

These twin actions are designed to assist in a common situation in outdoor photography—one for which our language is missing an important word.

We often find that the sky seems too weak. Or, rather, the blue part of the sky. Unfortunately, the word *sky* includes clouds. On the colortheory list, which is heavily international, I asked whether anyone's language had a specific word for the blue areas of skies, and nobody knew of one. The closest anyone came was azure.

But anyhow, I hope you get the point. The idea is to darken the blue areas considerably, the clouds not so much, thereby provoking the sensation of a more interesting and deeper sky.

The Darken Sky SC action works only in RGB; the Darken Sky B action works in any colorspace. The first opponent is Figure 1.

Figure 2 plays the Darken Sky SC, with an opacity of 55%. Figure 3 instead plays the B channel action, opacity 100%.

The two produce mildly different results but the operation is the same from the user's point of view. Each action generates an alpha channel in which the blue parts of the sky are light and everything else is black. Now it creates a curves adjustment layer, without changing the default curves. The layer is set to Multiply and the alpha channel is loaded as a layer mask. This multiplies only the areas that the mask identifies as sky.

The normal procedure at this point is to reduce the layer opacity to taste, as was done in Figure 2 but not Figure 3. However, we can also change the color, or increase the effect, by moving into the curves on the multiplying layer.

*Figures 1, 2, and 3. The original, and applications of the SC sky action, top opposite, and the B action, bottom opposite.*











Figures 4–7. The original image; a default play of the SC Action; a loose selection is made of the surplus blue objects; on the layer mask, the selection is filled with black.





The alpha channel remains in the file and can become useful later. Skies often are noisy. It's nice to be able to load the alpha channel as a selection and then blur or take whatever other remedial action is required.

That alpha channel will prevent you from saving the file as a JPEG if that is what you have in mind. Also, it can cause trouble in certain types of output file. So eventually you should go into the Channels palette and delete the alpha.

The 2013 release of PPW panel 3 does not change any of the previous functionality of either action.

## How Does It Know What's a Sky?

Skies are uniquely easy to select, because most of the time they're the only blue parts of the picture. This is as opposed, say, to a face. There are usually plenty of other red objects. But blue things are rarer. So the two actions simply look for blues, sky or not.

One action finds its blue by using the Selective Color command. The other uses the B channel of LAB, even though the file itself never leaves RGB.

The SC action should be the first choice. It runs faster and is less noisy. If the sky is a simple one, with large areas of blue and only a few clouds, using it is a no-brainer.

As a sky gets more complex, however, with color variations or interesting clouds with patches of blue peeking out behind them, the B channel becomes a better choice. I rate Figure 3 as slightly better than Figure 2, which has gotten the darkest areas of the clouds too heavy for my taste.

There is, of course, no reason to avoid trying it both ways, if the importance of the image justifies the time.

It sounds like the whole scheme would be derailed in the event something else blue lives in the picture, but it isn't so. Figure 4 is definitely in need of a sky boost. The sky is a simple one, so there is no reason to consider the more cumbersome B action.

The SC action, however, decides that the blue banners are part of the sky, darkening them unacceptably Figure 5. We would like them to revert to their original color, while retaining the stronger sky.

To do this requires changing the layer mask, which is easy because the blue objects don't butt the sky. They rarely do, so if you can operate the lasso tool, you should have

no difficulty excluding these banners. The only tricky thing is if you want to keep the alpha channel available for later blurring. Let's do the quick and dirty way first.

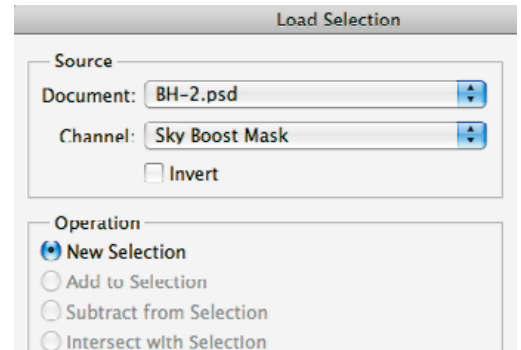
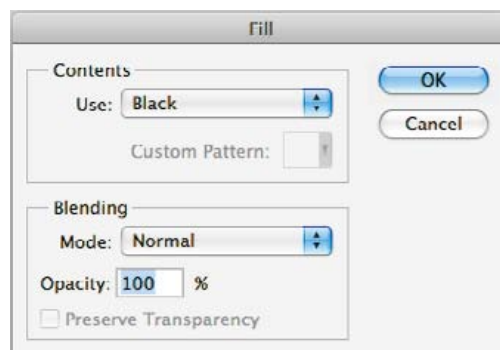
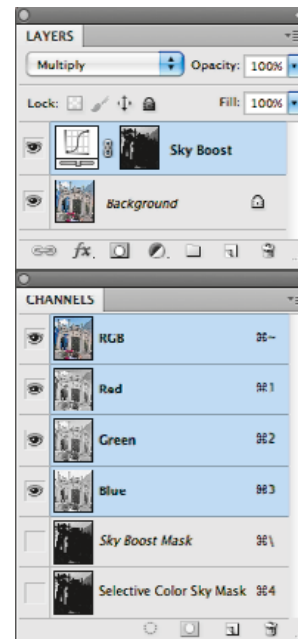
- Make a lasso selection as shown in Figure 6. It can be as rough as you like, as long as it doesn't include any sky. Notice that I had to dip the top of the selection about halfway from each side so as to avoid catching a piece of sky peeking through the arch.
- Be sure that the layer mask is active. If it is, it has a thin border around its icon in the Layers palette. In the graphic shown on this page, the mask is not active.
- Edit: Fill with Black, as shown in the graphic. A black layer mask eliminates any effect of the multiplying layer. There was no need to be careful, since everything that wasn't originally blue was black already on the layer mask.

I won't show the solution, but this picture has a rather noisy sky. Since a good selection of the sky already exists, we should be able to load it up and blur away—provided we have preserved the modified layer mask.

Before all this selecting and filling, as the Channels palette shows, the alpha channel appears twice: once under its own name, once as the layer mask. Either can be used as the source of a selection; the results would be identical.

Once the layer mask is edited to exclude the blue ban-

*Right, the Layers and Channels palettes immediately after applying the action. Note that the alpha channel in effect appears twice in the Channels palette, once in its role as a layer mask. Either can be edited, and can later be loaded as a selection if, for example, you wish to blur the sky.*



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ners, the two no longer are identical. In fact, there is probably no further use for the original alpha channel. The danger appears when the layer mask is eliminated (as, for example, if you flatten the image on the way into LAB).

If that happens, you can of course redo the selection, it only takes a few seconds. But it is not elegant, and elegance is second only to godliness. At least half a dozen ways of avoiding this outrage exist, of which the two most obvious are:

- Work on the layer mask as above. When finished, go to the Channels palette. The mask should be the active channel; click its icon if it is not. From the flyout at the right of the palette, choose Duplicate Channel and assign it a new name, like Edited Alpha Channel. Click on the original alpha channel

and choose Delete Channel from the flyout. Now it won't matter whether the layer mask vanishes during flattening later; you've saved a copy.

- Similar, possibly easier: instead of working on the layer mask, click into the alpha channel itself. It shows up on screen as a grayscale image. It's easier

to lasso accurately because the blue banners will show up as lightness surrounded entirely by black. When selected, Edit: Fill with black as before. Now, finally, click into the layer mask channel. Image: Apply Image, using the alpha channel as the source.

## The Full Workflow

With the right picture, this method can be powerful. We'll now show the full Picture Postcard Workflow on a tourism-oriented shot, one that goes back nearly twenty years, to the age of film.

One look at the original, Figure 8, tells us that a sky-deepening action will pay off. The whole picture, with the

**Figures 8, 9, and 10.** The original; an application of curves to correct the indicated green cast; the curve layer is changed to Color mode.



exception of the flags and the top of the tower, is currently light and monotonous. There's only so far we can go in darkening the stadium. But if the azure areas of sky get much darker, nobody will be the wiser and apparent contrast will increase greatly.

It is dangerous to apply these actions to a file with a color cast. Clouds are supposed to be white, at least in their lightest parts. If instead they are slightly blue, the actions will consider them part of the sky.

Consequently we need to be even more careful than usual with the first PPW step, which is to check and correct for known colors, particularly neutrals. Using the color sampler tool, I popped three fixed sampler points into the Info palette. I was looking for known areas of neutrality in the background—the whites of the flags were not as significant, in my view. I took the lightest and darkest area of the cloud at top right, and also the top center of the angled tower, which is a dark gray,

Or rather, it *should* be a dark gray. But in the original, it's green. So is the dark cloud. The lighter cloud stars slightly yellow.

I know these things by looking at the Info palettes inset into Figure 9, which is the curves correction. For convenience, I show the before-and-after values in both RGB and LAB. In RGB we would be looking for more or less equal values; in LAB for 0A0B. I find the LAB easier to work with because the large negative A numbers immediately announce that the cast is green as opposed to some other color.

The PPW's fundamental principle is not to mix color and contrast in the same adjustment. Therefore, from force of habit if not for any particular gain this time, the curves layer in Figure 9 is set to Color mode, restoring the original

**Figures 11, 12, and 13.** On a duplicate layer, the green channel is attacked to add contrast; the layer's mode is changed to Luminosity; and the Darken Sky SC action is played.



definition in Figure 10 while retaining the new color.

The next step is the other side of the coin. Figure 10 has established adequate, if unexciting, color. We can therefore attack contrast without worrying about color issues. In Figure 11, on a duplicate layer, I applied a steep curve to the green channel, which seemed to be the one in which detail would be brought out. Normally at this point we also consider blending channels, but all channels are essentially equal in the nearly neutral stadium; we've already made the sky as dark as needed, and the flags can be a problem for blending because they're nearly solid in one channel or another.

The greenness of Figure 11 was not relevant, because I changed layer mode to luminosity, reverting to the color of Figure 10 and thus producing Figure 12.

The next step is not shown. I applied Shadows/Highlights at the default settings that I currently recommend. This created more variation in the clouds.

Immediately thereafter I applied the SC Sky Mask action, Figure 13 is its default setting. The darker sky makes the image, as far as I'm concerned.

\* \* \*

The PPW structure usually features tired-looking color at this point, since there has been no effort to introduce vividness. The first color step was only to eliminate things known to be wrong, such as green clouds.

For this reason there is a final step, always in LAB. It almost always involves the Modern Man from Mars action, but not this time. The MMM action builds color variation as opposed to intensity. Here, the flags give us all the color variation we'd ever want.

Therefore, I used only the Color Boost action,

which does attack intensity. But first, this picture, like so many of its era, was full of noise in the sky. I therefore reloaded the alpha channel as a selection and blurred away.

The Color Boost action has a spare layer for luminosity changes. As Figure 13 did not have good highlight and shadow values, I provided them. As for the Color Boost layer itself, which usually produces excessive color, I saw no reason to use a layer mask or do anything other than reducing the layer opacity to taste. After a light sharpen, you get to compare the original, Figure 14, to a full correction, Figure 15. There were a lot of steps but the most important was the sky darkening.

### Notes, Reminders, and Warnings

\*Unless you are planning for the action to be the final step, you should generally use a value of about 50% opacity for the multiplying layer. Remember, the mask is saved as an alpha channel, so you can always reload it and make the sky darker later on if you need to. But if you make the sky too dark initially it may be hard to recover.

\*If there are other blue objects in play, the mask will include them. You can erase them from the alpha channel and/or layer mask if you find their presence inappropriate.

\*Skies are often noisy; you can also load the mask and blur them later on.

Enjoy!



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