



Post Processing Creativity: 1 Photo Presented 3 Ways

Description

Digital photography and its post processing tools offer so many creative possibilities for making a final presentation of our RAW files. Here I demonstrate the same photo presented 3 different ways mostly using Adobe Lightroom / Camera Raw and a little bit of Photoshop.

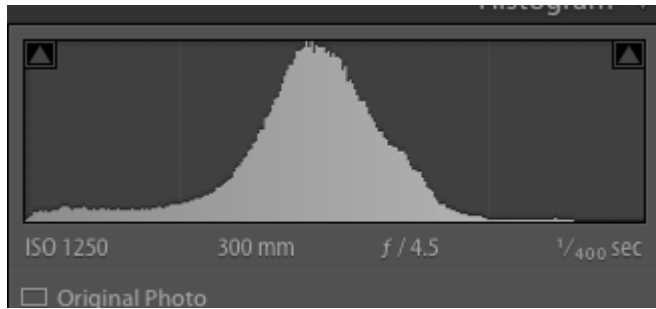
A Basic Processing

From a corrected and optimized image we can progress to ever more creative interpretations. The first step is always to take the RAW file and apply exposure and color corrections to it to replicate what we saw and felt in the field.

Step 1 : Exposure



The RAW image out of the camera lacks contrast and has a bit of a color cast

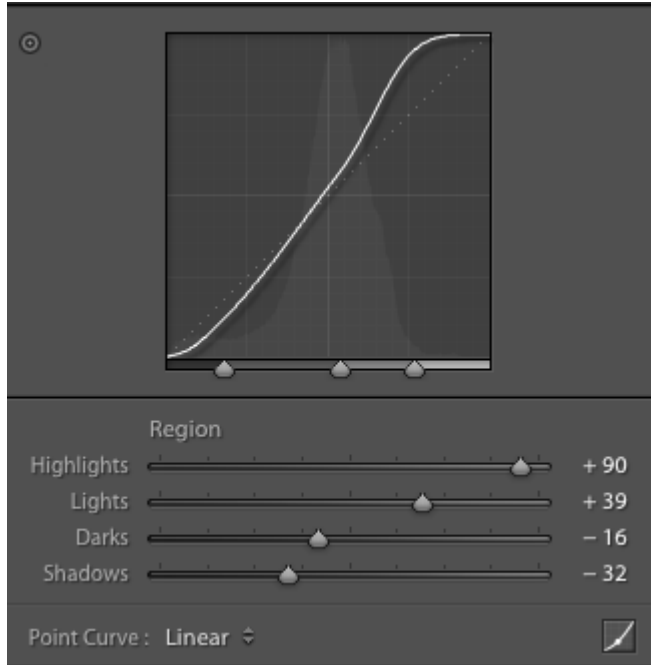


Histogram showing lack of contrast

Examining the image shows it lacks contrast (as most digital images do). Looking at the Histogram backs this up.

My first move is to temporarily remove the color information so I can concentrate just on exposure and contrast. I do this by moving the Saturation slider to -100 (desaturated). Now it is very clear that the image needs darker darks, more highlights and more separation in the midtones.

I will use the Curves Tool to increase the Highlights and Darks. To check for the threshold where I begin to get too light/dark and start to lose detail I click on the little triangles up in the Histogram. These will turn on display of red or blue in the areas where detail is lost. I adjust Shadows down until I start to see some blue warning color in the spots, back it off a touch, then do the same for the Highlights. Lights are made brighter and Darks are made darker until I like the detail and contrast. Note that in my Curve I have changed the region markers at the base of the curve to “exchange the definition” of Lights, Darks, Highlights, & Shadows to fit this image and my edits.



Tone Curve Tool in Lightroom with my adjustments

When I am happy, I put the Saturation back on (to 0) restoring the original color setting.

Step 2: Color

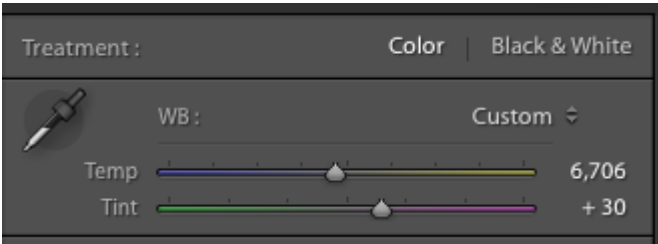
The exposure settings have made the colors more present and contrasted, but there is still a color cast and the tones are not how I want them to set the mood of late afternoon.



The colors are more bold, but still off a bit

The image appears too cool to me: it was taking in late afternoon and should be a bit more flooded with "golden hour" light. Also a clue lies in the color of the grass: the dead grass leaves look purplish. Moving the Temperature towards yellow (warm) changes the overall tone of the grass to a yellower

green and the dead grass to a more wheat color. Then moving the Tint slider toward magenta improves the fur color of the cat and lets the grass become more muted into the background.

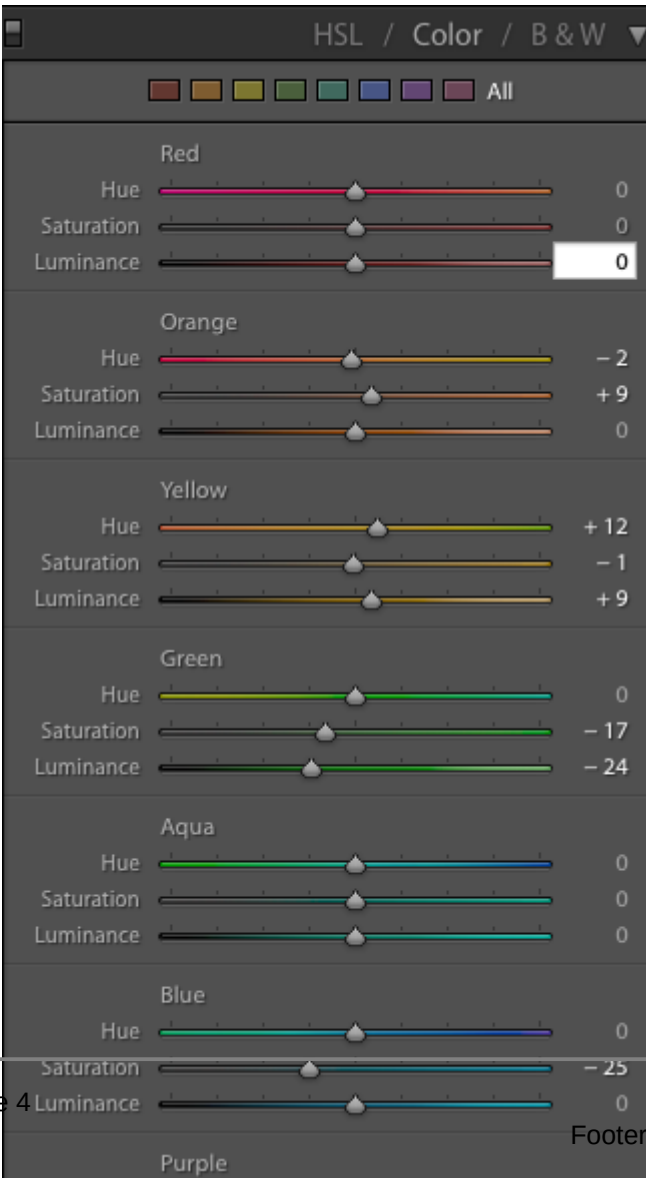


The corrected white balance

That is as far as the White Balance can take me, but there are more specific color tools to use down in the HSL / Color Section.

I take the edge off the grass (which is a bit distracting for a background right now) by desaturating it a touch and darkening its Luminance resulting in the subject standing out in contrast against the background.

The Yellow and Orange I adjust in order to improve the color of the cat: desaturating the yellow out of the grass makes the cat pop up more and saturating the orange, which is the main color in the coat, does the same. Desaturating the blue gets the blue cast out of the shadows like around the white of the tail .



Color settings

Now my image is how I envisioned it: an authentic take on my memory.

2nd Style: High Contrast



This processing pops out the cat

To achieve this look I started from my previous settings. I wanted to downplay the slightly distracting background.

Step 1 : Creating a mask

The Targeted Adjustment Tool in Lightroom will let me work on just the background. I can set features of the tool and change them at any time so I use this ability to help me “paint” in where I want to make my changes. I use extreme settings to help me see where I am apply to tool. I can change the brush size and softness to make an accurate “paint”. Sometimes I switch to Photoshop and use their Mask tools to accomplish this.



Applying the Adjustment Brush to the areas I want to effect while using extreme settings to help me

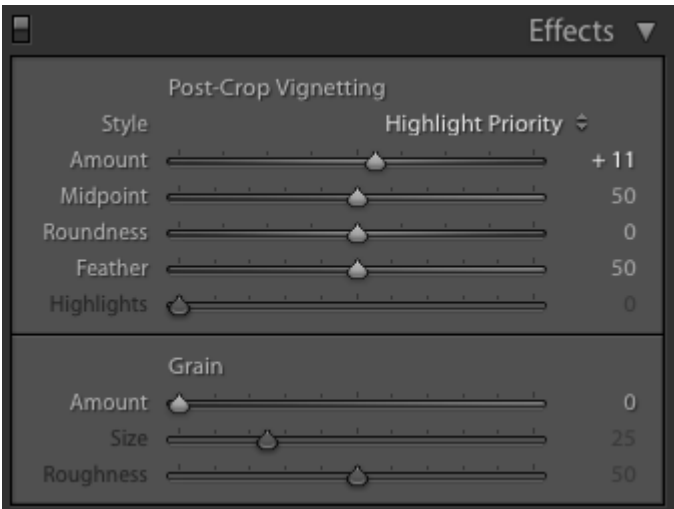
When I have my area covered, I reset the tool and put in my intended effect. I slightly increase the Exposure then desaturate. I use a negative Clarity setting to decrease midtone contrast and give a gauzy “blur” effect. All of these settings are to vanish the grass and background so the Leopard attracts all attention.



Adjustment brush settings

Step 2: Finishing Touches

To complement the brightening of the background, I add a Post Crop Vignette with Highlights . The effect is the corners and edges brighten and fade to white.



Post Crop Vignette settings

My last touch is to further contrast and attract attention to the leopard. I use the Targeted Adjustment Brush again on the cat with increased Clarity and Saturation settings.



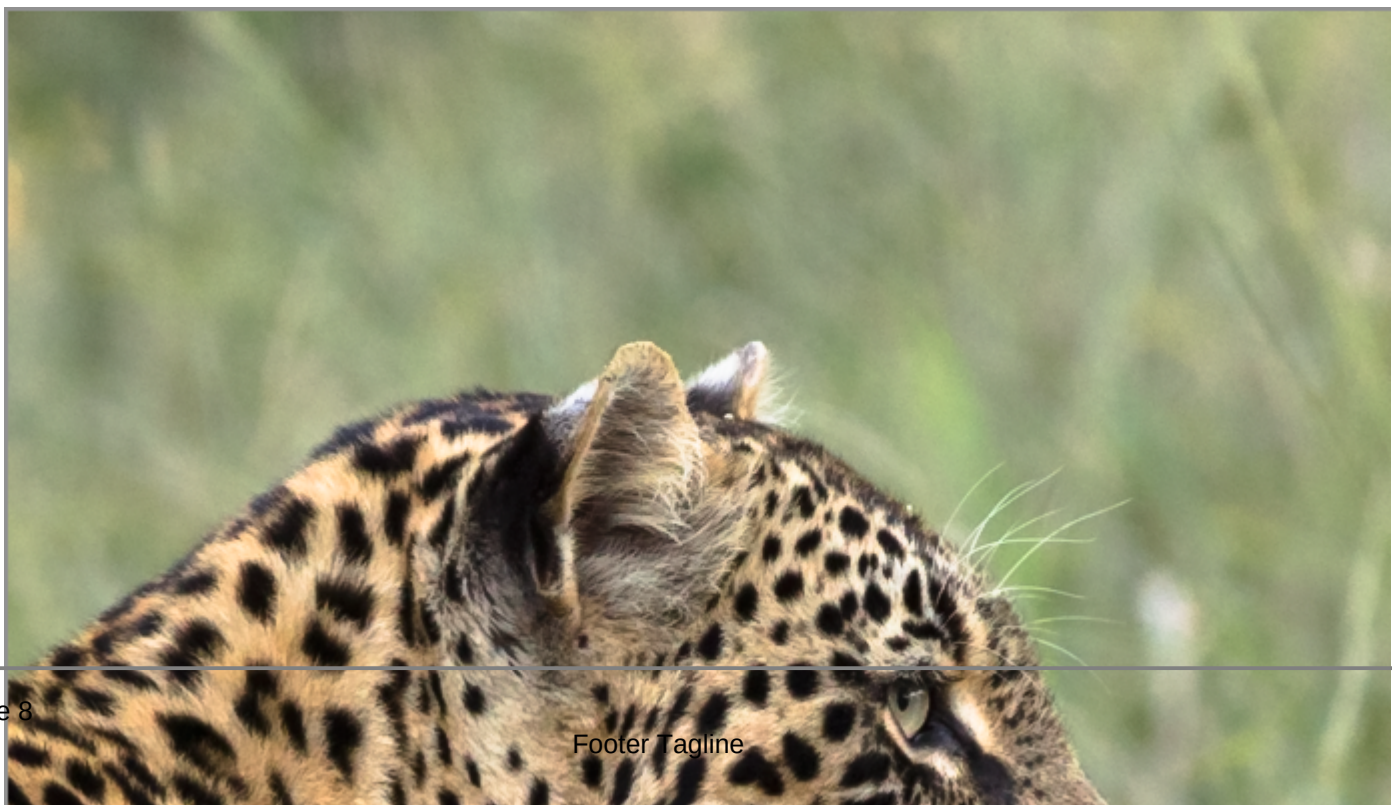
Adjustments to boost the leopard

3rd Style : Split Tone Portrait

I want a close “ cropped portrait of the cat’s head where the eyes and intense stare are the main point of interest.

Step 1 : Crop the Image

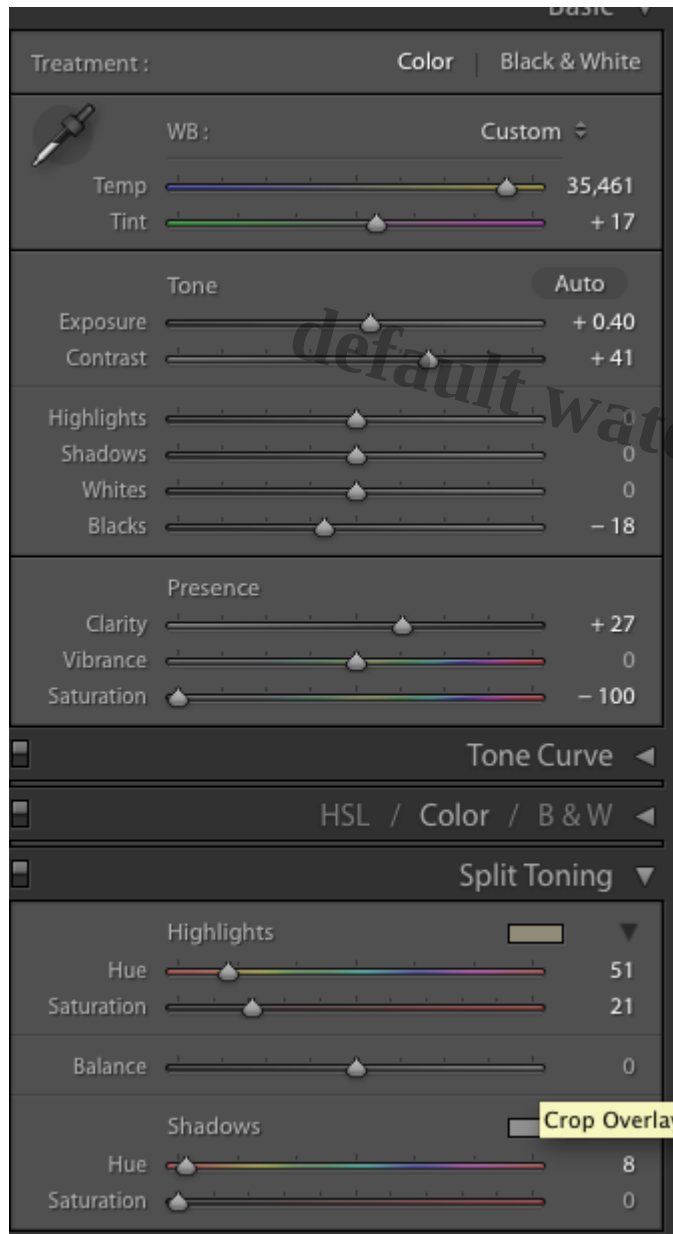
I crop the image so that just enough of the coat and spots shows (so there is no doubt it is a leopard) placing the eyes and line of stare and other features draw the eye to a point other than the center.



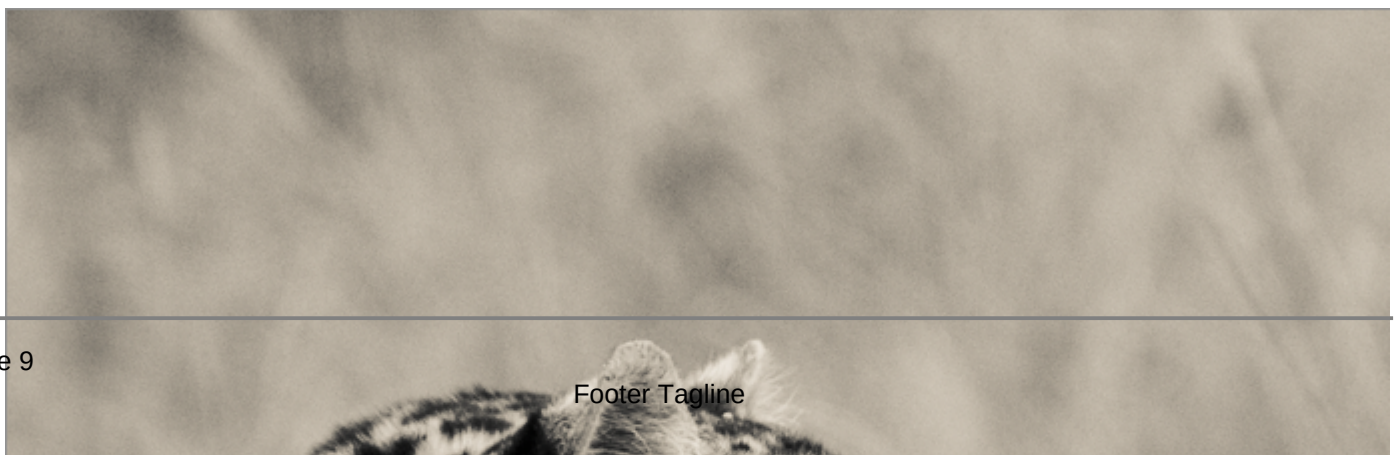
The image cropped

Step 2: Change to Monochrome

I want to give this portrait a classic look. Instead of just a straight Black and White treatment via desaturation, I will use the Split Toning method. I start with one of the Lightroom presets. My favorite is Creamtone. After I apply the preset I tweak it a touch with the sliders.



Split tone settings



Split Toning applied

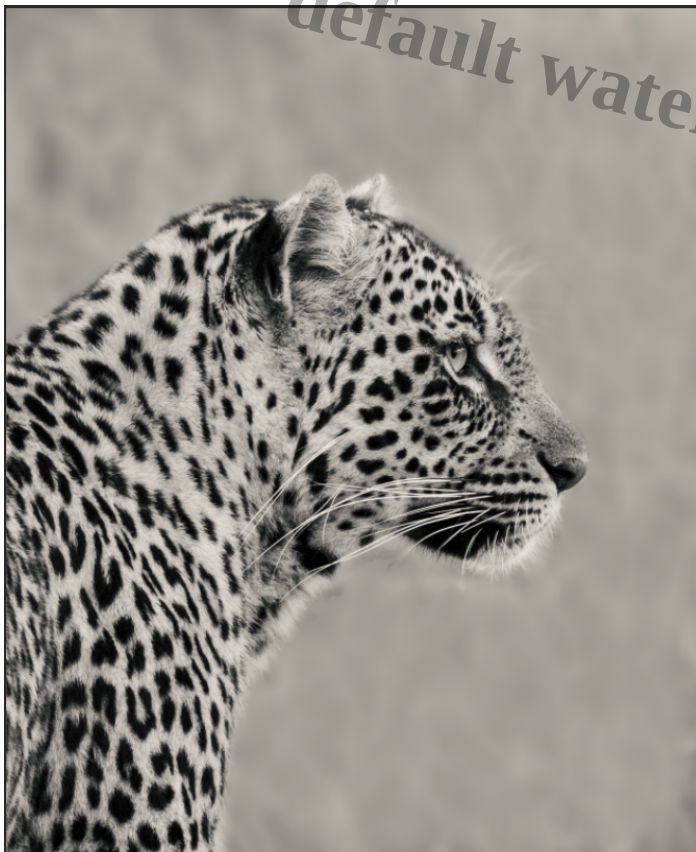
Step 3: Make the Background Vanish

To complete the portrait effect, the background needs to be flat and not draw the eye. I need to blur it and brighten it. For this I choose to use Photoshop because of its layers and masks. I left click in Lightroom and choose “Edit in Photoshop”.

In Photoshop I duplicate the image twice. Then on the topmost layer I create a mask around the leopard using various selections tools and a soft brush for near the fur.

On the layer below, I use a blur. I use the Gaussian Blur at a pretty high setting “ until there is little detail left in the grass.

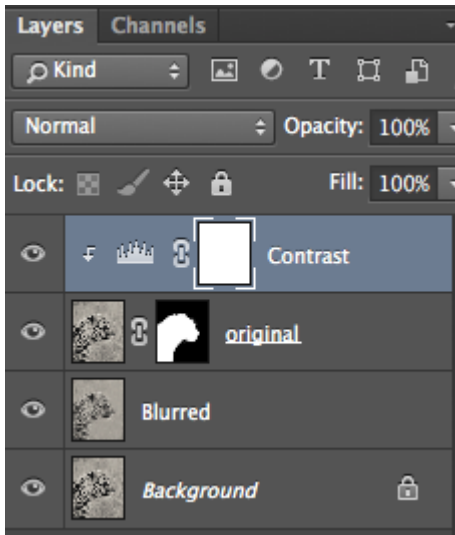
The mask on the layer above will let the detailed leopard show through. You may need to blur the mask itself a bit so the transition between the leopard and background is subtle.



with the blurred layer and mask

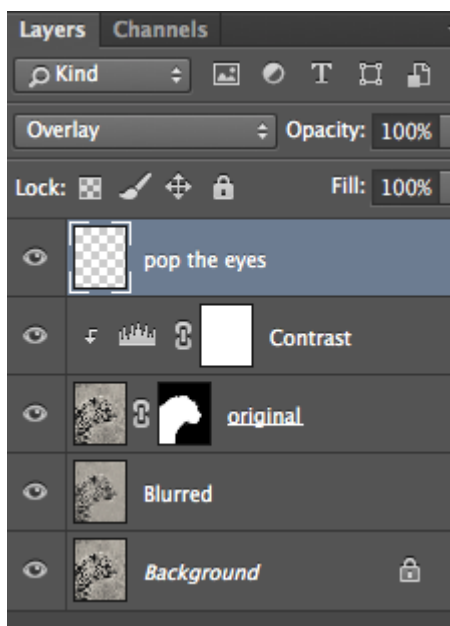
Step 4 : Contrast the Subject

To further pop the leopard I add a Levels adjustment brightening the whites a touch. To apply the adjustment to just the leopard and not the background I make it a “clipping mask”.



Step 5 : Final Touches on the Eyes

The eyes can use a bit of a “Dodge and Burn” effect. I create a layer above all the others, set the blend mode to Overlay to control how the lights and darks interact between layers, then paint. I paint with white and dark tones at low opacity until the eyes have a subtle intensity.



layer in overlay mode



The Final Look

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