

Mastering the Radial Filter

Are you using the radial filter in Lightroom? Do you even know what it is? If not, then you may be missing out on some pretty cool stuff that LR has to offer.

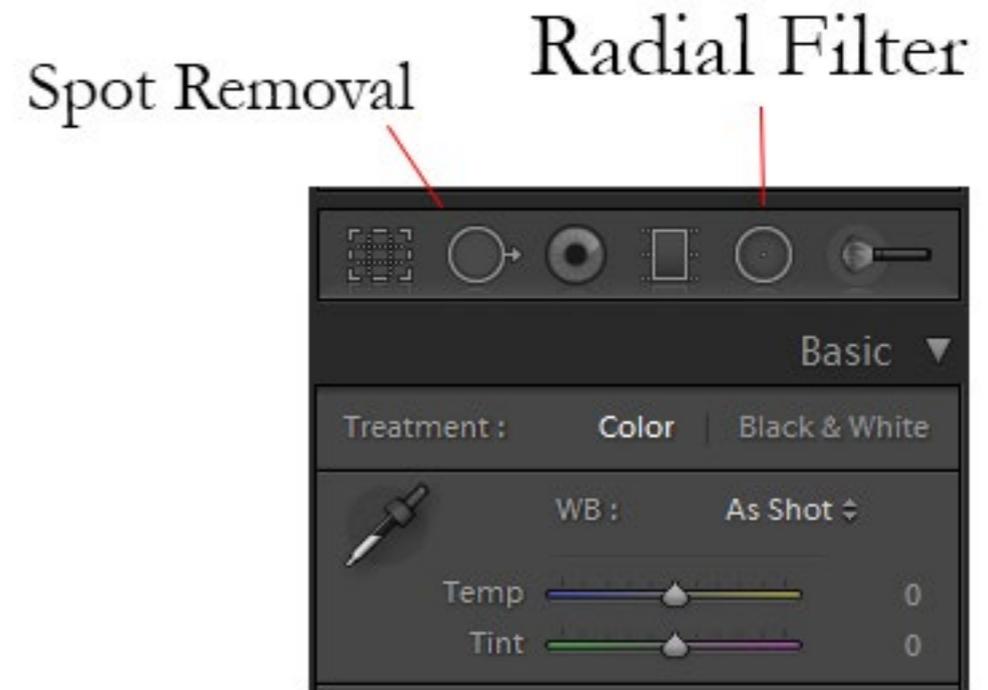
Before I discuss how I like to use the radial filter, I feel as though a disclaimer is in order. Or maybe this is more of an artist statement – the philosophical underpinnings of my vision as a photographer.

When it comes to photography in general, I am not looking to simply document the natural world. There is of course a time and a place for that. My photography is about art. It is about capturing the imagination. It is about recording or recreating for you what I saw and felt in my mind's eye. This is what we call artistic vision.

So when it comes to using something like Lightroom's radial filter, tools such as this are all about the artistic side of photography. Really though, I believe this what post processing is all about in the first place. Using Lightroom or Photoshop to simply sharpen your photos is like climbing into a Lamborghini simply to back down your driveway to check the mail.

Putting ridiculous analogies aside, lets dive in. . .

Light is the essence of photography. Yes you have heard this before. You may even have read my ebook by a similar title.



Light is something that we as photographers are constantly thinking about both in the field and behind the computer. Quite simply, the radial filter is all about manipulating light in your photograph. There are many uses for it such as what I like to call an intelligent vignette (dare I say, iVignette) and the creation of an additional light source. Both of these uses will be covered into this tutorial.

In the photo above, you can see the radial filter in the tool bar just above the temperature and hue sliders under the Development Module of Lightroom. The symbol is quite similar to the spot removal, but note that lack of arrow sticking off the side.

In wildlife photography, there are two basic types of portraits. There is the more traditional sort, like this one, of a great grey owl, in which the wildlife subject is the focal point of the entire composition and we want the viewer's eye to be locked in on nothing else. Then there is the environmental portrait, where we want our subject to exist as part of a larger context with greater emphasis on the landscape around the animal. Radial filters have their place in both of these types of portraits, but for the sake of this article I am going to focus on the traditional portrait.

When it comes to the more traditional sort of portraits, one of the tools that we have at our disposal for focusing the viewer's attention is a vignette. The idea of a vignette is to darken the edges of the frame down so that your eyes are forced to focus more towards the middle of the composition and do not wander off to the edge or, worse yet, out of the composition.

Traditional vignettes are terribly limiting. For starters, more often than not you can see that someone has applied a vignette. This is something you want to avoid as much as possible. Secondly, you are simply burning the edges of the frame which focuses the attention toward the middle of the composition. So unless you have a damn good reason for bullseyeing your subject in the dead center of the frame, then the vignette is only marginally helping to keep your viewer's eye focused on the subject.

Enter: the radial filter and the concept of intelligent vignettes.

Clicking on the radial filter opens up a menu of various

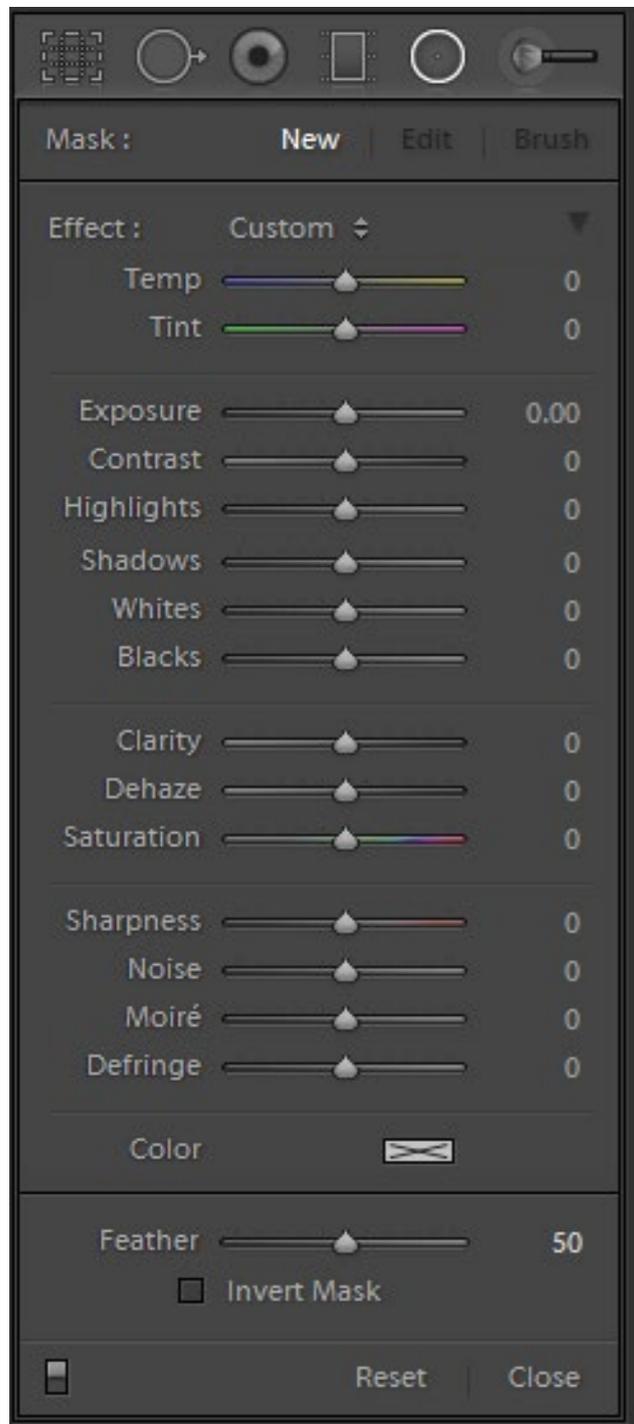
options that are identical to those of the adjustment brush. Though all of these options can come into play when tweaking the lighting of your photograph, I tend to stay away from most of these sliders and use only the exposure and temperature adjustments.

At the bottom you will see a box that allows you to invert the mask. By default, when you use the radial filter you are affecting everything outside of the filter. If you select invert mask however, this flip flops to only effect what falls inside of your filter. For a vignette, you want to leave this unchecked. When creating the illusion of a light source however, you want to invert the mask.

This photograph of a great grey owl is a beautiful portrait I made up in the Absaroka Mountains during a workshop this fall. The background is distant enough to have a nice soft feel (remember bokeh in the background is a function of distance from subject). The composition is simplistic – bird and top of young spruce. And technically speaking, this is a solid photograph and perfectly salable one as it stands. However, there are certain things that radial filters will do for me to help take this photograph to another level.

For starters, it will help to focus the viewer's eye on the bird. Next, and this may be the most important thing in this particular photograph in my opinion, it will help to give the photograph a certain moodiness. In essence, we are creating what is known as tenebrism – or dramatic lighting.

Chiaroscuro and tenebrism are very similar in that



highlights and shadows are contrasted off each other, but the purpose of doing so is the difference. Whereas chiaroscuro is about creating a sense of depth and volume, tenebrism is all about creating mood and drama in visual art.

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When using radial filters to create a vignette or to try and focus attention on my subject, I always use two separate filters. The first filter that I create is one that simply corresponds with the shape and angle of my subject. You can drag and stretch these filters into any circular or oval shape you need. And as you can see here, I have simply created an oval shape around my subject.



Bringing my mouse back over to the exposure slider under the adjustment panel of the radial filter, I am going to begin to reduce the exposure on the composition. Remember, by leaving the Invert Mask box unchecked, I am only effecting what falls outside of the filter.

The way that I like to make universal adjustments like this is to start off with too much of whatever I am doing, and then work my way back down until I like the effect. When we add the adjustment incrementally, we tend to hold back too much – especially with adjusting exposure and saturation.

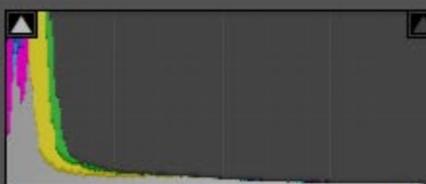
With this particular image, bringing down the exposure by -1.24 has the desired effect that I want.

Next, I create a second radial filter. This time, the angle of the filter is nearly vertical and encompasses the head, chest, and shoulder. Where I apply the second radial filter is largely determined by the particular photograph. My primary





Histogram ▾



ISO 4000 600 mm f/8.0 1/1250

Original Photo

Mask: New Edit Brush

Effect: Custom ▾

Temp 0

Tint 0

Exposure -0.48

Contrast 0

Highlights 0

Shadows 0

Whites 0

Blacks 0

Clarity 0

Dehaze 0

Saturation 0

Sharpness 0

Noise 0

Moiré 0

Defringe 0

Color

Feather 50

Invert Mask

Reset Close

Basic ▾

Treatment: Color Black & White

WB: As Shot ▾

Temp 0

Previous Reset

goal is to focus in on the face of my animal. Therefore, sometimes I will just create a second filter for the head. With this situation, the head and chest of the bird are all evenly illuminated by the strong side lighting here and so I want to work with the natural lighting ratio of this photograph. Thus, I set the filter to include the face and chest.

With the second filter in place, I settled on an exposure reduction of -.48 which is pretty much half a stop.

By using radial filters in Lightroom, instead of the clunky and optionless post-crop vignette, we were able to create a more intelligent vignette here while also creating tenebrism style of lighting. The effect is subtle but dramatic. And by making these small adjustments to the lighting of the image, we move from a documentary portrait into something more akin to fine art.

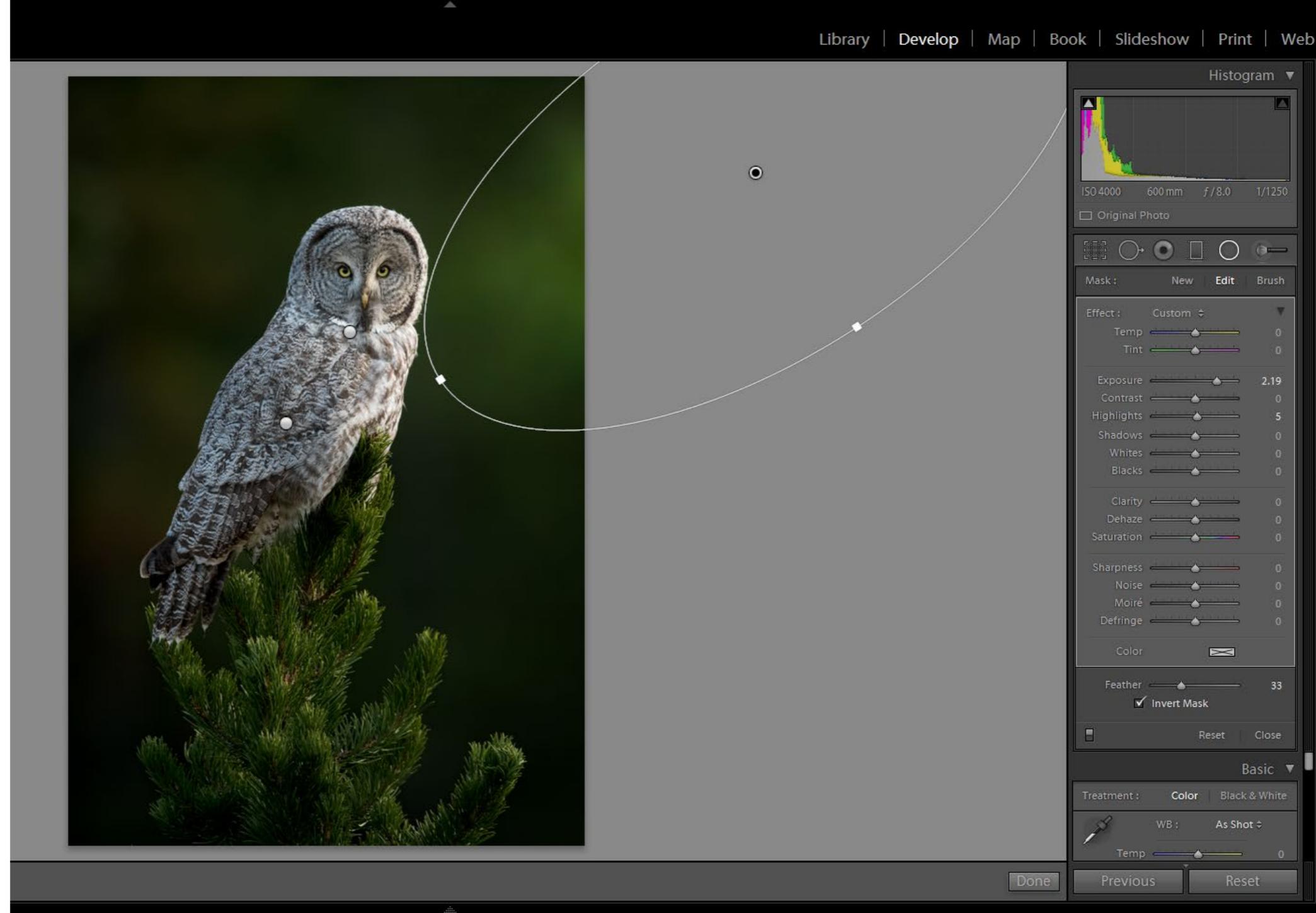
The results of using these two radial filters together are exactly what I wanted.

There is a third option that can be used in this situation as well. That is to use another radial filter to create the illusion of a light source that corresponds with the illuminated face and chest of the owl.

In adding my third, and admittedly optional, radial filter, I want to do the reverse of what I was trying to accomplish with my first two. Instead of darkening down everything outside of the filter to create a vignette, this time I want to lighten what is inside of that filter.

Here is where we come back to the option to invert the mask.

I played around some with where I wanted my light source to come from and exactly at what angle. You can see from the image that this placed most of the filter off the photograph. This is fine, as I only want the feathered edge of it on the



composition. Remember, we are just trying to create the subtle illusion of a light source here. More often than not, less is more with this effect.

Personally the verdict is still out for me as to whether this was necessary to add to the photograph. After applying the two

radial filters to begin with, I believe the image was quite strong as it was. In adding this light source, It changes the mood of the photograph in my opinion – which is to be expected. Which one is the stronger finished product is quite subjective and is a matter of opinion. But, I wanted to include the third as an example of what can be done with this tool.

Radial filters are all about controlling light in the photograph. Whether it is a matter of removing light from parts of the photograph or adding light, use this tool in Lightroom creatively. This is not about documentary photography. It's about art. And in art, you are limited only be the depths of your own imagination.

