

Fundamental Editing Case Study #9

WHITE BALANCE AND THE HUMAN SKIN VS. REPTILE SKIN

By Kent DuFault

A year and a half ago, I adopted a baby bearded dragon. His name is Whiskers.

On the day that I brought him home, I set up my Nikon D750 on a tripod and took some shots of me holding him using the self-timer camera feature. The lighting was provided by a single table lamp.

This was my favorite shot of the group because he was looking right at the camera.

On the face of it, this shot isn't all that bad. The White Balance has a lot of red, yellow, and orange, so the skin tones don't look right.

I was also hoping to have the lizard stand out a bit more from the background.

Image 001 is the original shot as it emerged from the camera.



Image 001 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

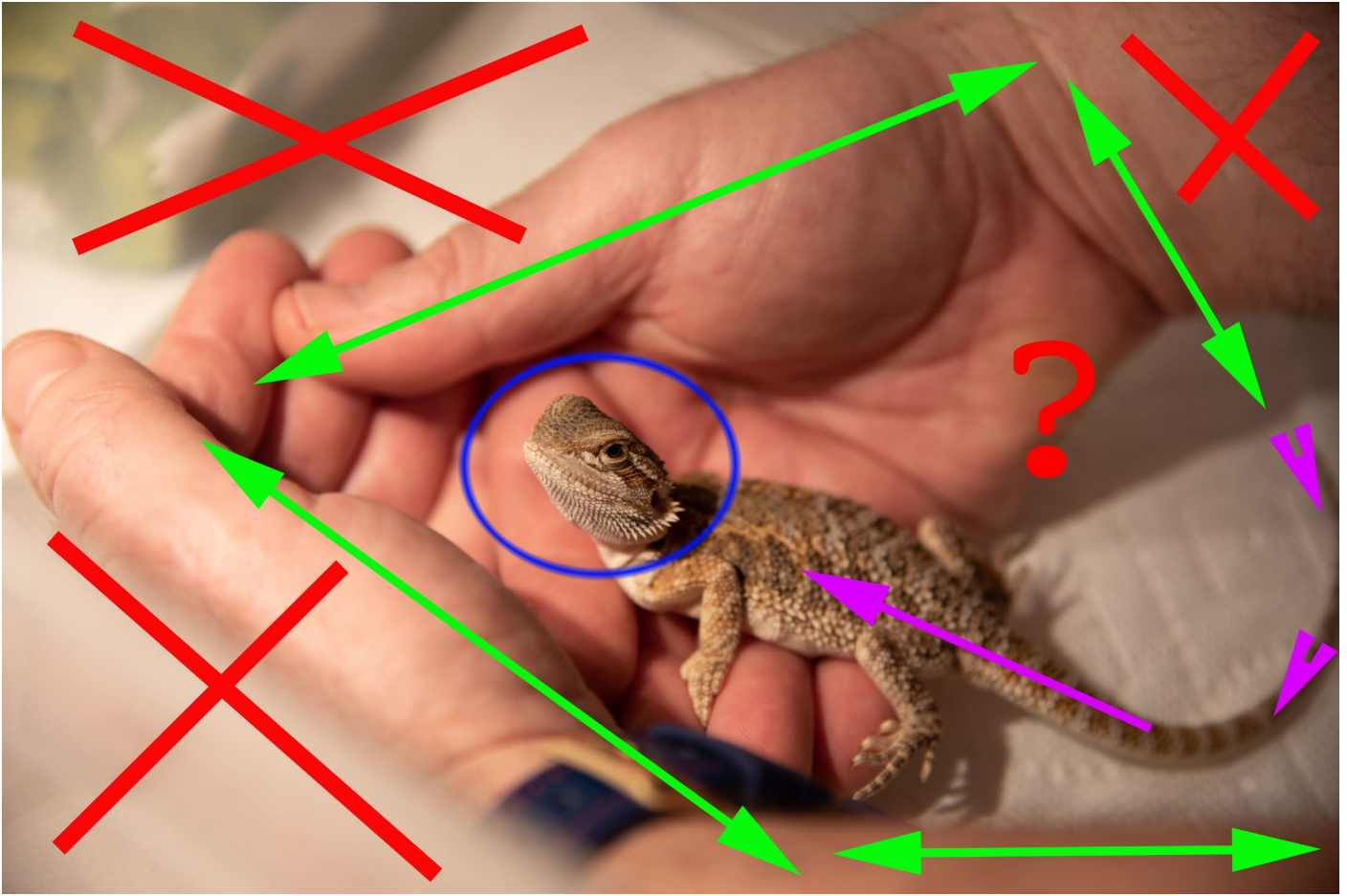


Image 002 – Photograph and Illustration by Kent DuFault

Image 002 shows my intent for this shot. It's kind of a mess, isn't it?

I really want to focus a viewer's eyes onto the face of Whiskers – the area within the blue oval.

The green arrows illustrate how I wanted to use my hands and arms as a frame to his face and body.

The purple arrows indicate that my intent was to use the tail and body as a leading line towards the face.

The red Xs are negative space that I want to eliminate or subdue in my final composition.

The red question mark indicates negative space that I will have to resolve as I progress through the Fundamental Editing list.

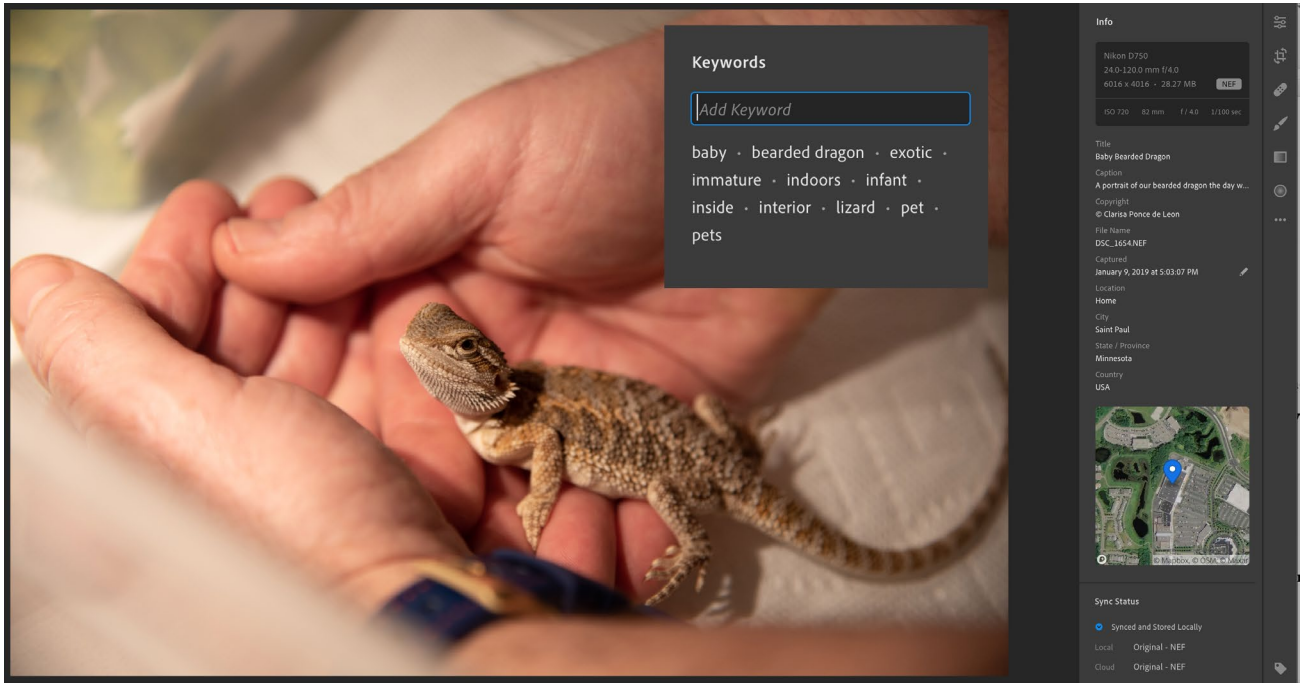


Image 003 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

This photograph will be an excellent stock image with good sales potential. I'm getting my metadata and keywords logged right away.

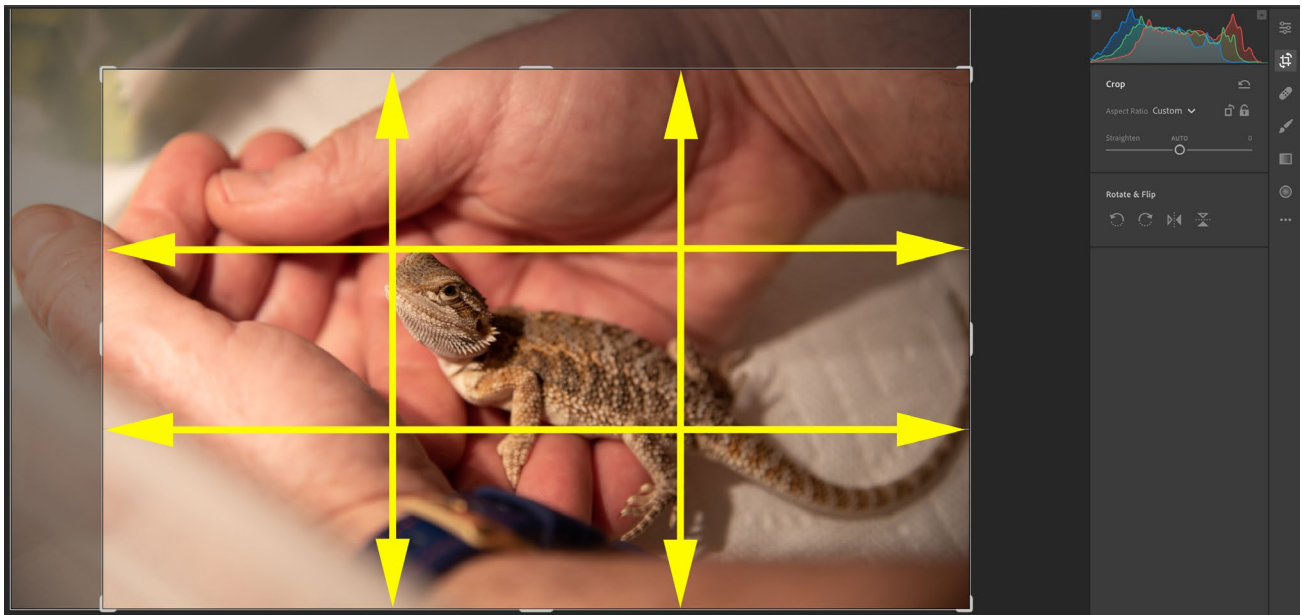


Image 004 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

A good crop eliminates some of that unnecessary negative space. It also solidifies my hands and arms as a tight frame around my subject. Whiskers' face is now in just the right spot for the Rule of

Thirds grid, and the tighter crop moves his head forward due to its increased size within the frame. I was careful not to crop off the tail, as I think the curve works well for the leading line and adds interest overall.

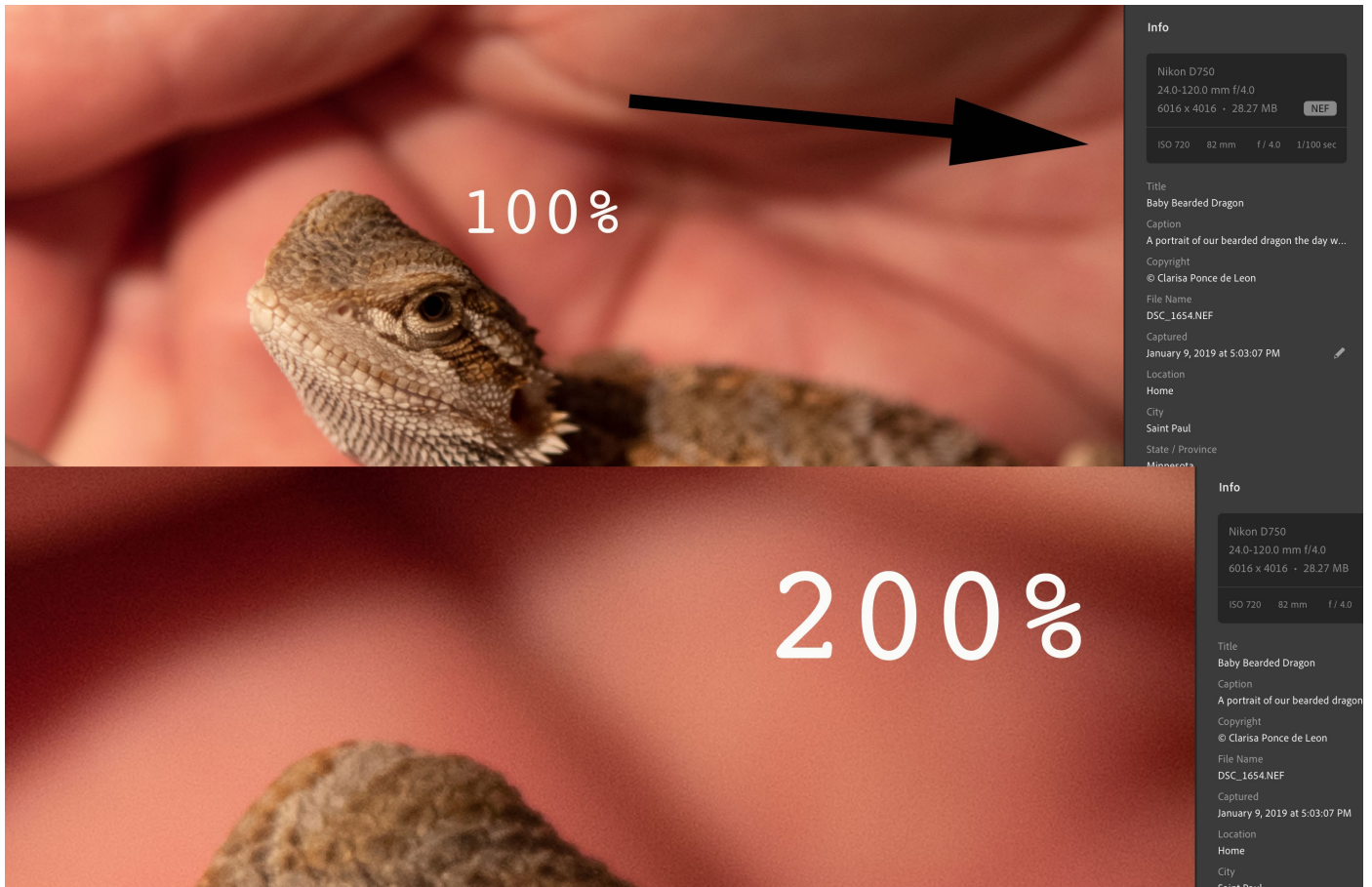


Image 005 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

This photograph was created at ISO 720. The camera was a Nikon D750, which is a full-frame sensor camera. The Previews show almost no digital noise even at 200%.

I will leave the Noise Reduction at 0 for now, and I will recheck it again at the end of the FE list.

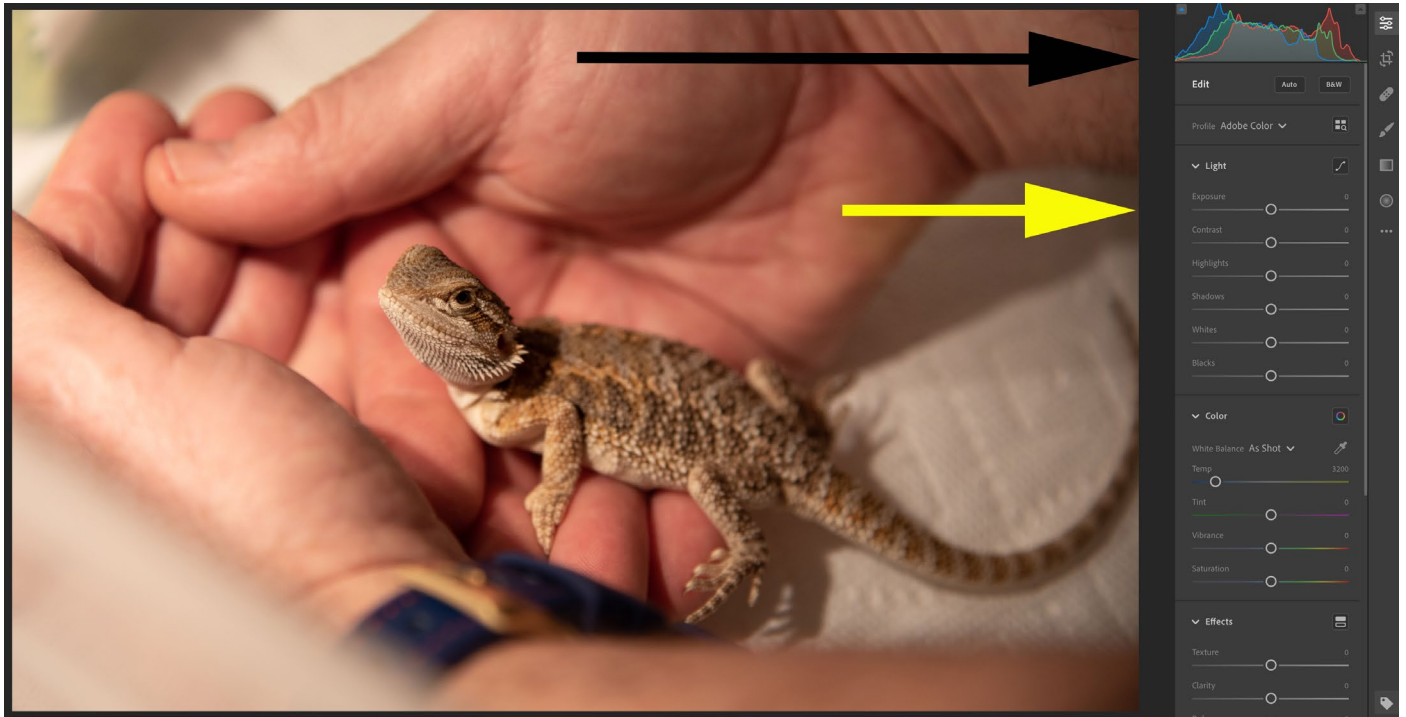


Image 006 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

My next step in the Fundamental Editing (FE) list is a global Exposure adjustment.

I always start this step by taking a good look at the histogram. In this case study, I have excellent tone value across almost the entire scale.

Visually, the Preview looks a little dark. But I think I will leave the Exposure slider at 0 and raise the Exposure of the lizard later on using the Adjustment Brush.

Note: Look closely at the histogram. Take notice of how the RGB signals have separated. When you see this in your histogram, then you know that the picture has white balance issues. The color is unbalanced for some reason. That's not always a bad thing. For example, a sunset can be visually red, and that will cause the red channel to be separated in the histogram. However, in that case, it's expected and normal. Understanding your histogram and the Fundamental Editing process will make you a better photographer and post-processing editor.



Image 007 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I turned on the Clipping Indicators and discovered that I already have a perfect Black Point in my lizard's eye.

I have no White Point yet. I will set the White Point locally at the lizard's face with the Adjustment Brush later on.

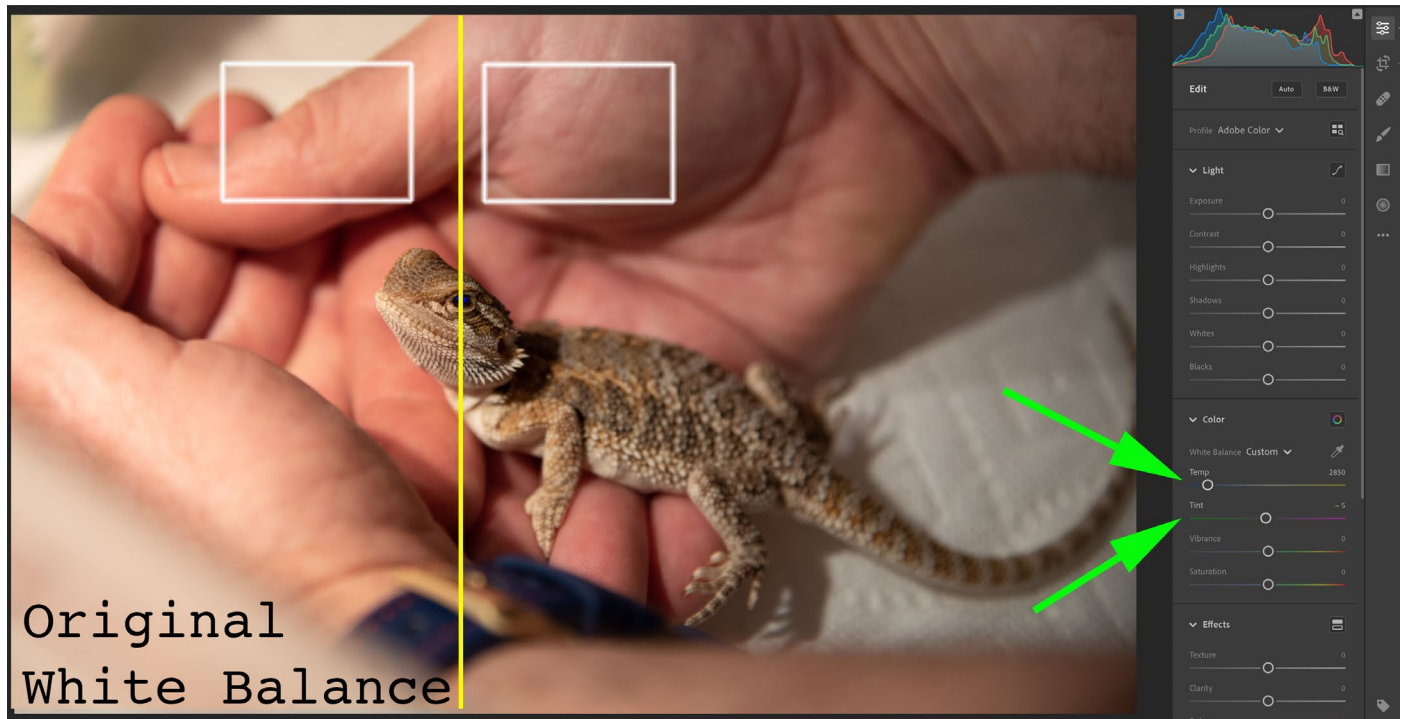


Image 008 – Screenshots by Kent DuFault

Now, we are at the White Balance (WB) step on the FE list.

It's here that we will address the significant problem with this photo.

It's pretty easy for me to see the white balance problem in the skin tones. I adjusted the Temp and Tint sliders by using the Preview window as a visual guide.

For Image 008, I gave you a before and after view of the skin tones inside the white boxes.

Also, take a look at the new histogram reading. The RGB channels have pulled closer together, indicating a better white balance.

My White Balance settings were Temp 2850 and Tint -5.

While this corrected the skin tones, it also removed some of the natural colorings from the lizard. I will put that color back in a later localized FE step.

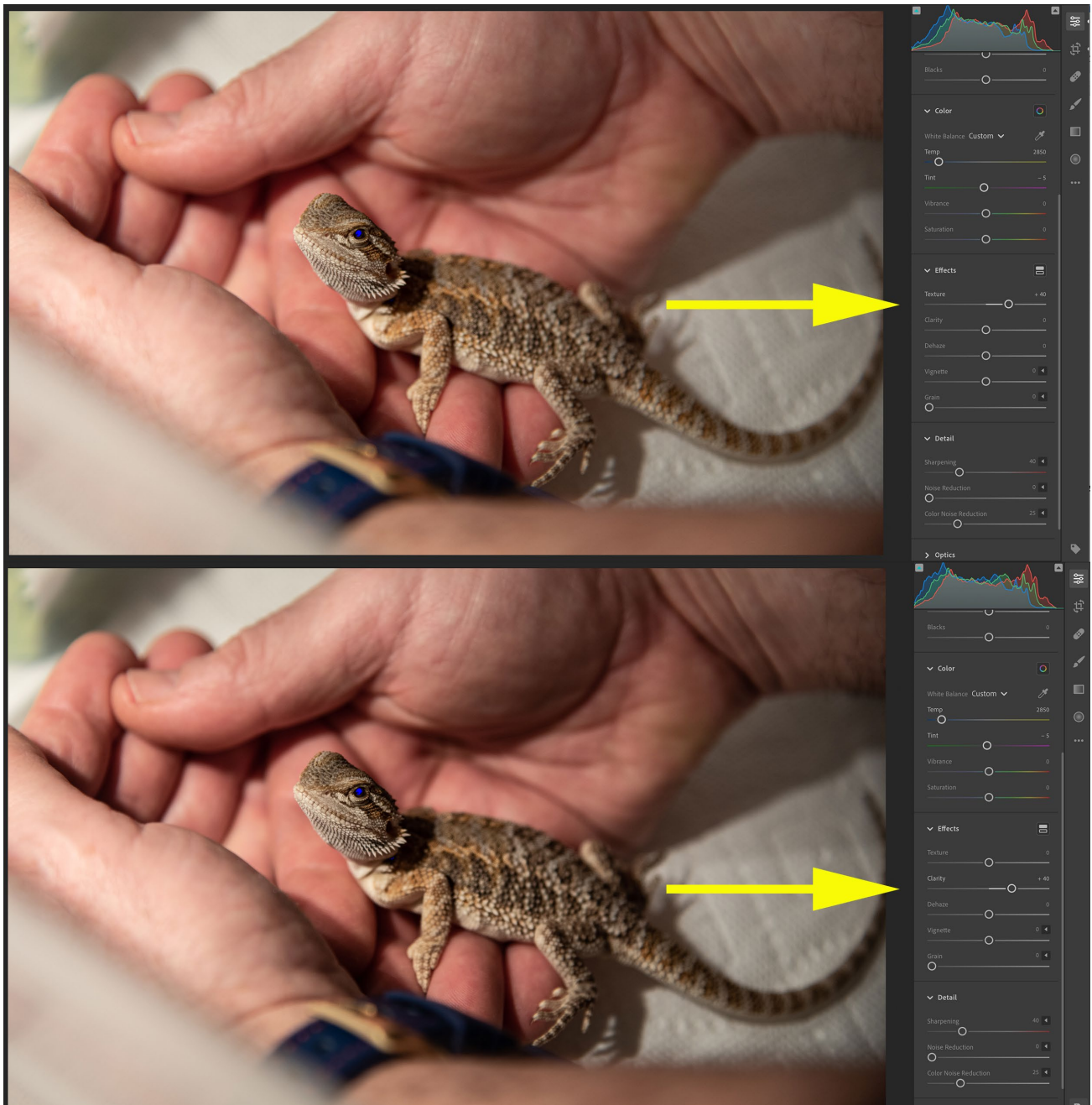


Image 009 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

Clarity has a bias to add darker and more pronounced shadows than the Texture slider.

The Texture adjustment wasn't yet developed when the original Fundamental Editing guide was written.

This is a perfect example photo for the Texture tool.

Whiskers has a lot of texture in his skin, and I really want to bring that out in the photo. However, my

lighting was directional and bringing in contrast right from the start. I don't want to accentuate that.

I will leave the Clarity setting at 0, and then I will raise the Texture setting to +40.

When you view the final image for this case study, you will see how exquisitely that worked out.

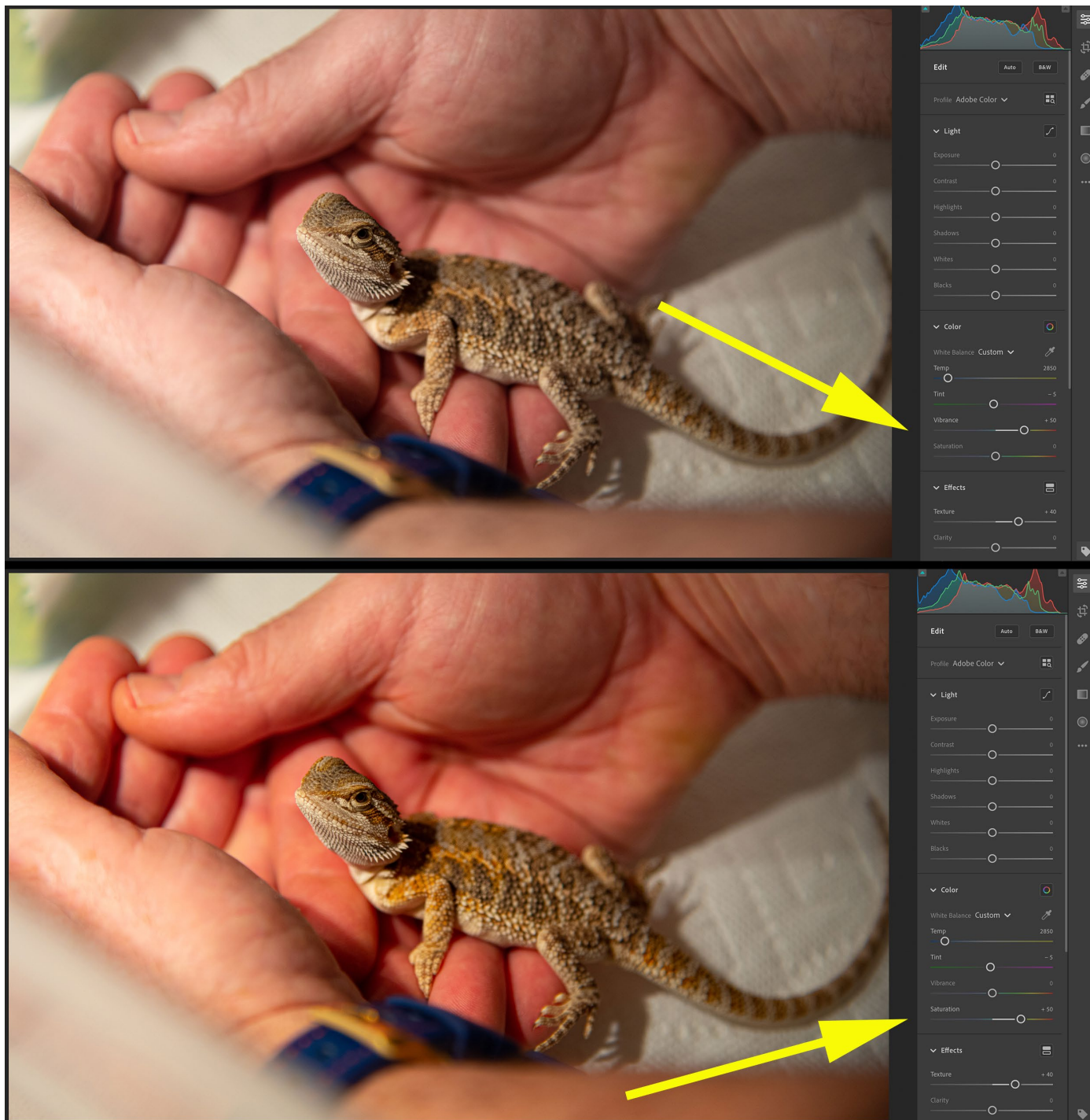


Image 010 – Screenshots by Kent DuFault

Following my standard procedure, I tested the Vibrance and Saturation sliders individually to see their effect.

In this case, both of them begin to introduce unwanted color shifts.

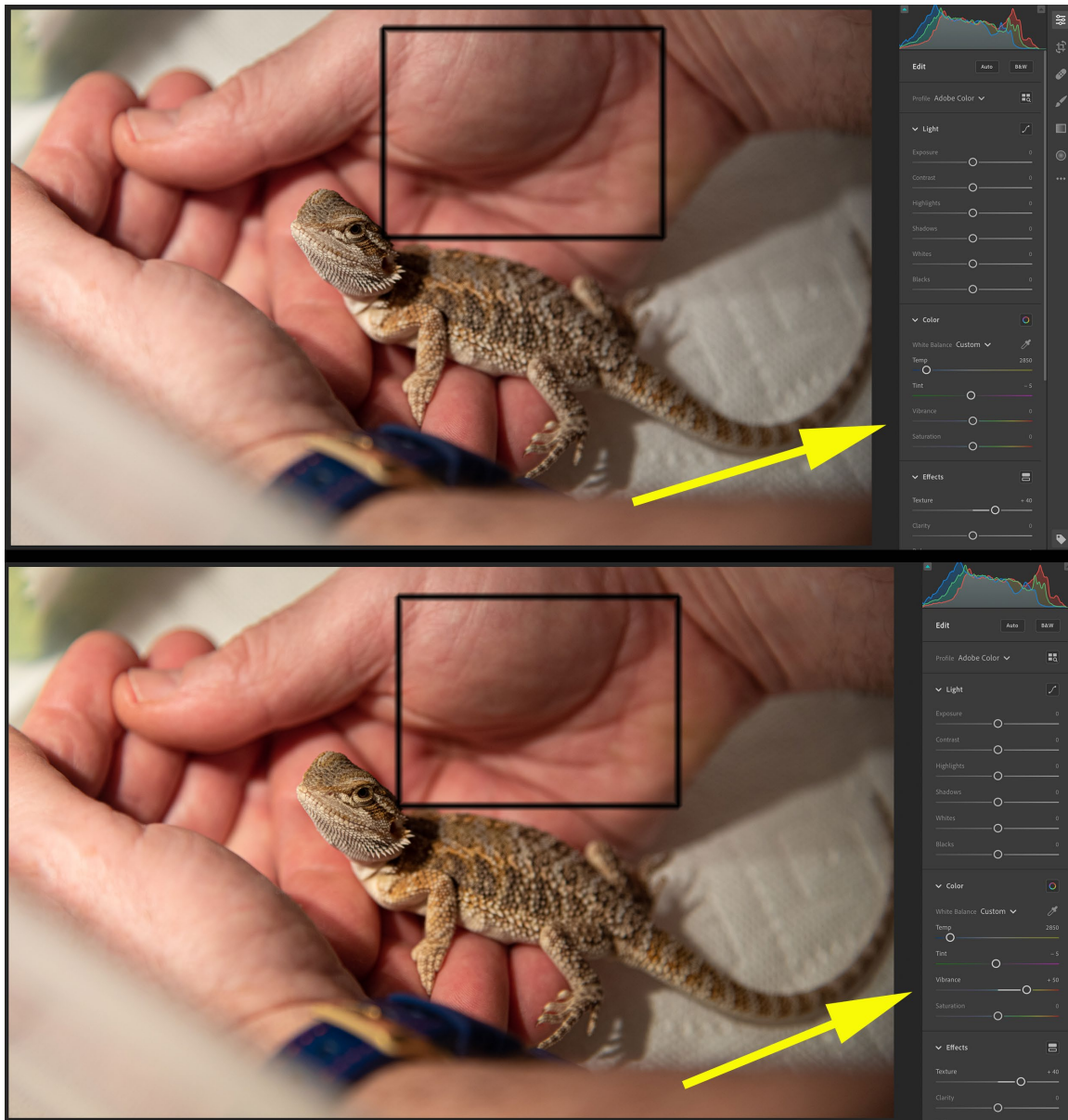


Image 011 – Screenshots by Kent DuFault

I played around with the Vibrance slider as it did bring back some of the colors to the lizard. But I still wasn't happy with the skin tones if I increased Vibrance.

I will leave the global settings of Vibrance and Saturation at 0, and then perhaps locally bump up some levels of color with the Adjustment Brush.

Note: Have you noticed how many Fundamental Editing steps we have skipped over with this case study? I think it's vital to grasp that the Fundamental Editing list is critical to follow from beginning to end. However, it is a fluid process.

Sometimes you will skip steps. Other times, you will return to a step twice or more. Once you begin following FE, at some point it will become rote memory. You will move back and forth through the steps with ease, but will always start the process at the beginning and moving towards the end. Three steps are firm. Crop first. Next, check the noise and fix it if necessary. Sharpen last!

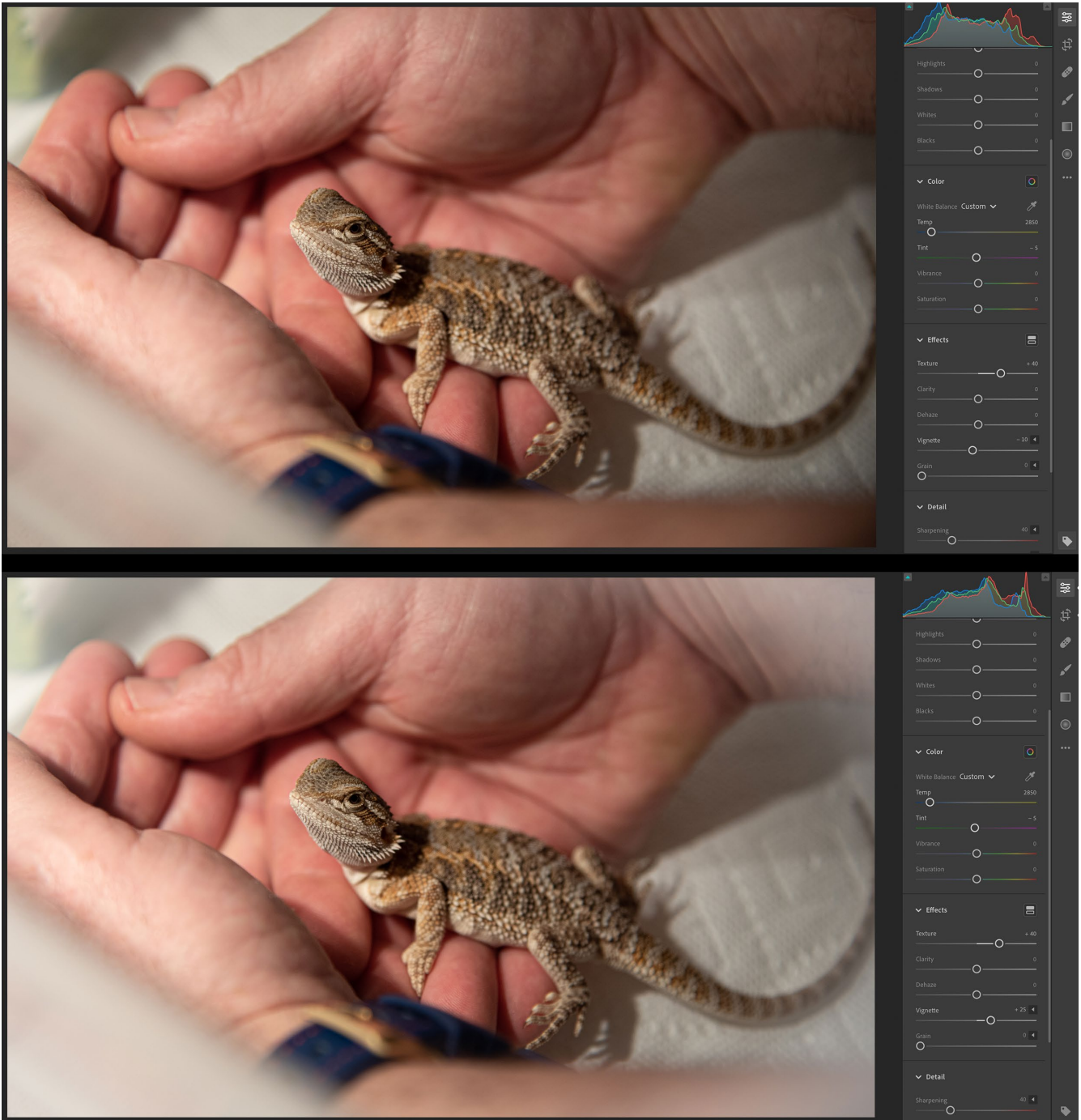


Image 012 – Screenshots by Kent DuFault

I will typically apply a vignette when I want to push a viewer's eyes towards the center of the picture.

From that description, you would think that this case study photo would be a perfect candidate. It isn't, and let me tell you why.

Note: When the outside perimeter of your photo is primarily white or light in color or tone, a dark vignette will rarely work. It's fighting the natural

appearance of the shot. Sometimes a white vignette can work. I did an experiment with the white Vignette on Image 012 (bottom). However, it turned the arms on the right side of the shot into a milky white, and I really want this picture to be as realistic as possible for future stock photo sales potential.

I left the Vignette slider at 0.

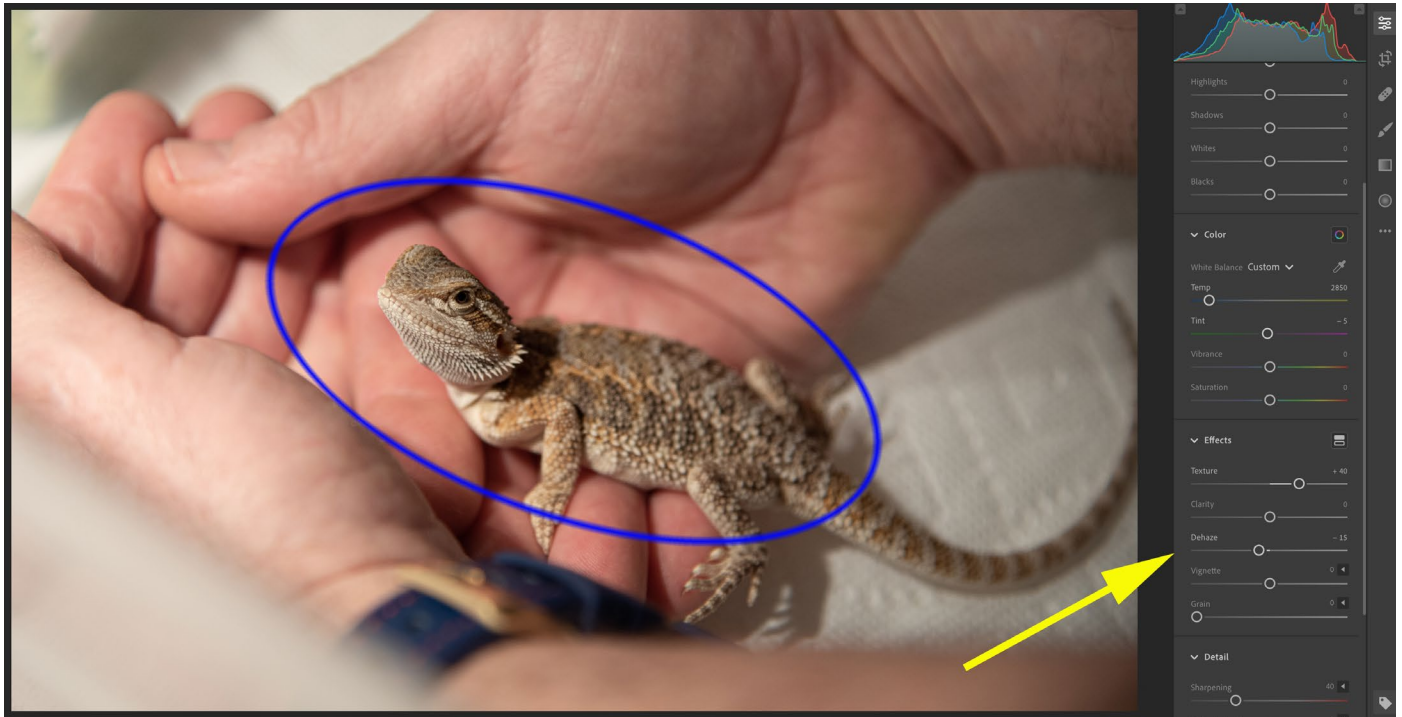


Image 013 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

The Dehaze setting provided some interesting and unexpected help with this picture.

Earlier, I mentioned that the lighting for this shot was direct and created a harsher contrast than I would have wished.

By slightly lowering the Dehaze to -15, it had a softening effect on the overall contrast!

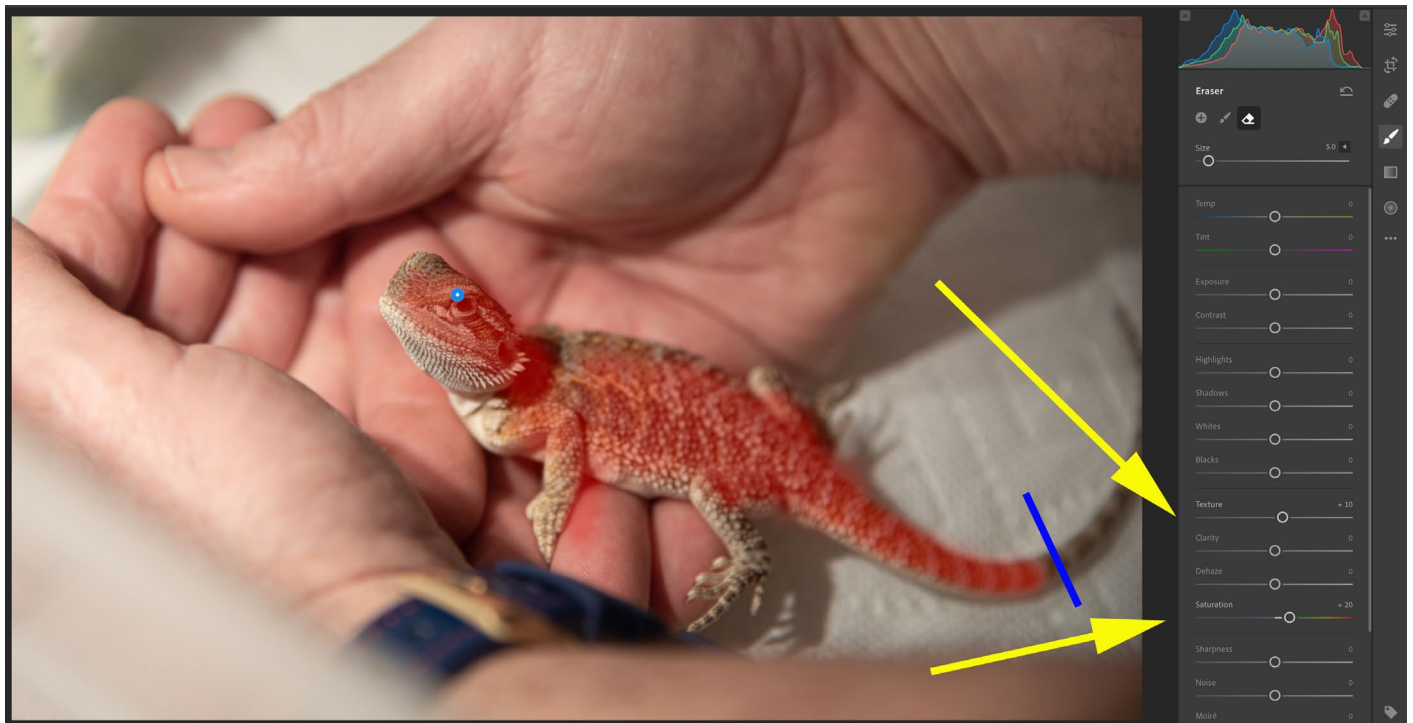


Image 014 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I will now use the Adjustment Brush for localized edits. That will hopefully meet my original intent for this photo, which is to direct a viewer's eyes right towards the lizard's face.

I begin with a mask that covers most of Whiskers' body. Notice that I left out the tail. I did that

because I want the tail to be a leading line towards the face. However, I don't want it to draw too much visual weight, especially being located right on the edge of the frame.

For the body, I increased Texture +10 and Saturation +20.



Image 015 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

Next, I want to drastically reduce the visual weight of the watchband. I used the following settings: Exposure -0.28, Shadows -19, Whites -29, Saturation -100.

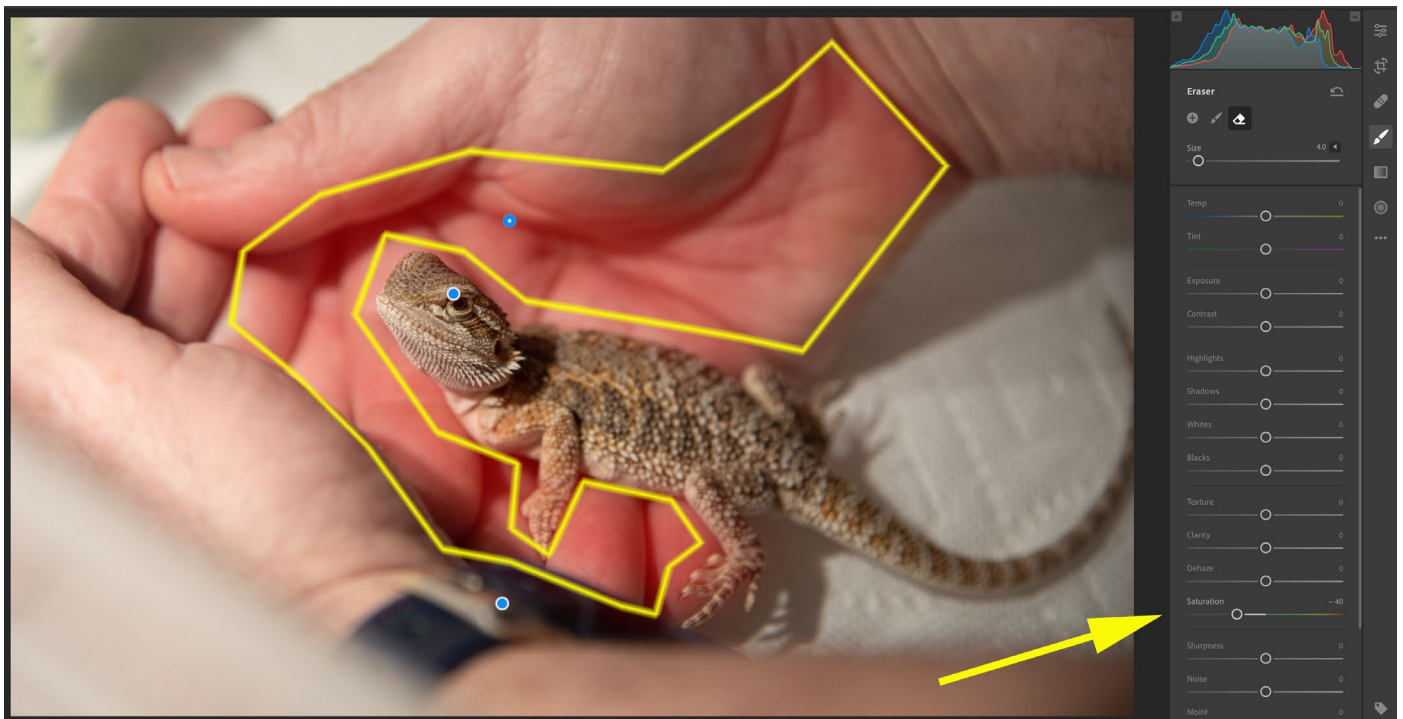


Image 016 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I still see too much red in the shadow area within the folds of the hand. I created a mask and reduced Saturation to -40.

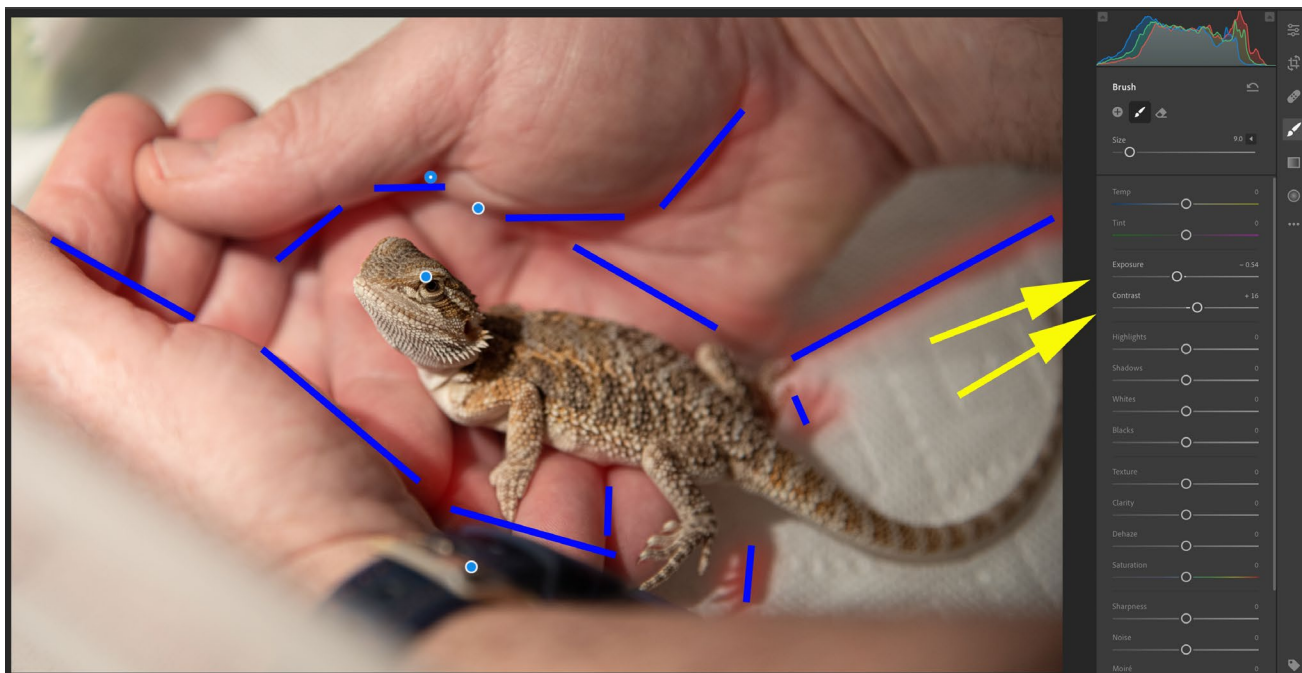


Image 017 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I decided to enhance my intent for the hands becoming a frame to Whiskers by darkening the shadows outlined in blue. You can see how it forms a perfect frame around the subject.

My settings were Exposure -0.54 and Contrast +16.

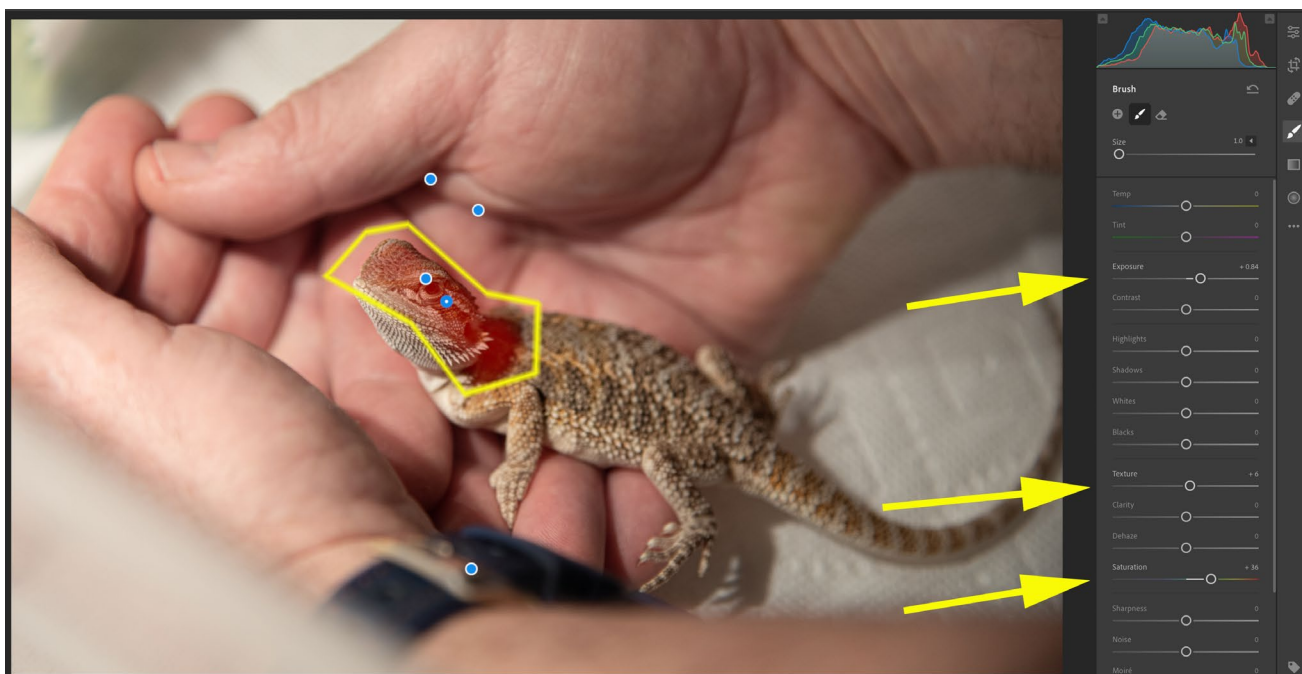


Image 018 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

Now, I will work on just the head area. This spot is my hero spot. I want this spot to be the brightest, sharpest, most textured, and most colorful location within the entire frame of the picture.

I used the following settings: Exposure +0.84, Texture +6, Saturation +36.



Image 019 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I will now apply some reverse thinking. In the previous step, I worked to enhance the visual weight of the head.

At this point, I will work to **reduce** the visual weight of areas that I don't want the eyes to go to!

The blue lines indicate where I have painted a mask at 35% opacity. I have reduced the opacity of

the mask because I want the effect of my changes to be definite but subtle.

My settings in these areas were: Texture -100, Clarity -100, Dehaze -100, and Sharpness -100.

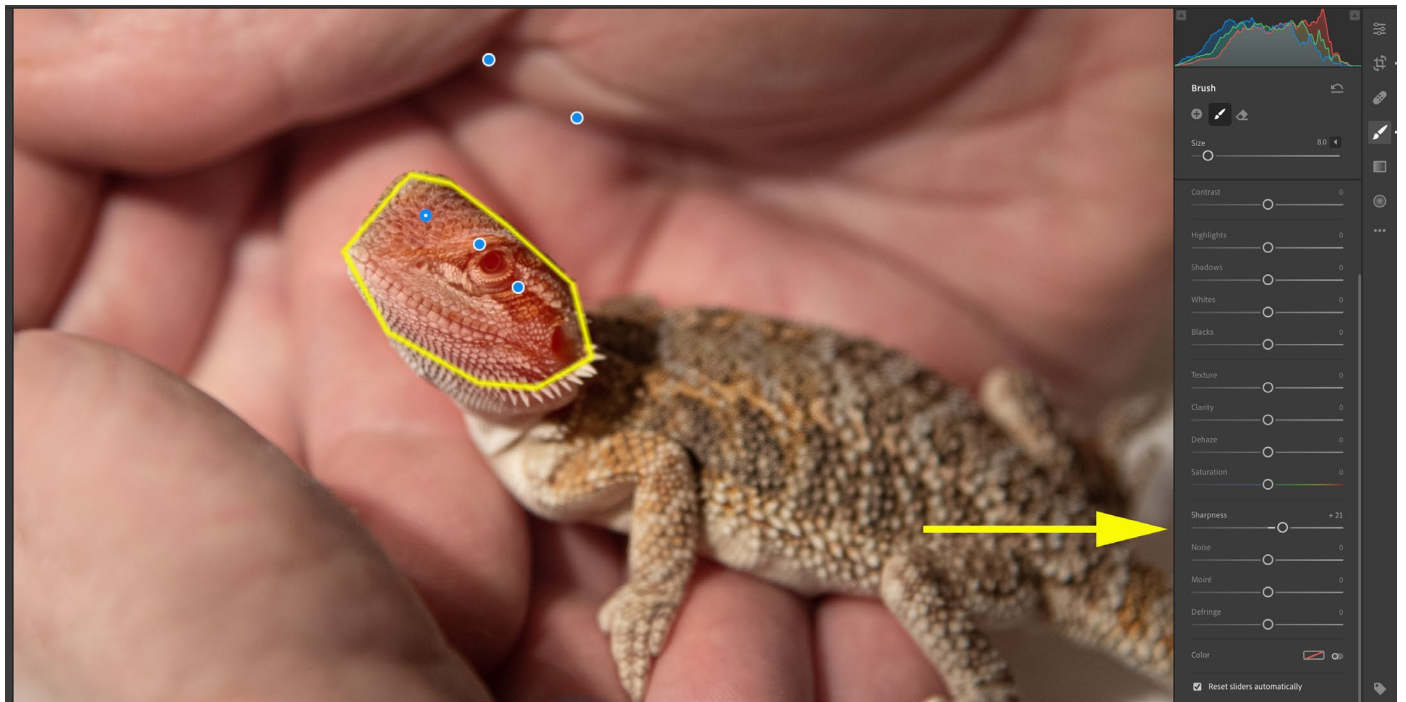


Image 020 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I will now locally sharpen Whiskers' face. My setting is Sharpness +21.

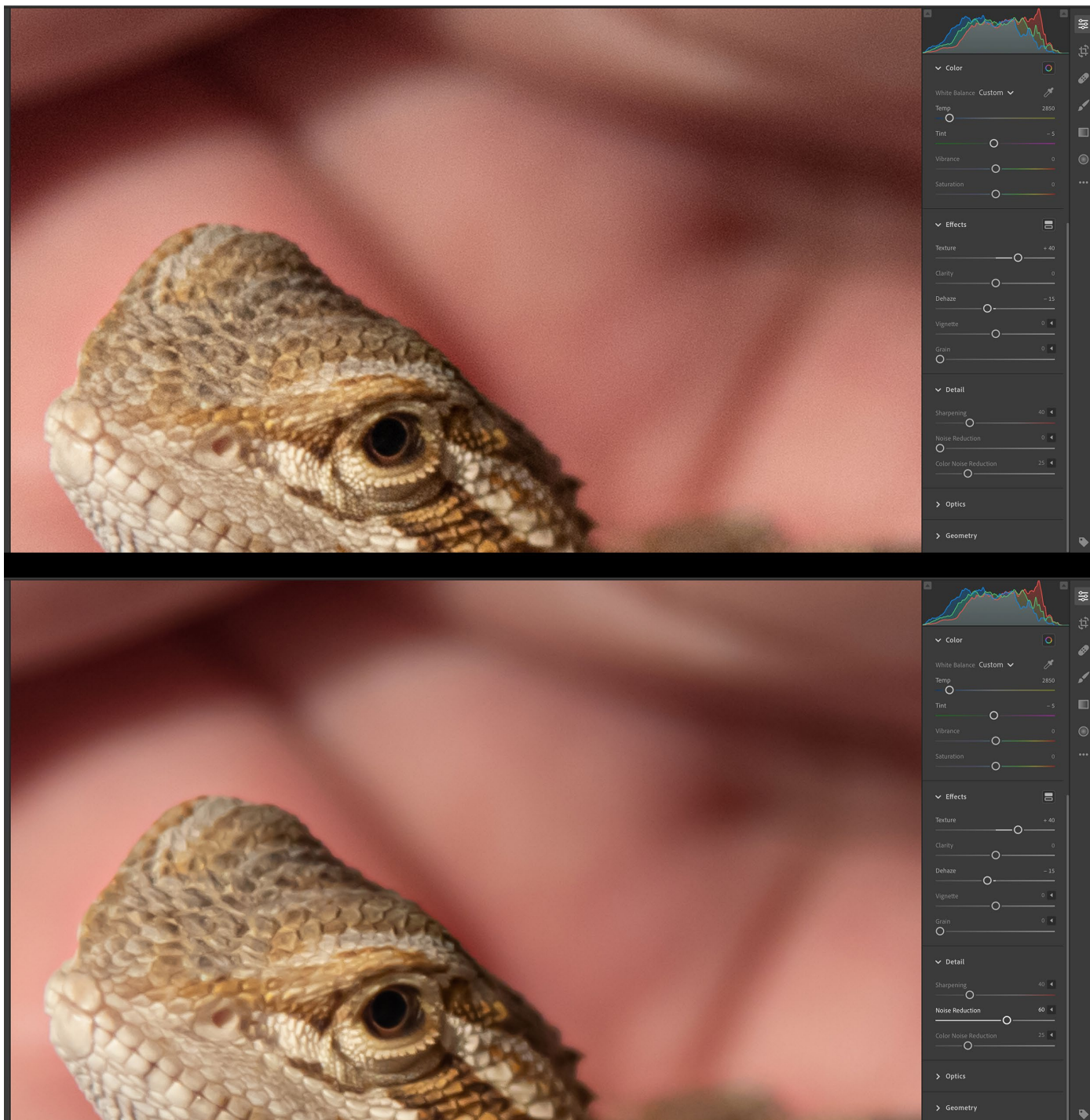


Image 021 – Screenshots by Kent DuFault

I am rechecking the digital noise levels.

It is my hope that this photo will sell to hundreds of veterinarian clinics and exotic pet stores around the world. I want them to buy large prints to hang on their walls. I want zero noise.

I can still see some noise in the skin on the hands.

To get rid of the noise, I had to raise the Noise Reduction slider to +60. Unfortunately, that really softened the sharpness of the entire picture.

I'm going to have to reverse engineer this problem!



Image 022 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

As an alternative, I painted an Adjustment Brush mask everywhere in my photo, except on the essential parts of Whiskers, which were not showing any digital noise at all anyway.

For this mask, I set the Noise Reduction to +60. This actually helped improve my composition by lowering the sharpness (visual weight) around my hero subject!

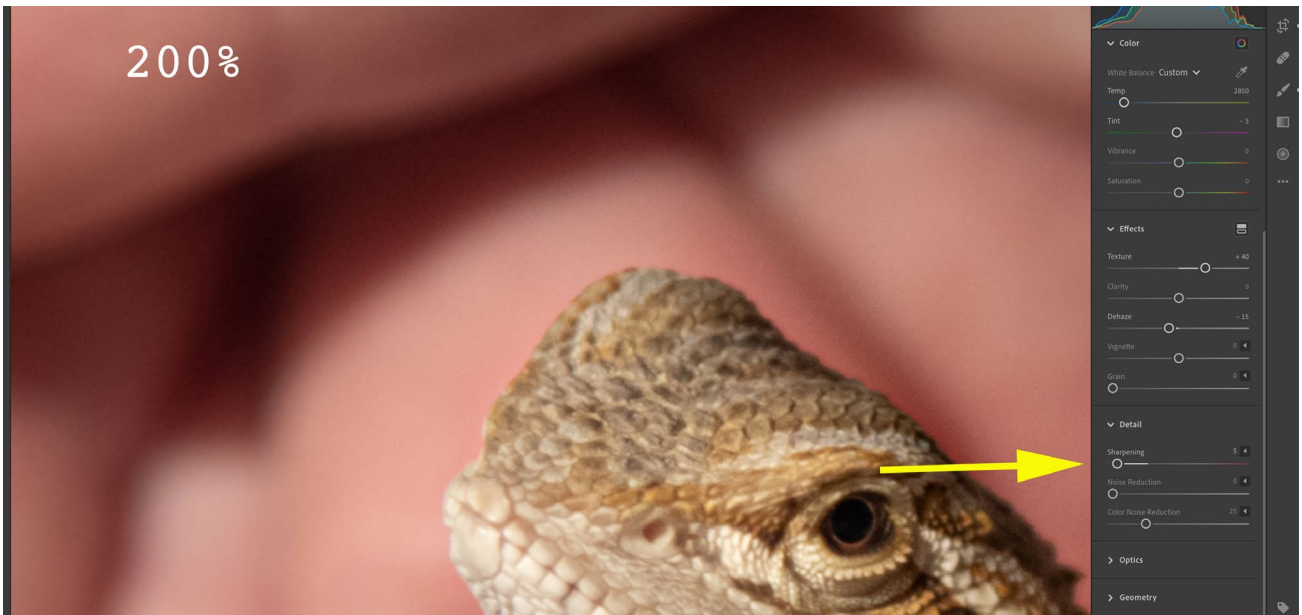


Image 023 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I previously sharpened my hero subject locally. I don't want to globally Sharpen too much, or it will bring back some digital noise or, worse yet, create digital artifacts.

I set the global Sharpening to 5.



Image 024 – Photograph and Fundamental Editing by Kent DuFault

On the left is the original picture file as it emerged from the camera. On the right is my edited final photograph.

It's pretty easy to see how much this image has improved!



Image 025 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

Here is my final photograph, all ready to send off to the stock photo agency.