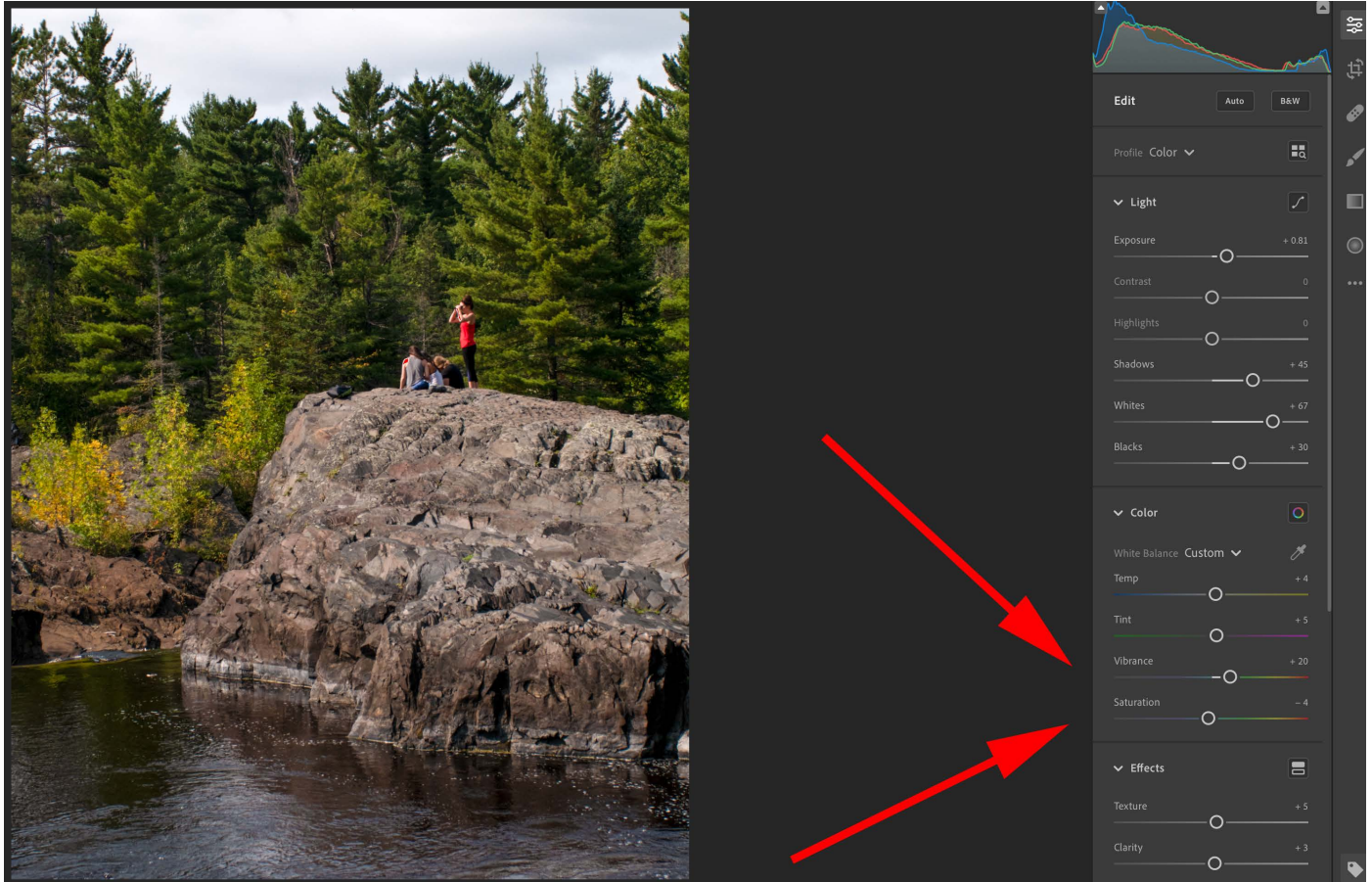


Image 015 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

Vibrance and Saturation are two steps within the FE list. However, I find it most useful to work with them together at the same time.

For the case study photograph, Vibrance was raised to +20 and Saturation was lowered to -4. Does that seem like an odd combination?

Note: The Saturation slider works principally on the primary colors that already contain saturated hues. Vibrance excludes those colors and works primarily on the hues within the picture that are less saturated to begin with.

After reading that note, do the settings now make more sense?

The Vibrance increased the color saturation values of the rocks, trees, water, and sky while ignoring the red shirt.

The red shirt was a completely saturated red, and it took an unnatural appearance after the image was brightened in the global exposure adjustment step. By dialing the saturation down a few notches, the shirt returned to a more normal appearance.

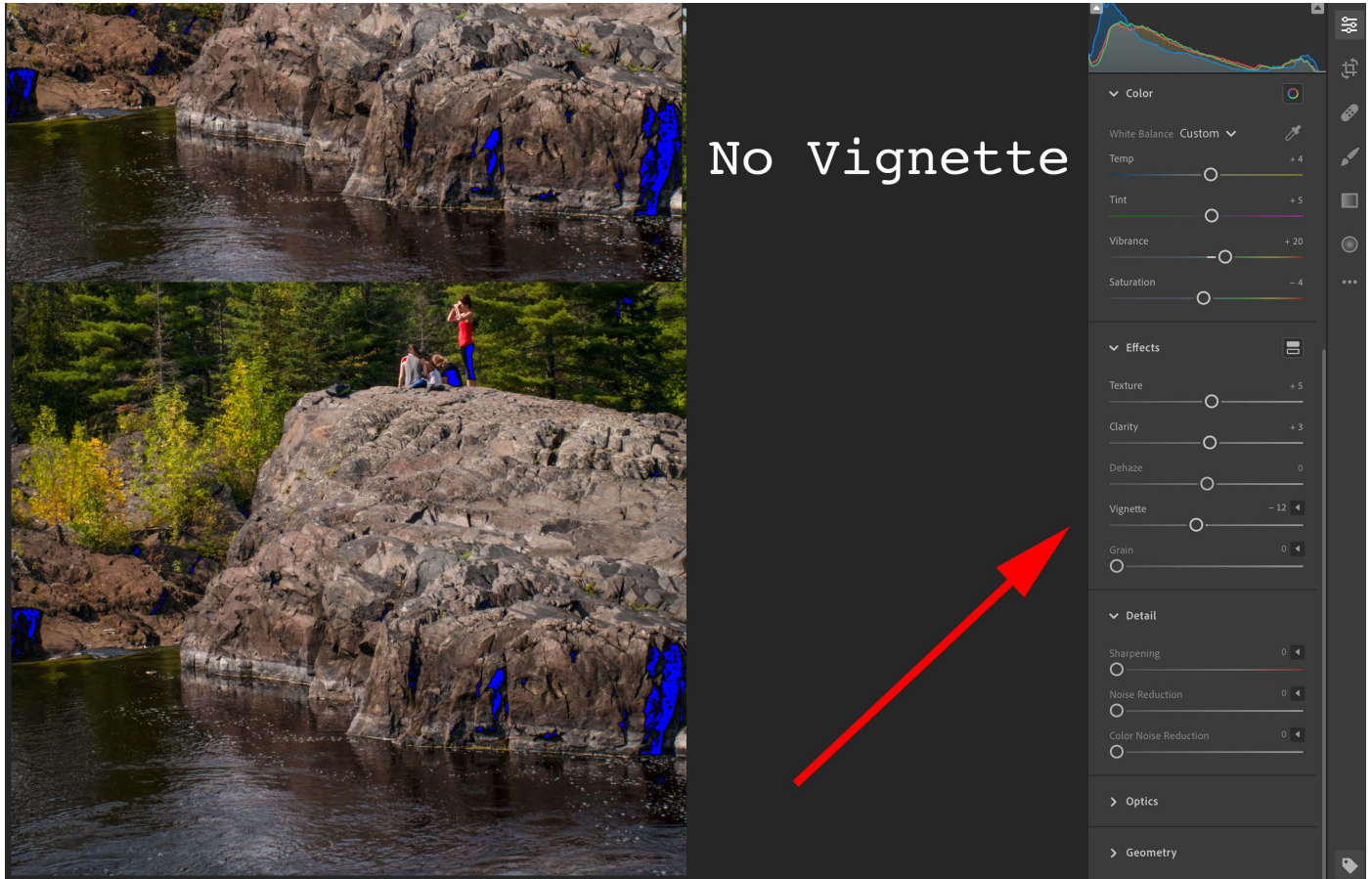


Image 016 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

The use of a vignette is strictly a personal artistic choice. Many photographers don't like them. I do like them, and I use them often, especially when my goal is to push the viewer's eye inward toward the middle of the picture. In most cases, my vignette settings are subtle, and I think that's the key to their success.

I'm using a small vignette on this photograph. If the setting is stronger than -12, then the clipping of the Shadows begins to worsen.

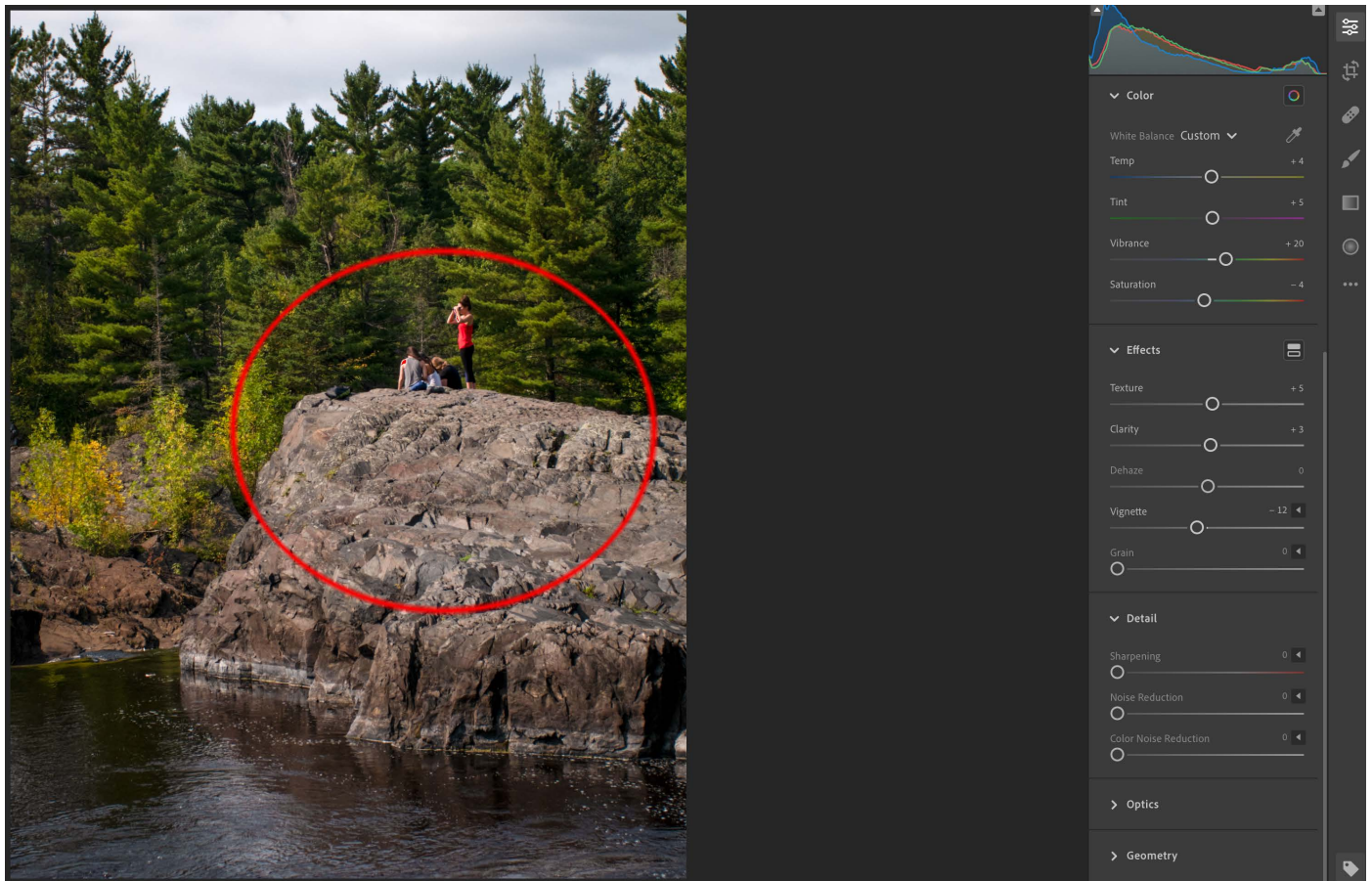


Image 017 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

Image 017 shows the entire vignette applied at -12. Notice how the eyes are now pushed inward, toward the women in the red circle. This location is now the 'brightest' spot within the frame.



Image 018 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

The Dehaze tool was initially introduced to help photographers deal with atmospheric haze.

The Dehaze tool introduces contrast to background elements with a bias that starts at the top of the frame.

I honestly don't use the Dehaze tool all that often, and indeed only with light adjustments.

I will typically send the slider all the way to +100 for an easily defined view of what it is doing, and then back it off to something that seems reasonable.

In this case, Dehaze +10 helped to define the clouds. It also added contrast to the trees in the background.

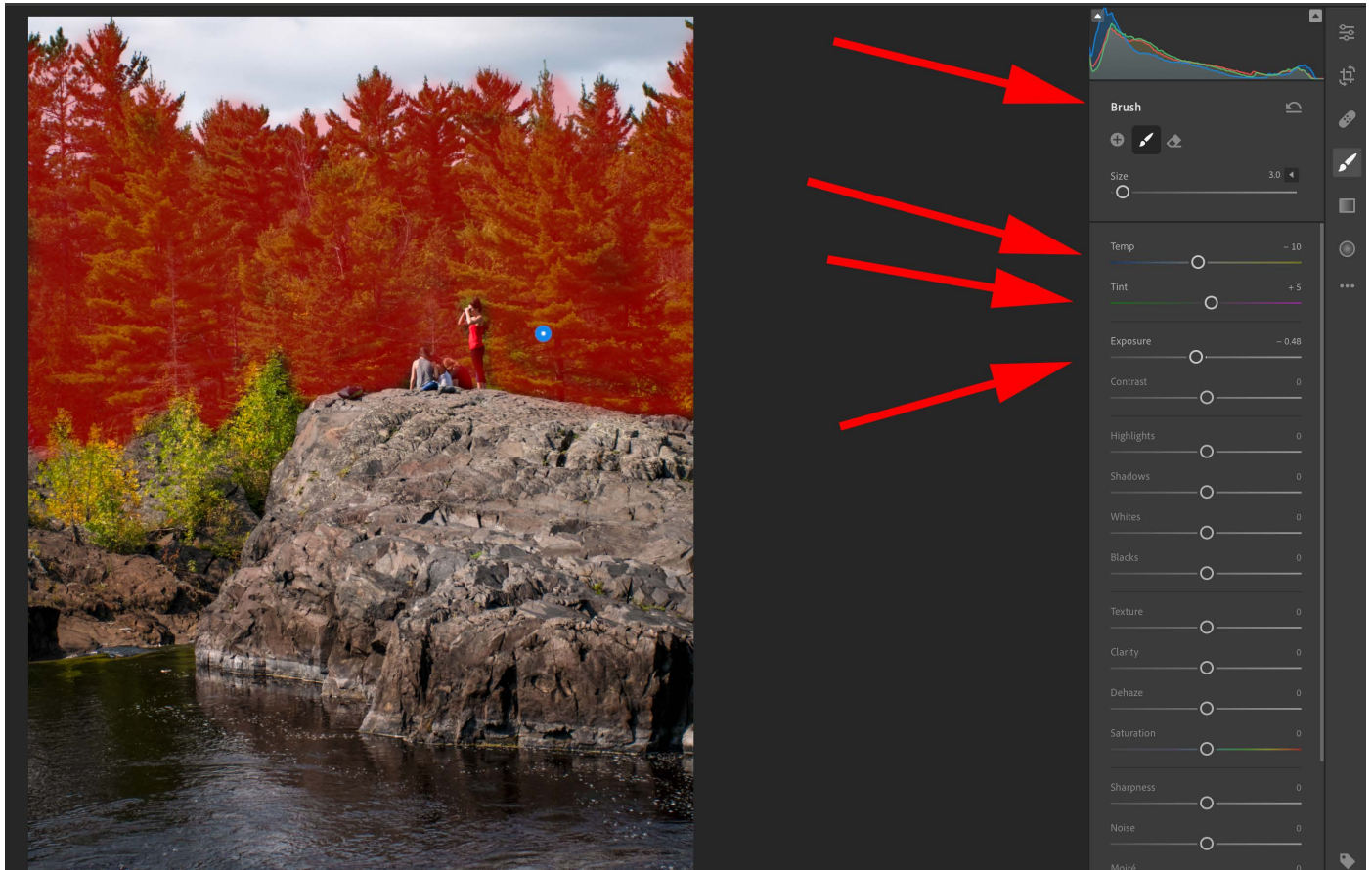


Image 019 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

The Adjustment Brush is my favorite FE editing tool. It allows carefully placed localized adjustments throughout the photo. It gives us photographers the power of being a painter.

For my first localized edit, I'm going to reduce the amount of yellow to the trees in the background. I will also add a little magenta and reduce their Exposure by -0.48.

This is the first step to create the layering (the puzzle pieces effect that we discussed back in the 'Intent' section of this case study).

Note: When using the Adjustment Brush, you can cycle through these views by pressing the 'o' key: show mask, show pin, show mask, and pin, or turn off the mask and pin.

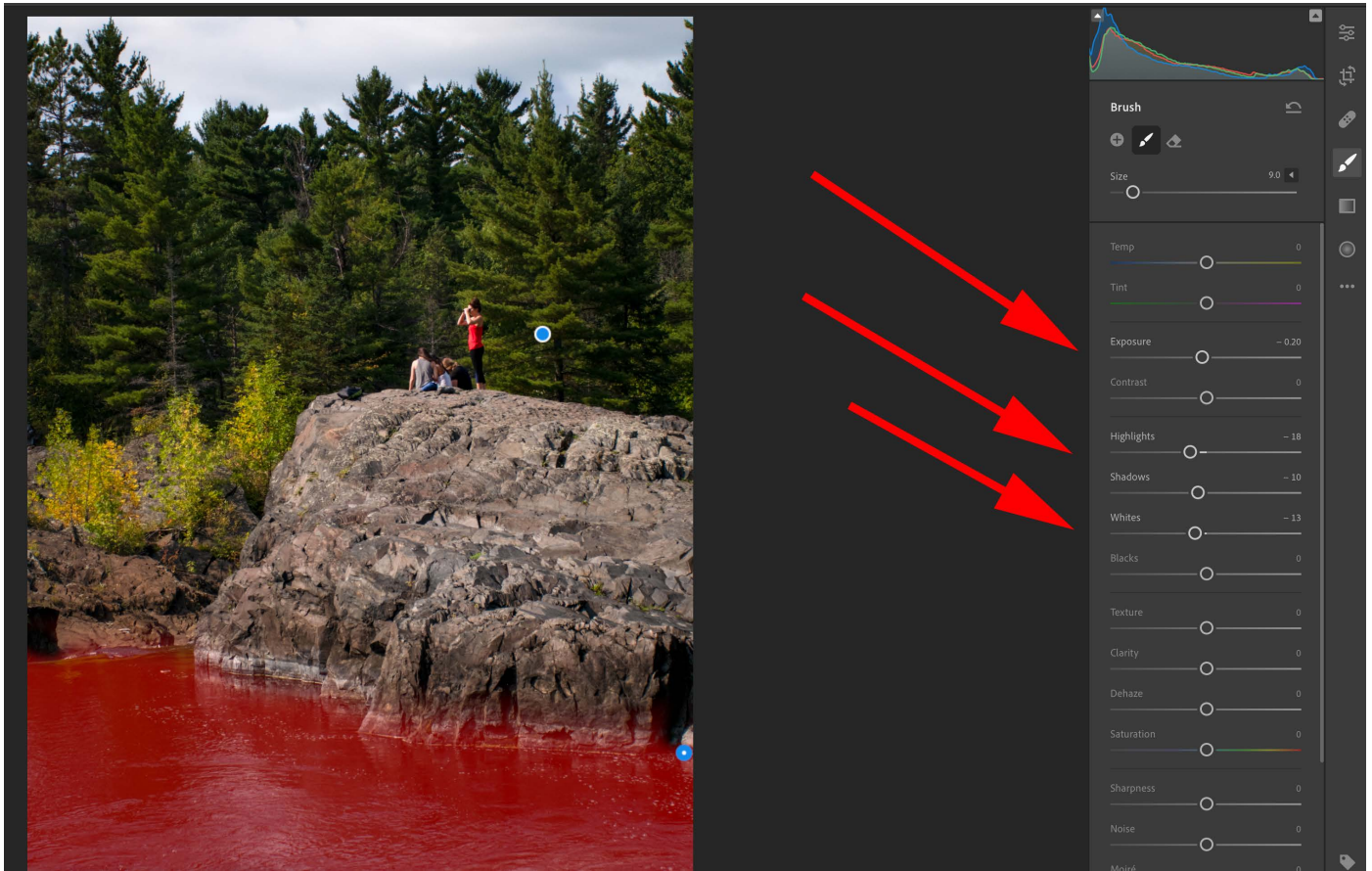


Image 020 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

The red area on the water is the mask. The blue dot indicates the first mask that was created over the trees. The blue dot with a white dot inside indicates the active mask, which in this case is the water.

The next FE step to create the layering effect is to darken the water.

Notice how this was achieved through a combination of sliders: Exposure -0.20, Highlights -18, Shadows -10, Whites -13.

You may wonder, why not merely reduce the Exposure if you want to darken this area?

Remember, Exposure is a global adjustment. Even though we have created a mask, an Exposure adjustment is applied 'globally' across the entire mask. Using just the Exposure slider creates a result that has too much contrast.

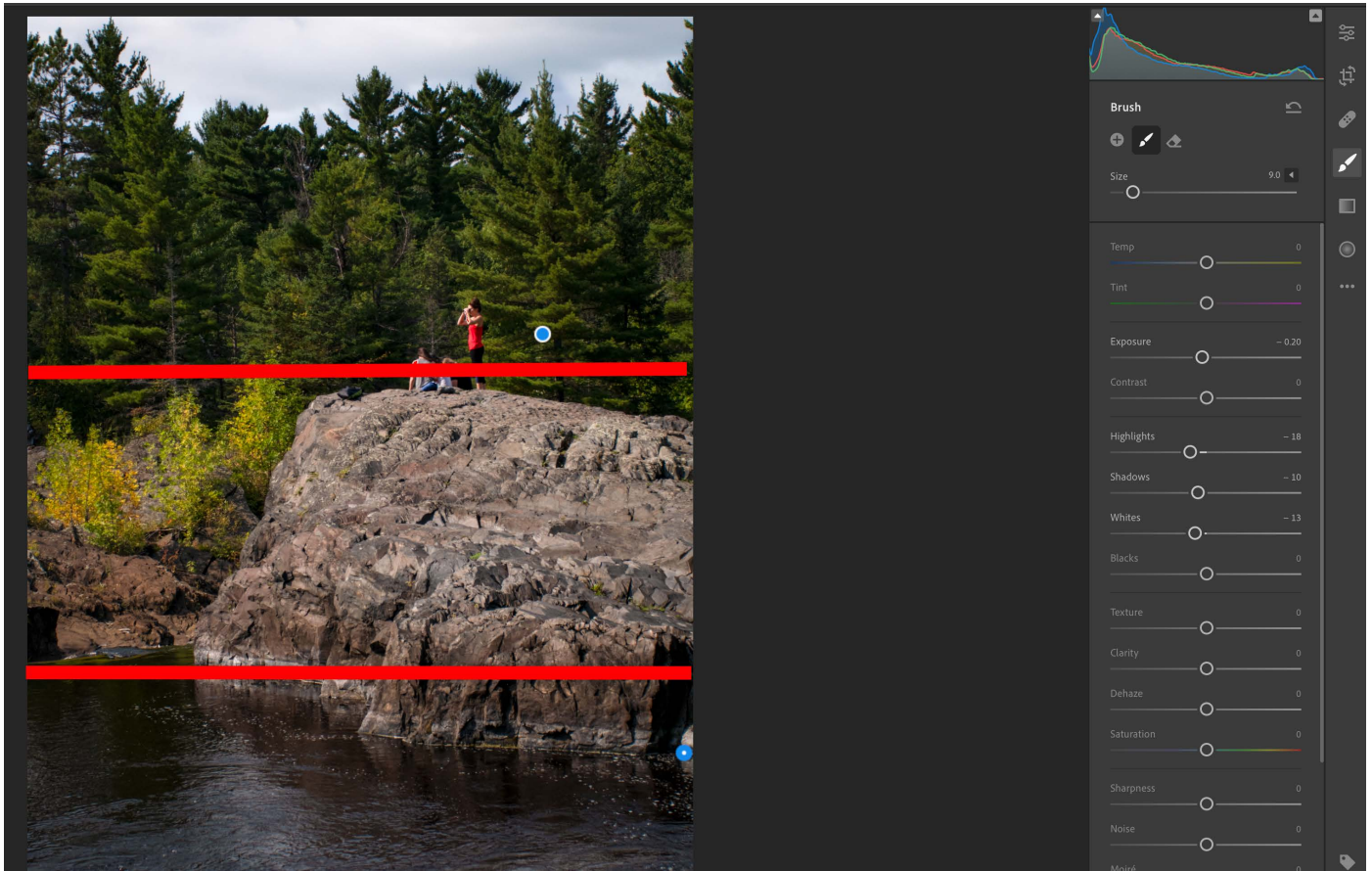


Image 021 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

The red lines show how I will achieve the composition concept known as the 1/3 – 2/3.

1/3 of the image will be far brighter and located around the subject.

2/3s will be equally divided above and below the subject. These two lines of contrast will subconsciously force a viewer's eyes towards the center of the picture.

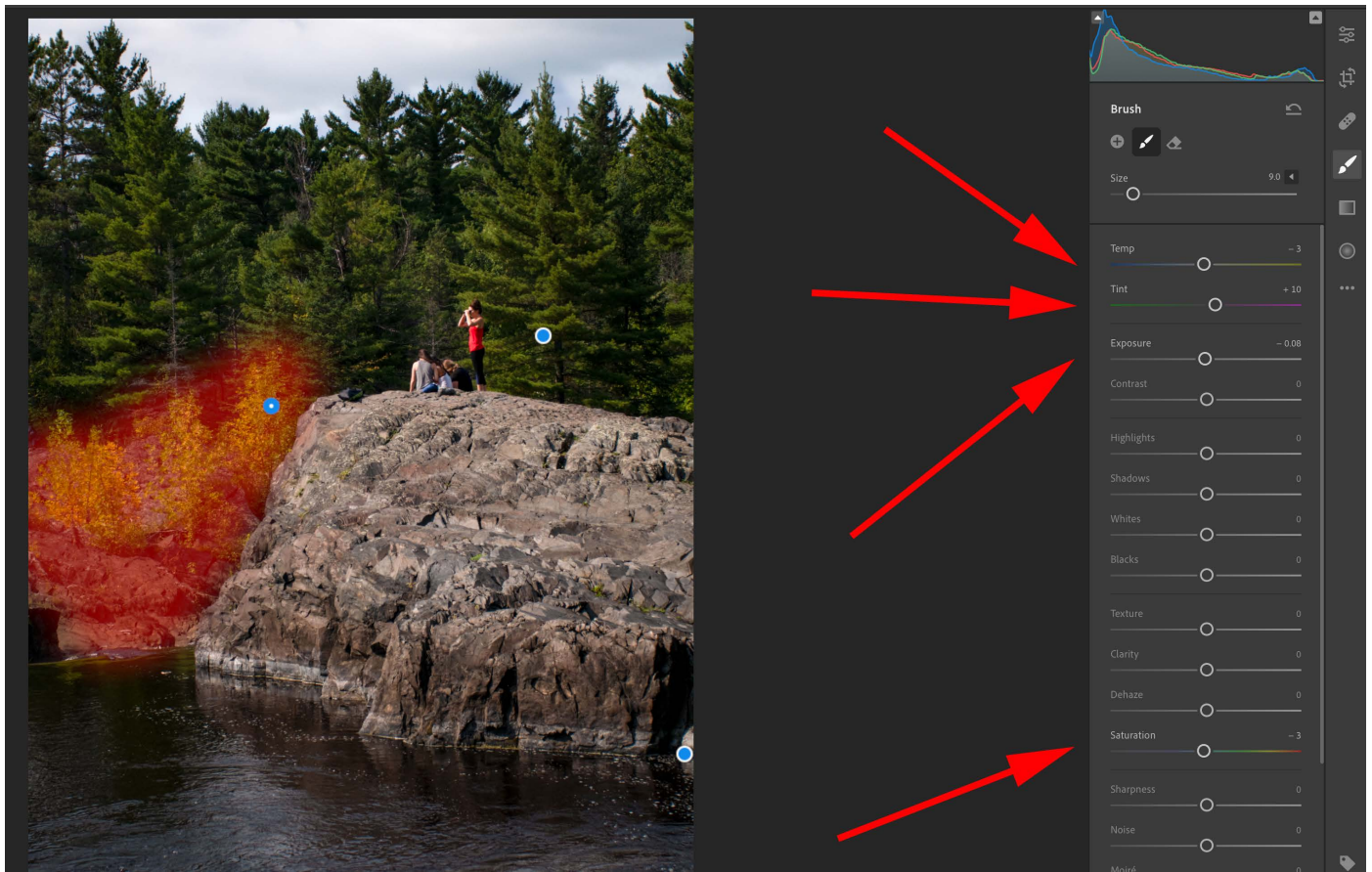


Image 022 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

My next Adjustment Brush mask will reduce the visual weight of the trees to the left.

I want the trees to the middle left to add color to the shot. This helps to establish the time of the year. However, I don't want that area to have

equal visual weight to the women, as they are my subject.

By slightly reducing the white balance Temp, the Saturation, and the Exposure of this area, it takes on the secondary role of a focal point.

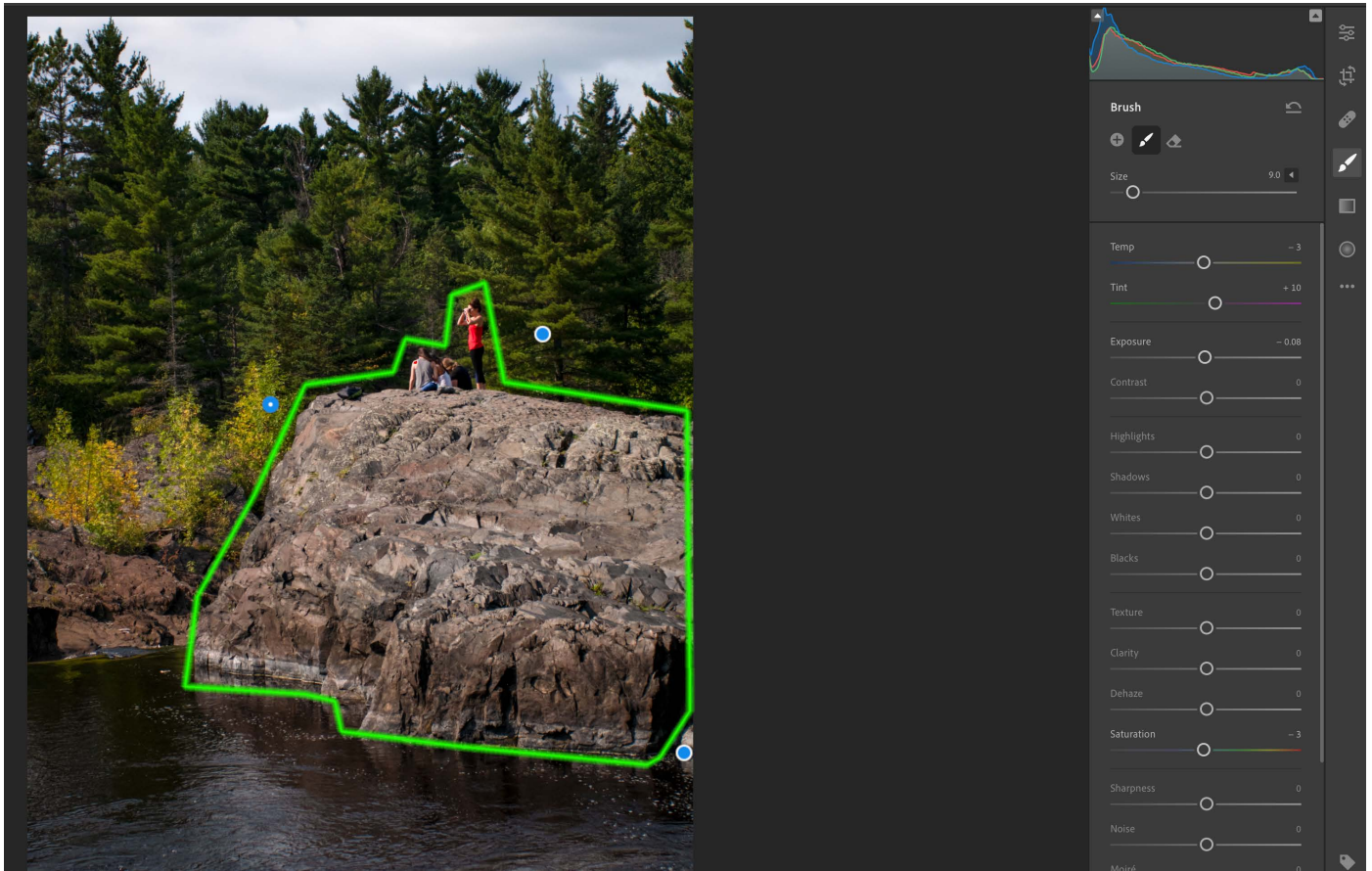


Image 023 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

All of the steps so far have directed the eyes right towards the area encircled in green. Do you see the puzzle piece?

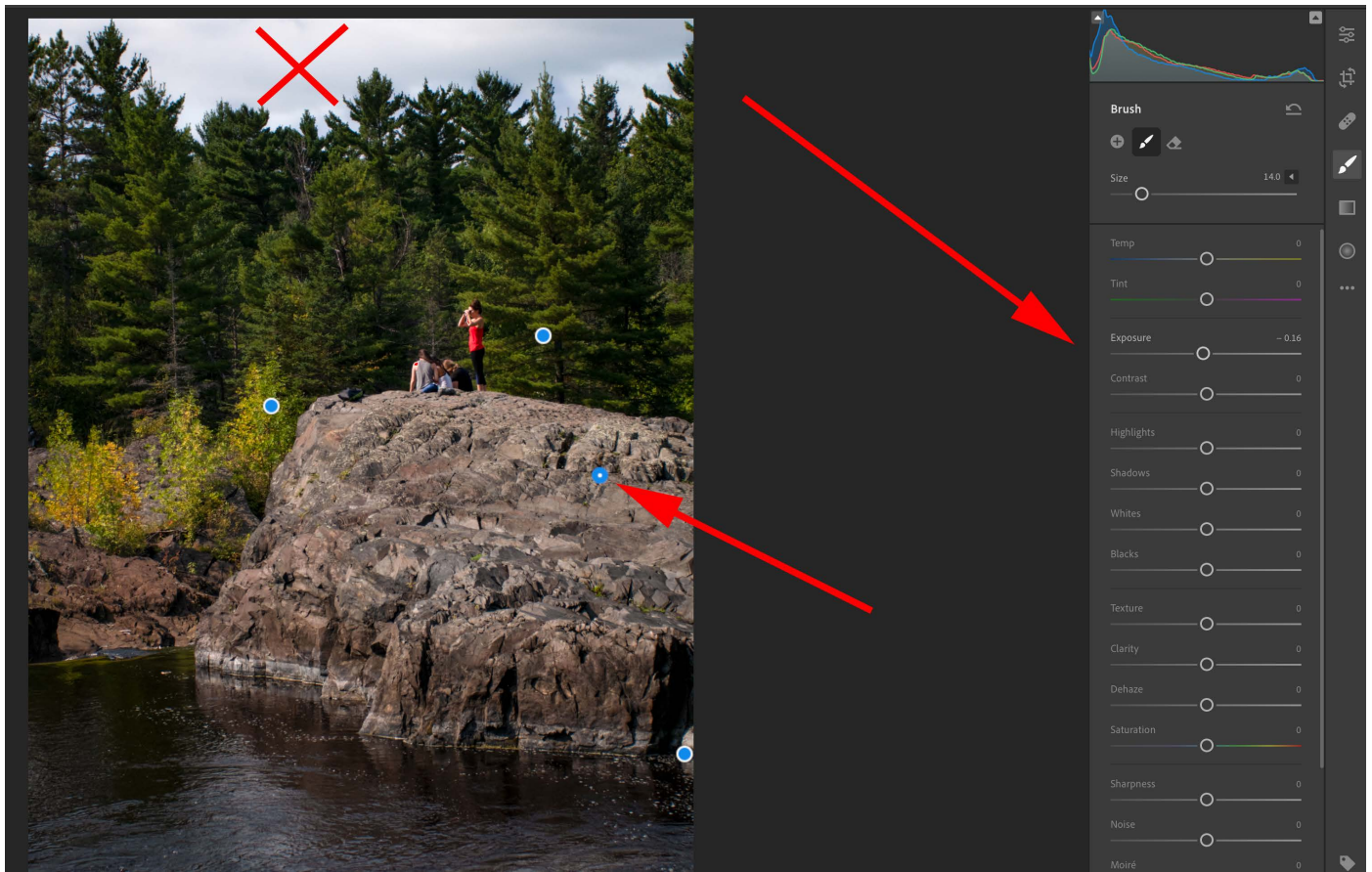


Image 024 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

This is the step of FE that I call 'Final Touches.' This is where I take a moment and study the entire photograph. Is there anything that stands out as out of place or a distraction to the subject?

I decided to slightly reduce the Exposure of the rocks just below the women to help them pop from the background even more.

I played around with trying to add some drama to the sky. But quite frankly, it looked best left alone.

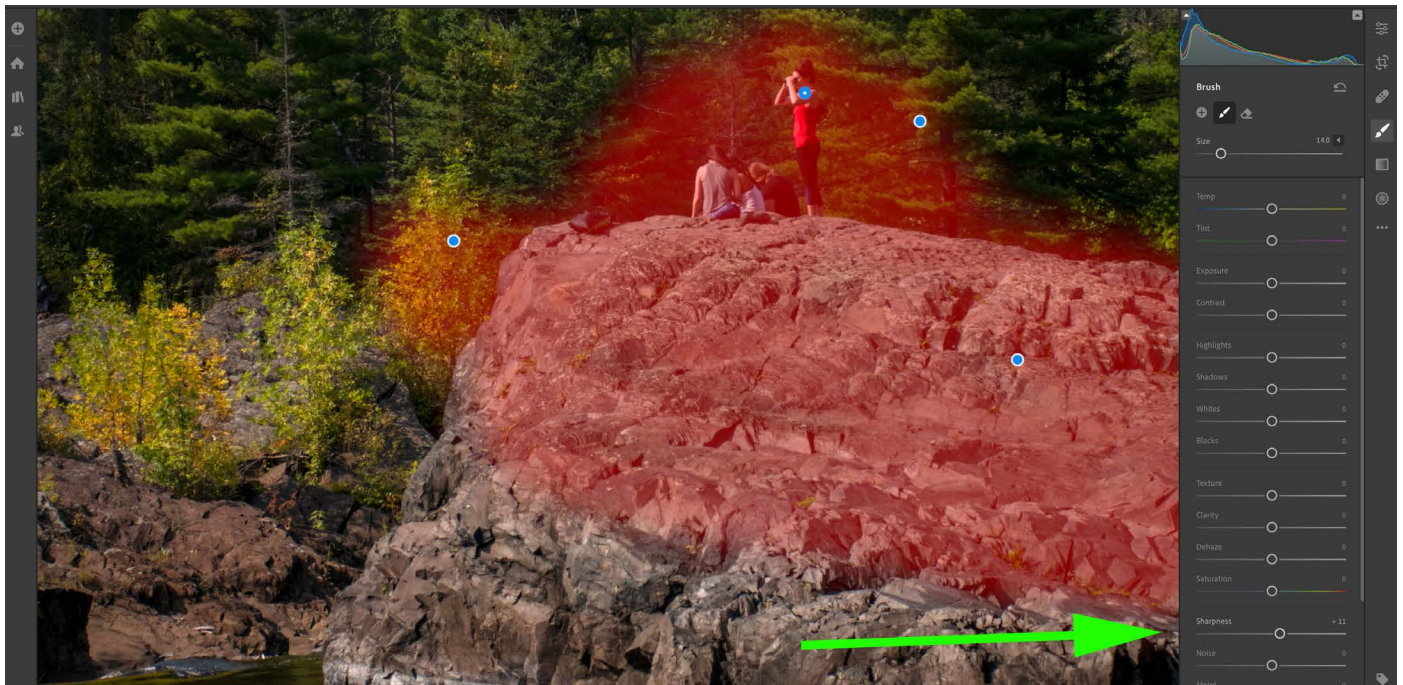


Image 025 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I always do localized Sharpening around the subject using the Adjustment Brush. I keep my global Sharpening to a minimum, and sometimes I don't apply any global sharpening at all.

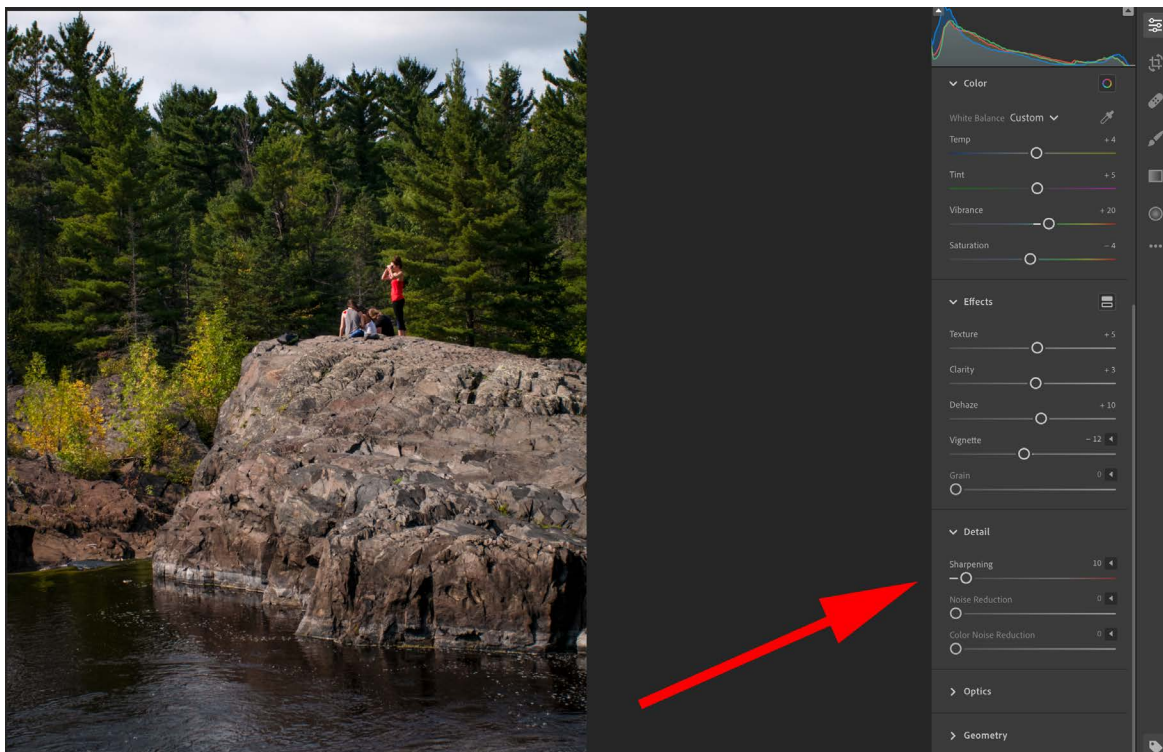


Image 026 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I applied a minimal global Sharpening of +10.

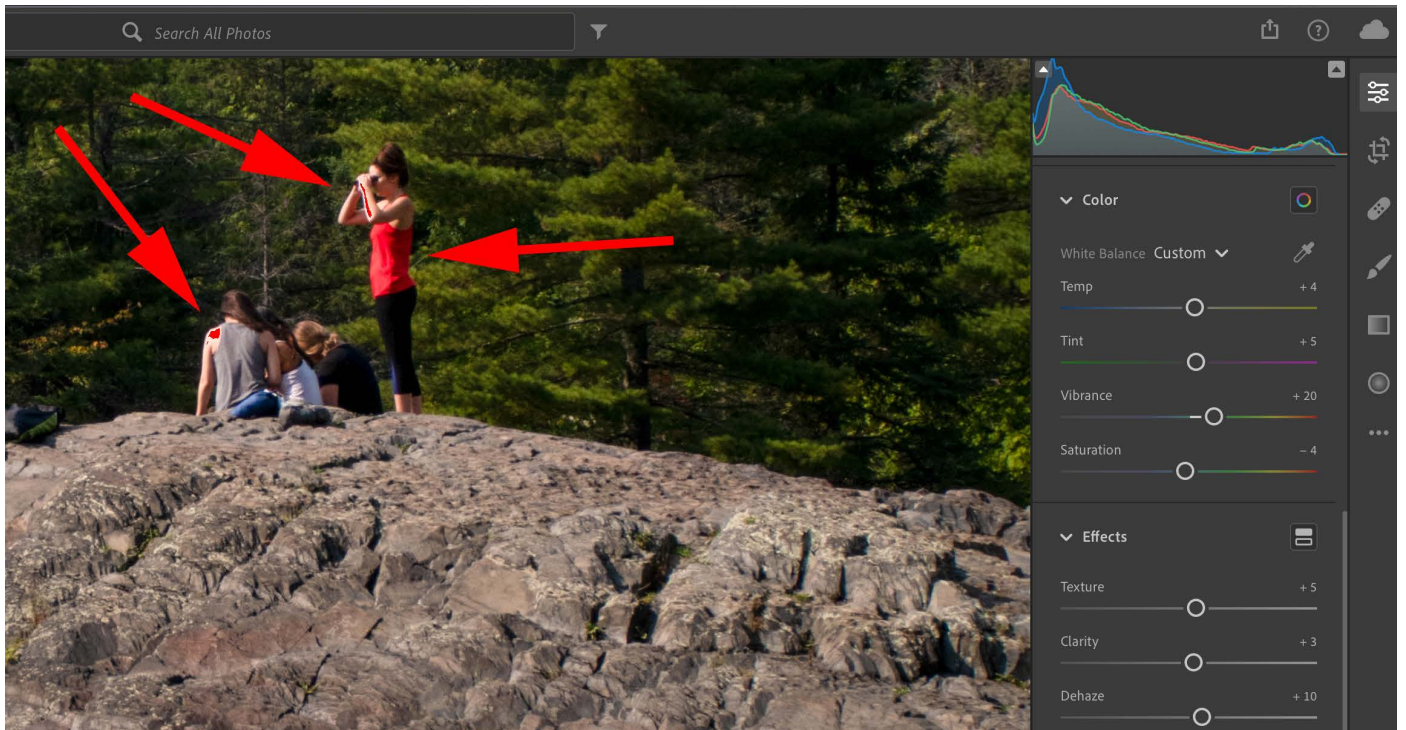


Image 027 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

Remember earlier, we checked the noise? I have now returned to thinking about the noise level. I need to see if the adjustments throughout the FE process increased the noise level.



Image 028 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

At a 200% preview, I can see some generated noise in the woman with the binoculars. I won't make a global Noise adjustment. Instead, using the Adjustment Brush, I will make a localized noise reduction on just her.

I didn't discuss Healing in the original Fundamental Editing Guide. However, within these case studies, I believe it is valuable to discuss Healing as a tool of FE.



Image 029 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I will use the Healing Brush to remove the rock that was an eye snag in the lower right of the picture.



Image 030 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I will also use the Healing Brush to remove some attention-grabbing highlights from the water.



Image 031 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

All of my FE Healing is complete.

Notice that for Fundamental Editing, Healing should be used with great discretion. We aren't trying to completely alter a picture, but merely improve it.



Image 032 – Photograph and Editing by Kent DuFault

On the left is the original camera file, and on the right is our completed Fundamental Editing photograph.



Image 033 – Final Photograph by Kent DuFault

Here is my final photograph!