

Fundamental Editing Case Study #3

WHEN THE LIGHTING DOESN'T PROPERLY EMPHASIZE YOUR SUBJECT

By Kent DuFault

I have a thing for trees, especially birch trees. I have a hard time walking past a stand of birch trees without taking a picture.

The problem with this obsession is that the trees are typically located in a forest, and the lighting is often quite subdued, or it is intense and creates too much contrast.

Image 001 was taken while camping with my wife.

We came across this little stand of birch trees, and I was mesmerized by the white-colored bark against the darker background.

Unfortunately, the original picture, from the camera, lacked the visual magic that I saw in my mind.

Let's see if I can rescue it with some Fundamental Editing!



Image 001 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

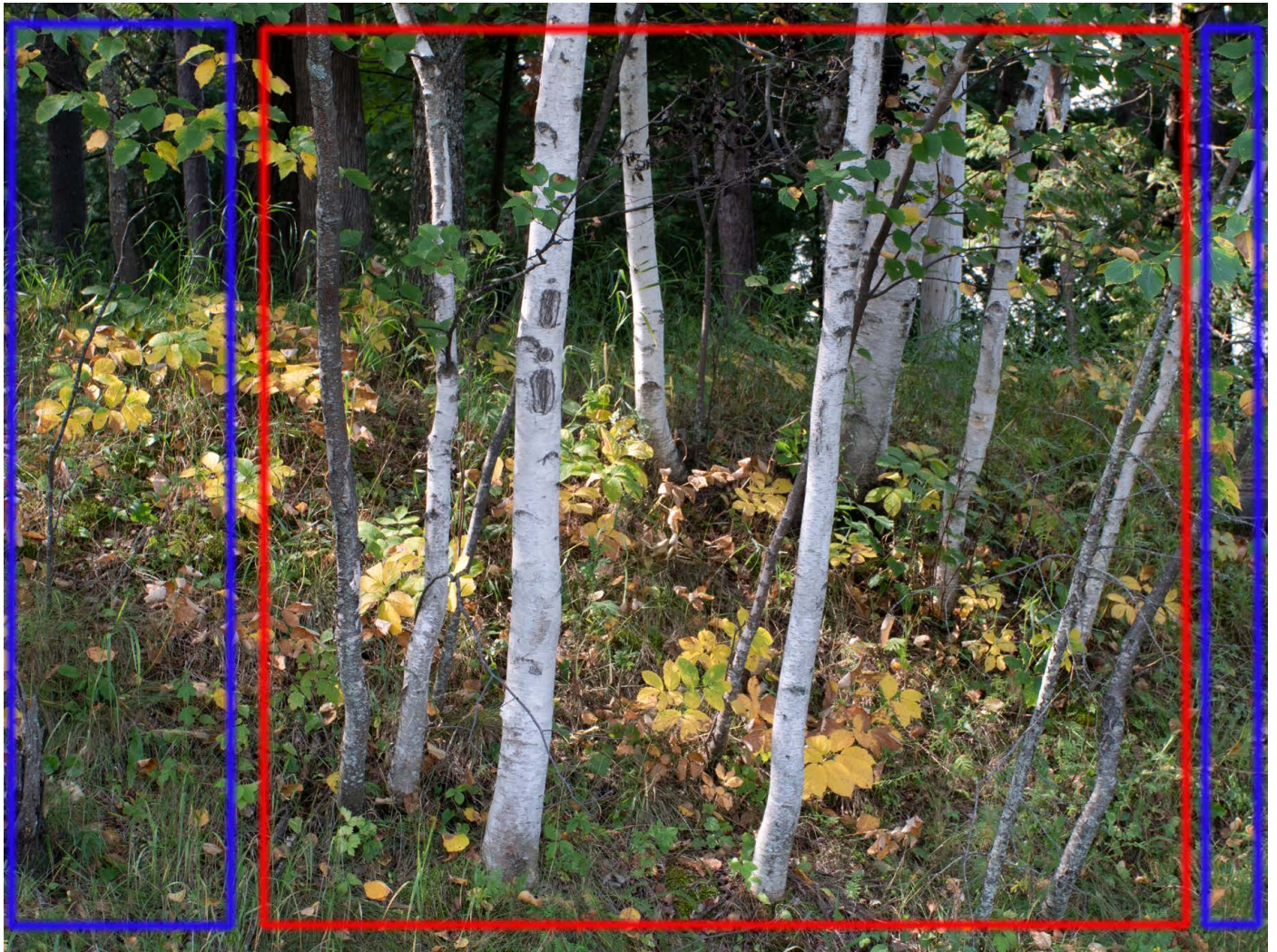


Image 002 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

Upon reflection, I realized that the core of my picture was located within the red box. I also had negative space that wasn't adding anything to my composition located within the blue boxes. Also,

I needed to create an emphasis on the white-colored bark against the darker and more colorful background.

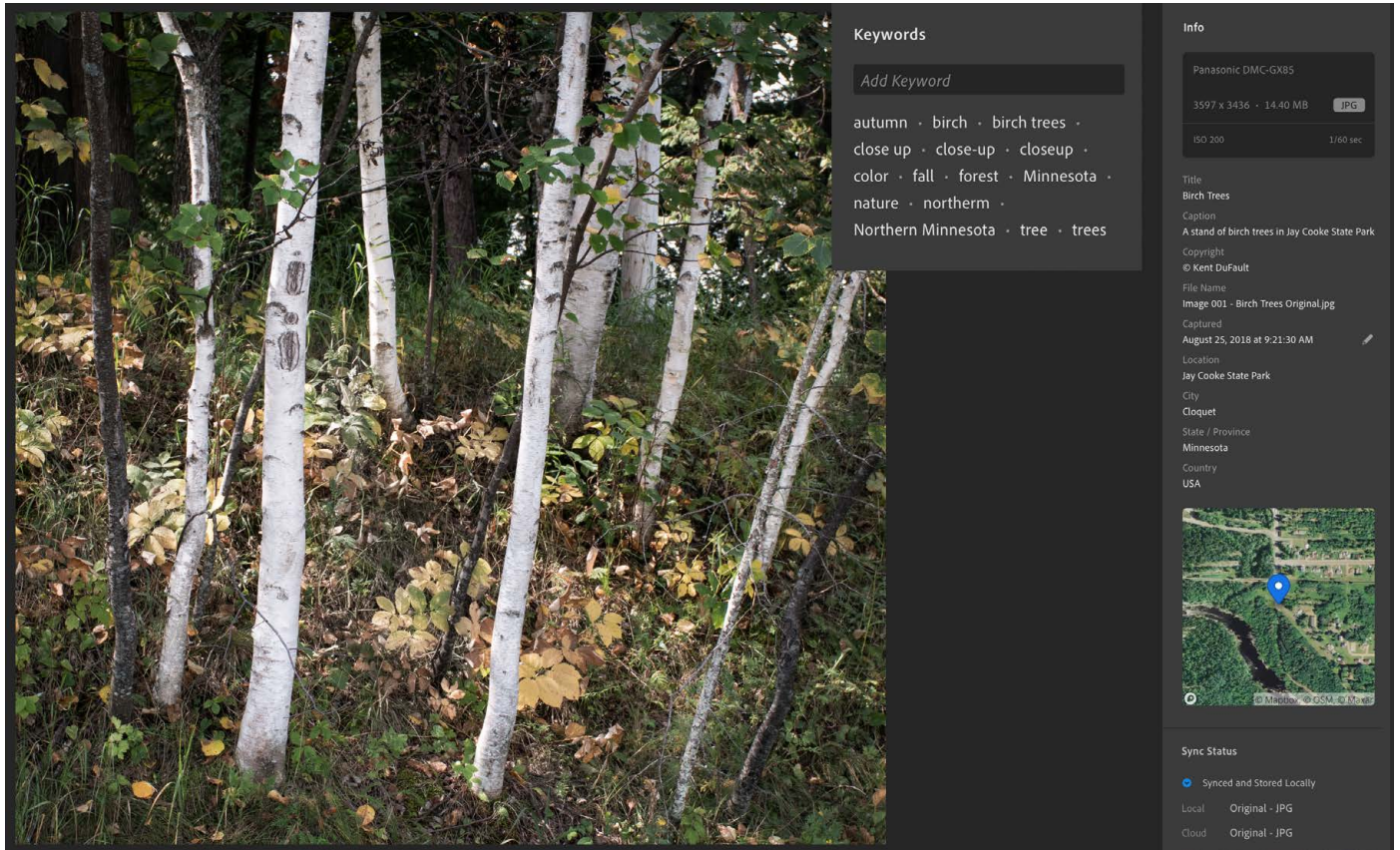


Image 003 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

As always, I added identifying image details and keywords to the photograph metadata. I do this to help my memory. Five years from now, I may not remember that this was taken in Jay Cooke

State Park. That could make a big difference to someone interested in buying it for a particular use.

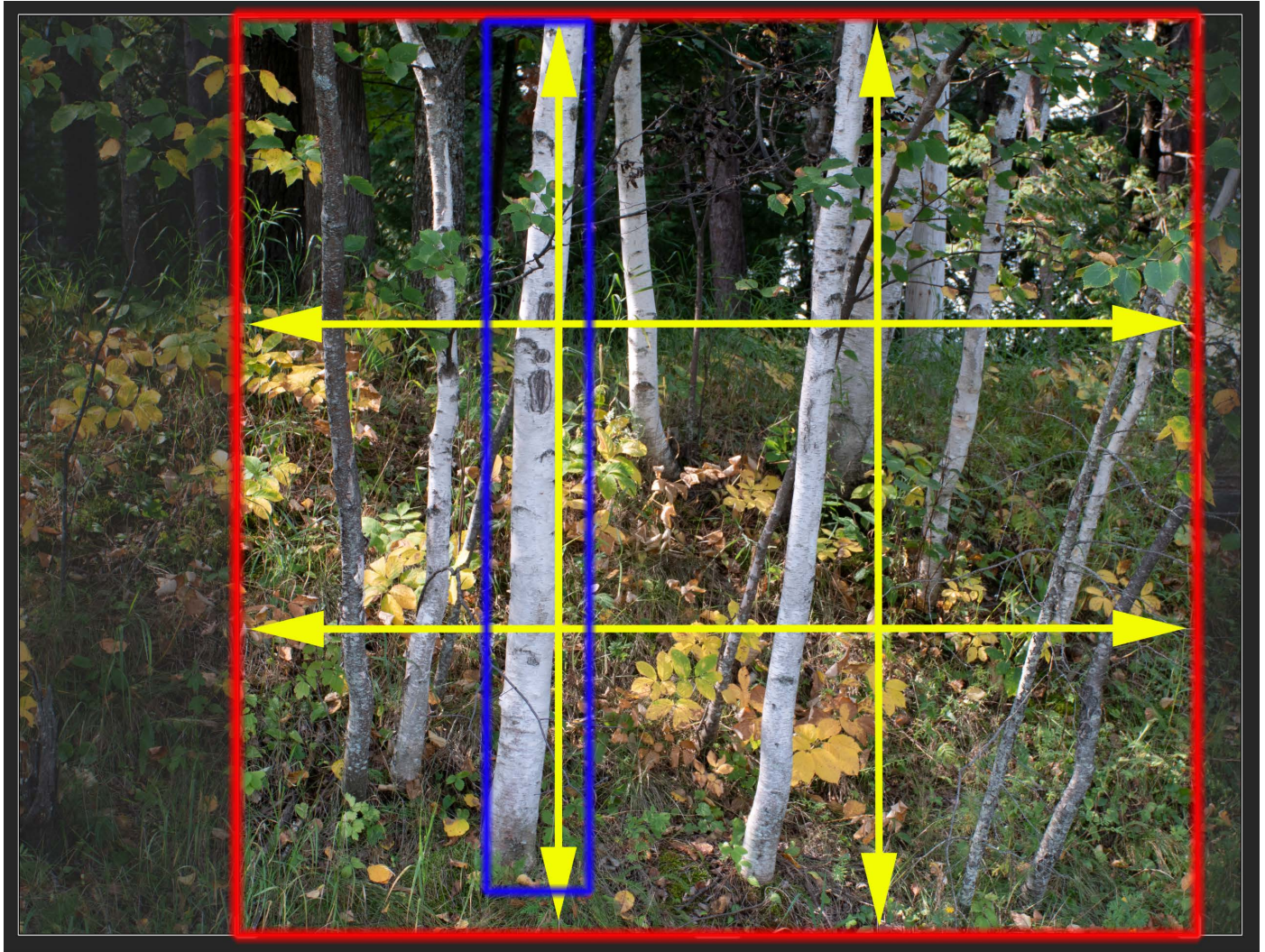


Image 004 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

Taking into account my intent for this picture, I am going to crop to the frame as indicated by the red box.

The tree located within the blue box is going to be my hero.

Note: A commonly used professional photography term, which is also used in the movie industry, is what's known as 'the hero.' The hero is where you want a viewer's eyes to finally rest. The subject in Image 004 is the stand of trees, but I need a resting spot, and that is the hero. By the time I am done editing this picture, the tree in the

blue box will have more visual weight within the composition than the rest of the trees.

This presents a twofold task for this editing project.

- 1) All the trees must stand out from the background.
- 2) This particular tree must stand out from the rest of the trees.

Sounds challenging!



Image 005 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

The next step in the Fundamental Editing (FE) list is to check and perhaps fix any digital noise.

This photograph was created with a good camera, at ISO 200, and under a reasonable amount of light. Plus, it was correctly exposed. I have no significant noise to worry about here.



Image 006 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

The exposure on this photograph is reasonable, given the lighting. The histogram shows us two things.

- 1) The middle tones have fallen slightly to the left of the central part of the histogram scale.

- 2) There is minimal Clipping on both the Shadows and Highlights sides of the histogram.

An increase in the global Exposure adjustment will push the middle tones to the right without creating any clipping problems.



Image 007 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

I pushed the global Exposure level to +0.83. The middle tones are now better situated within the histogram.

However, this adjustment actually reduced the visual weight of the trees against the background.

No worries, though, we will address this later on in the FE (Fundamental Editing) list.



Image 008 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

After making that global Exposure adjustment, it's time to check for Clipping. I make sure that the Clipping Indicators are turned on. Blue depicts Clipping in the Darks, and Red represents Clipping in the Highlights.

There is very minor Clipping in the Shadows and Highlights. For this case study, this is excellent. The Clipping doesn't affect the subject, and it ensures that I will have a full tonal range within my final picture.

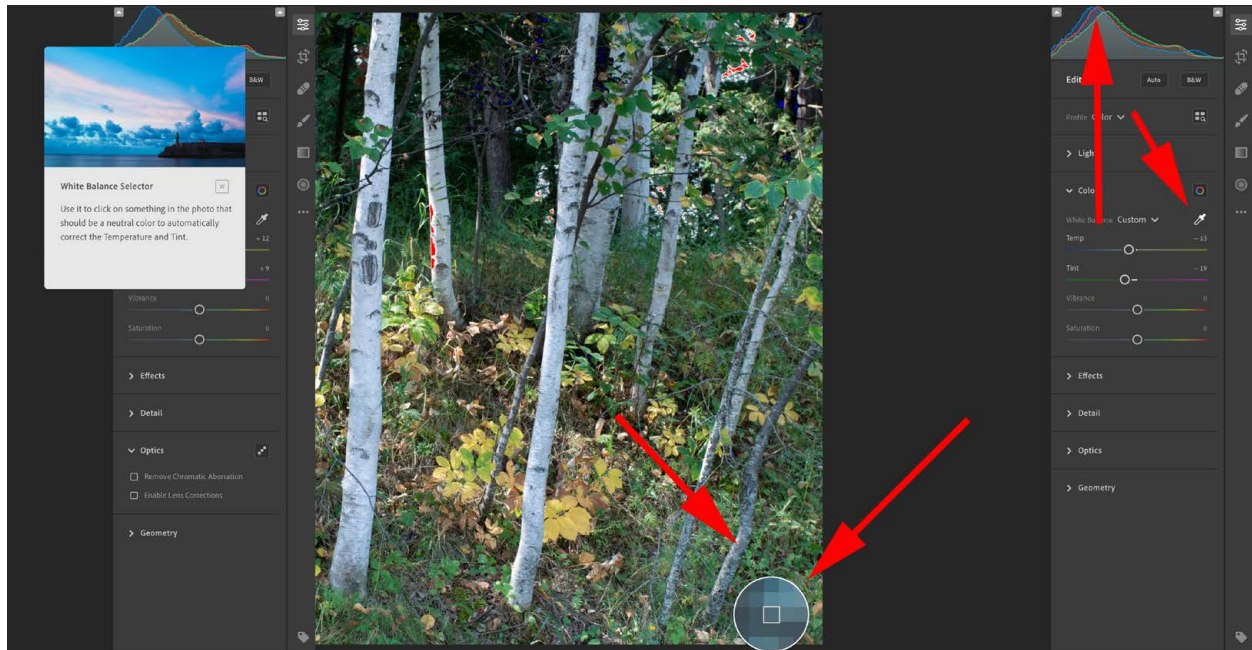


Image 009 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

The next step in the FE list is White Balance.

I felt that the original RAW camera file contained too much blue and cyan. I tried using the White Balance Selector Tool to correct it.

The smaller red arrow pointing downward on the Preview Image (Image 009) indicates where

I clicked to try and select a neutral gray area. The larger red arrow pointing downward on the Preview Image indicates what the selection point looked like.

This choice did not clean up the color bias. Let's try something else.



Image 010 – Screenshots by Kent DuFault

Looking at Image 010, on the left is the original image file and on the right I used the Auto White Balance option in Lightroom CC. It helped. But I am going to explore this further.

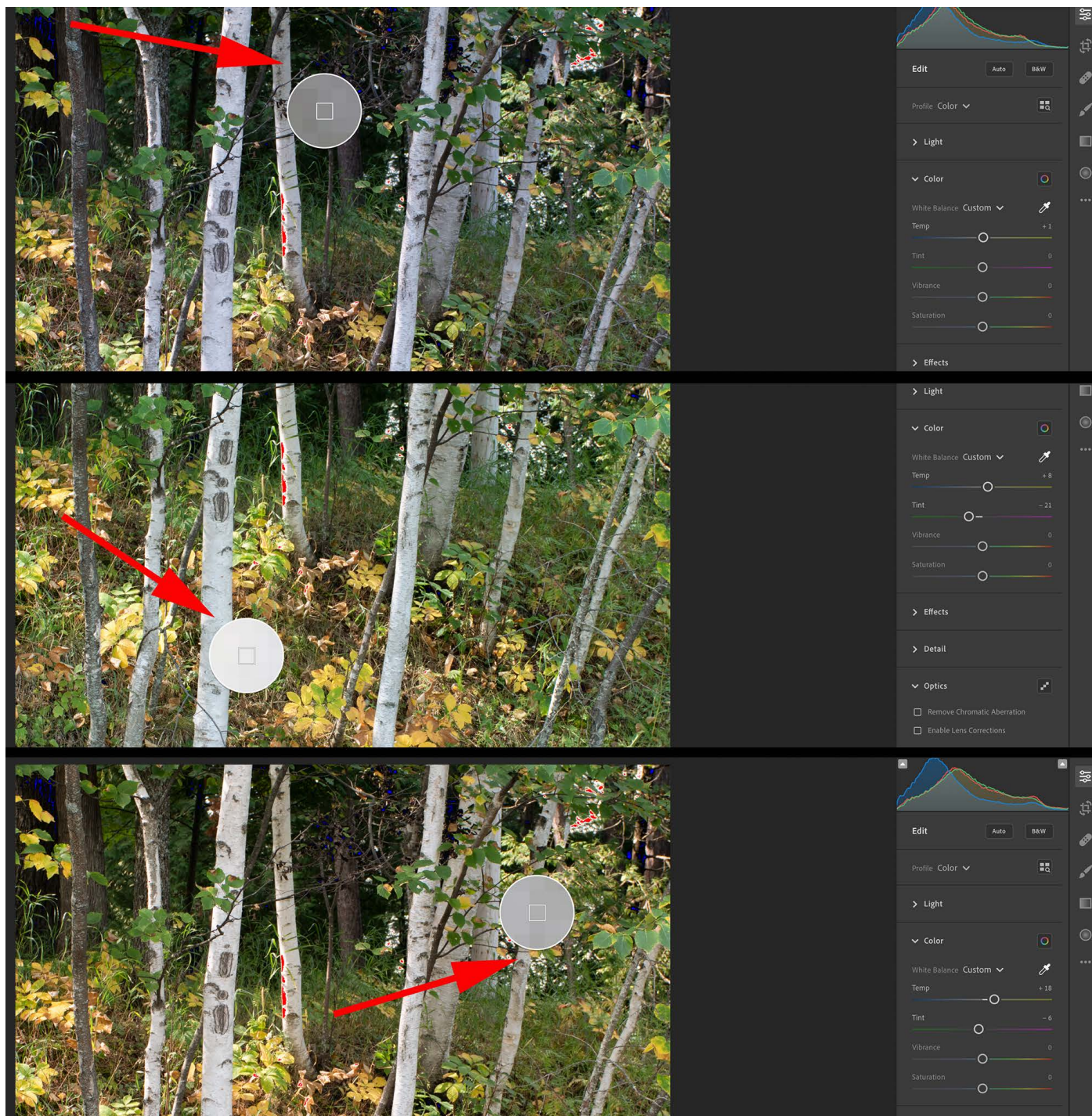


Image 011 – Screenshots by Kent DuFault

I went back to the White Balance Selector Tool and tried these three options, as indicated in Image 011.



Image 012 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

WB is so subjective in nature photography. I decided to return to my original thoughts on a selection area, and I kept clicking until I saw one that appealed to me.

My final WB selection was Temp +12 and Tint +9. I may end up tweaking this again further along in the process. We will have to see.



Image 013 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

Clarity is a tool that can help add 'apparent' sharpness to a picture. It works by adding contrast to the middle tones of a photograph. For this picture, I set the Clarity to +8.

Note: Texture, Clarity, Dehaze, and Vignette are all adjustments that typically look best when used with a light hand. I rarely adjust any of these four settings more than plus or minus 30.

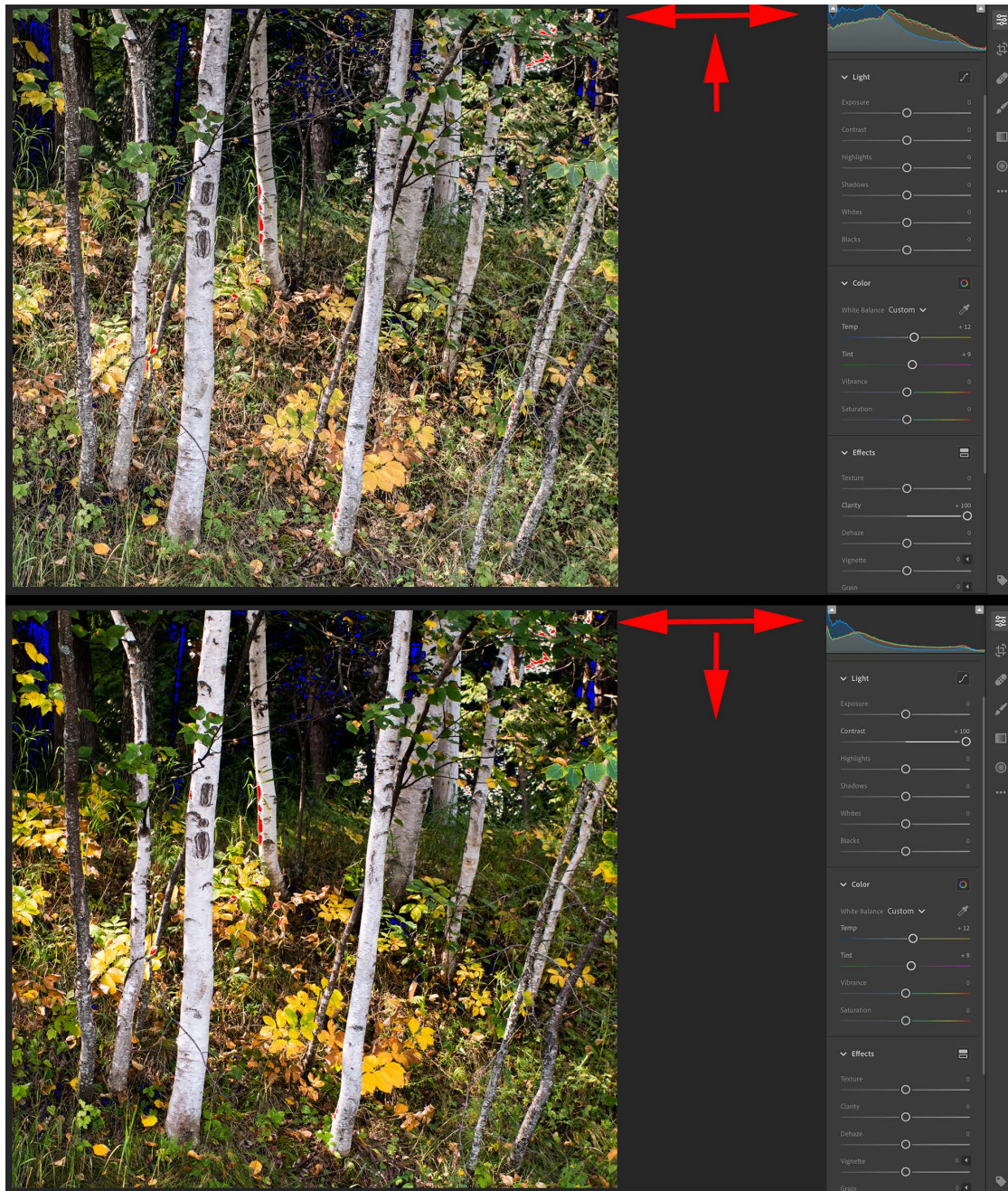


Image 014 – Screenshots by Kent DuFault

I included Image 014 to show you how Clarity versus Contrast will affect a picture, especially considering that they both increase contrast.

The top example in Image 014 is Clarity increased to +100. Look at the histogram. The central part of the histogram has been pushed upward. It also increased the Shadows Clipping because most of the middle tones were biased toward the Blacks/ Shadows end of the scale.

The bottom example in Image 014 depicts Contrast maxed to +100. Look at the histogram.

The central part of the histogram has been pushed downward. In other words, the middle tones have been reduced.

- Increased Clarity increases contrast in the middle tones while avoiding the Shadows and Highlights ends of the histogram scale.
- Increased Contrast reduces the number of middle tones.



Image 015 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

This may come as a surprise. One doesn't usually reduce color Saturation for a photo that contains autumn foliage. However, given my intent, I'm going to continue my FE list by reducing Vibrance to -11 and Saturation to -11.

Lowering these color values helps to subdue the visual strength of the background.



Image 016 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

Now that I've globally reduced the color Vibrance and Saturation, I think the shot would benefit from increased Contrast.

I raised the global Contrast slider to +45.

By raising the Contrast, I also increased the number of Blacks/Shadows that became Clipped. So, I increased the Shadows slider to +40.

By increasing the Shadows slider instead of the Blacks slider, I reduced the amount of Clipping in the deeper shadowed areas. The Black Point is left where I set it earlier.



Image 017 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I will be unusually using the Vignette adjustment for this photograph.

I'm going to use it to balance the brightness levels along the edges of the frame to the brightness

level of the central part of the frame. (See the two red circles.)

I set my Vignette slider to -16. This slightly brightened just the outside edges of the frame.



Image 018 – Screenshots by Kent DuFault

My next step is Dehaze.

I maxed out the Dehaze slider both to the plus and minus side so that you could see the effect.

I saw no benefit for this picture with the Dehaze slider and left it at 0.

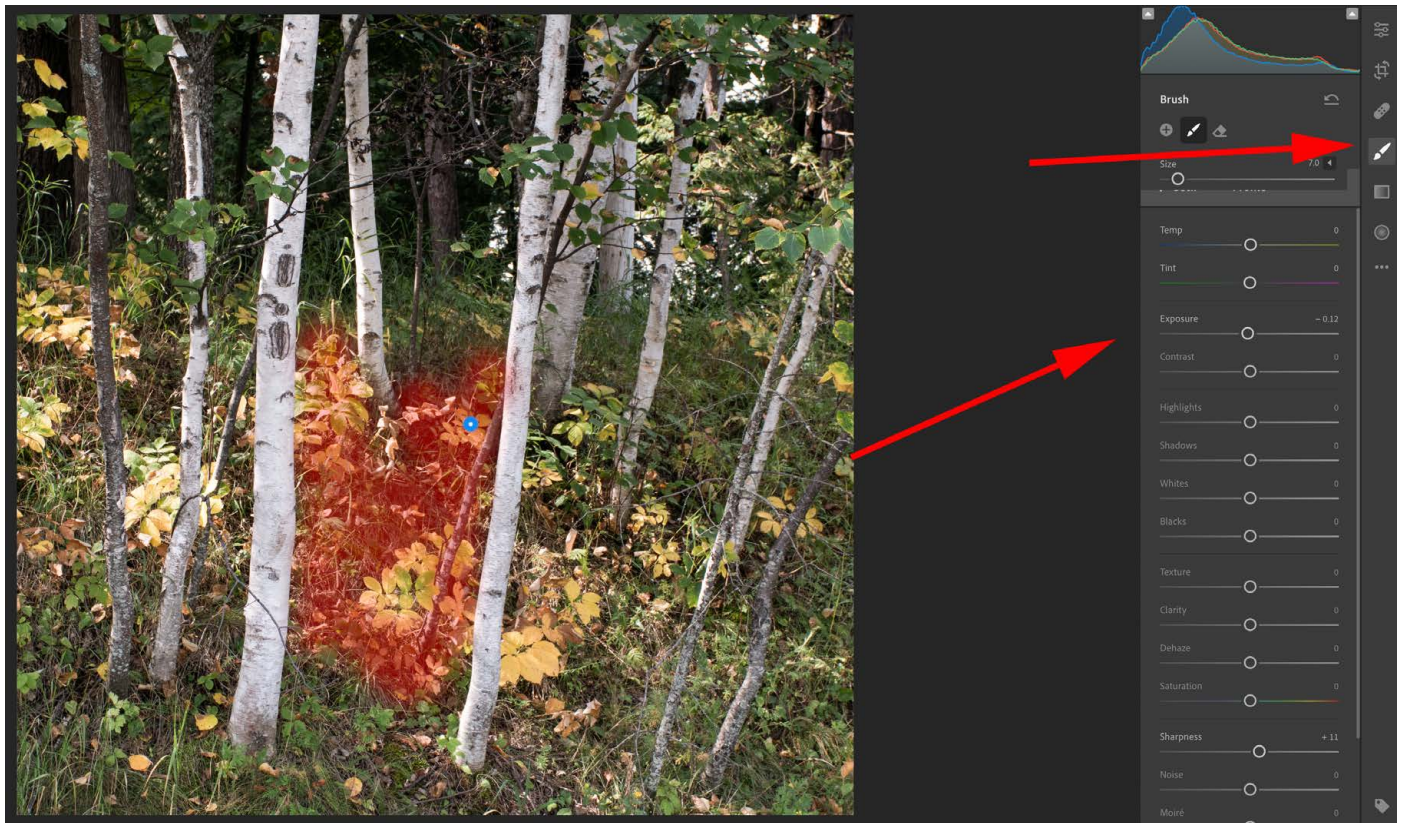


Image 019 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I will now begin doing the localized edits with the Adjustment Brush. This is where the magic will happen for this particular photograph.

Step one was to slightly reduce the Exposure of that central area of the frame (Image 019). I want the trees to end up brighter than any area on the ground.



Image 020 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

Each blue dot that you see within Image 020 was a separate mask created by the Adjustment Brush to edit a small portion of the picture. There is a total of 10 edits completed here.

Note: This is very important. Each time you click the '+' icon under the word 'Brush' to create

a **new** Adjustment Brush, the sliders do not automatically reset. So, you must manually reset them to 0, or you'll be making edits that you don't want to. In this case, I forgot to reset the sharpness to 0. I definitely do not want these areas sharpened. I now have to go back and manually reset all of them to a Sharpness level of 0.



Image 021 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I am now making localized edits around the trees to the Exposure, Highlights, Shadows, and Saturation sliders. The purpose of these edits is to help the trees pop from the background.



Image 022 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I will now apply localized edits to each tree. I will start with my hero tree. I'm increasing the Exposure to +0.64. I want this tree to be the brightest point within the picture.



Image 023 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I will create an Adjustment Brush mask for each tree and then carefully edit them individually.



Image 024 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I will also use the Adjustment Brush to darken a few trees that I want to be subdued within the composition.

Note: In composition, white or light areas advance, and black or dark areas recede within the frame. Points of contrast between light and

dark will generally attract a viewer's eyes first. This means I want my hero tree to be the brightest object within the frame and also to have the most Contrast surrounding it. Take note, though, that these tweaks are subtle. I want my photo to look real and not manipulated.



Image 025 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I'm going to revisit two settings: Vignette and Blacks. I changed the Vignette from -16 to -15. I also raised the global Blacks slider to +20.

These two tweaks are to balance out the tones across the picture, while also accentuating the trees against the background, and finally controlling Clipping.



Image 026 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I almost always sharpen my photographs in two steps. The first step is to apply localized Sharpness to my hero, as illustrated in Image 026.

Note: The vertical red arrow on the tree to the right of my hero is also essential to the

composition. I am setting up this tree to be a focal point. It will be the second brightest and sharpest tree in the group. This will help move a viewer's eyes across the picture while also adding a sense of depth to the photograph.



Image 027 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

Finally, I will apply a global sharpening to the entire picture.

Note: I rarely globally Sharpen above a setting of 30. Most of the time, if I do any global sharpening at all, my configuration is between 10 and 20.

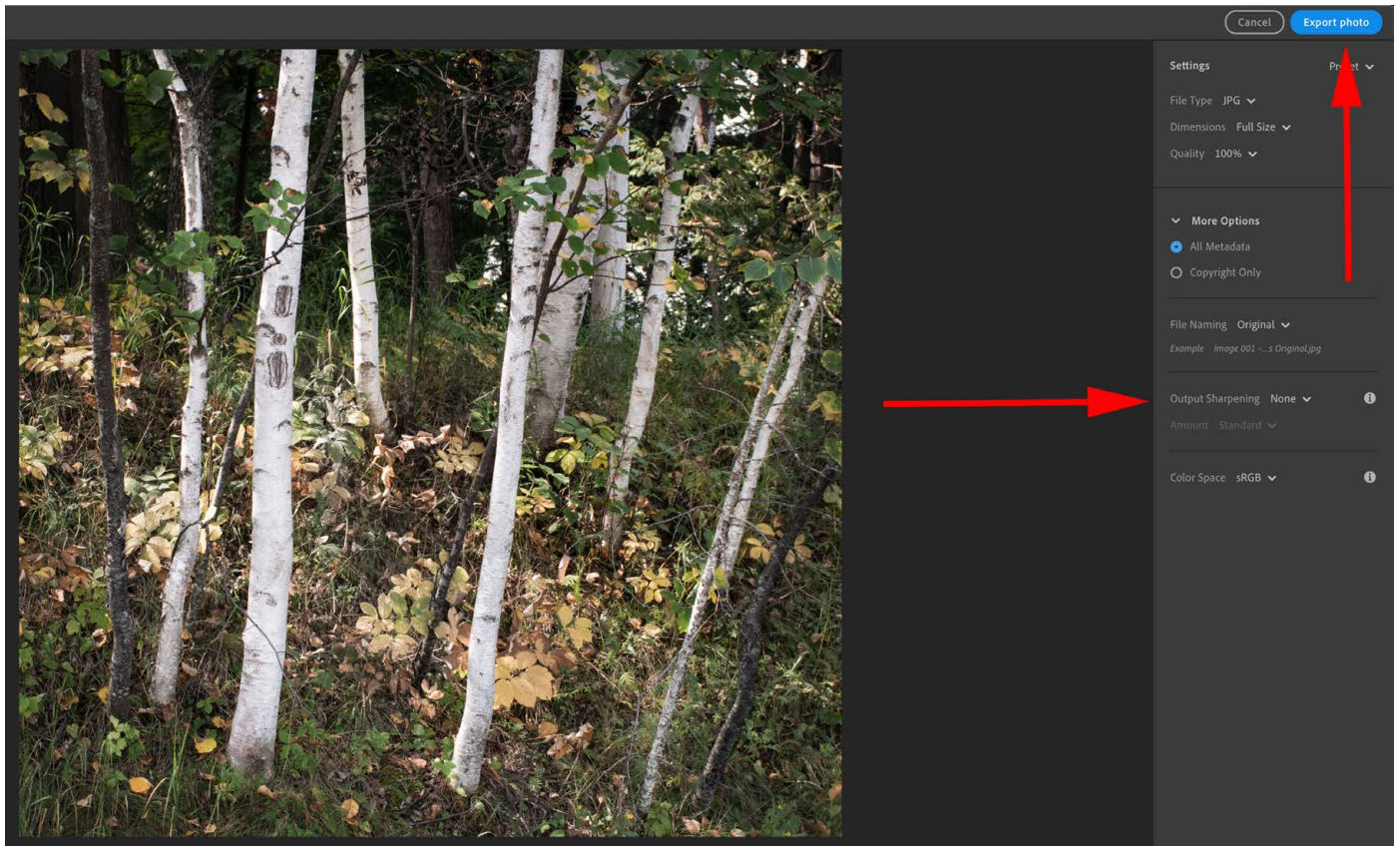


Image 028 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

Along with that same story, I make sure there is no output sharpening when exporting, and that I am exporting all of the metadata.



Image 029 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

The original image file is on the left, and the edited version is on the right.

As noted in the Fundamental Editing Guide, these steps are not about radical change. They are intended to improve your original vision for the photograph.



Image 030 – Photograph and Editing by Kent DuFault

Here is my final photograph. It now matches my original vision perfectly!