



Graduated Background Blur

You plan, you arrive, you set up, you see, you aim and you shoot. You got it! A sharp, perfect pose, spot-on shot of a wildlife subject that could be an award winner. Except for one thing. It has a messy, in focus distracting background. The animal bolts, and there is no second chance.

This occurs more often than not for me. What to do? There are lots of techniques for blurring the background. However, they all tend to be one-dimensional. What I mean by one-dimensional is that the blur is uniform and appears to be in a single plane. This will work just fine for many situations. But what if your animal is sitting on the ground or in water or on any surface that recedes into the background? The point of contact with that surface is in the same focal plane as the animal and therefore must be in focus and not blurred.

What is really needed is a graduated blur from sharp, in-focus at the point of contact with the surface to the most blur at the furthest distance from the subject.

Overview of Technique

Photoshop CS6 offers the Blur Gallery. One of the blur methods is the Tilt-Shift blur. This blur method allows the user to create a graduated blur from no blur to high blur from point to point in an image. Using this tool in addition to selection tools, one can achieve a background blur as shown in the following Before and After images:



Before



After



Before



After



Before



After

The summary of steps is:

Part 1

1. Load the image into Photoshop
2. Duplicate the Background layer
3. Select the animal on the Background copy layer, using any one of a number of selection methods.
4. Copy the selected animal to another layer.
5. Apply the CS6 Tilt-Shift blur.

6. Make the animal layer visible.
7. Create alternative Tilt-Shift blur layers.

Part 2

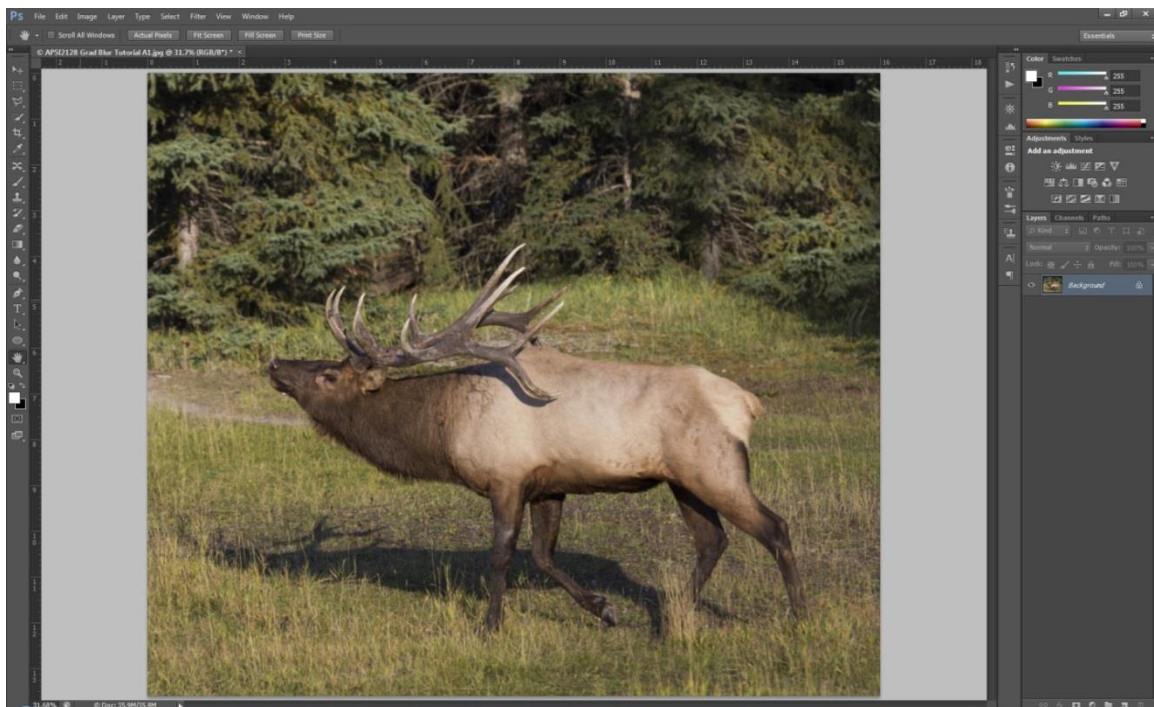
Depending on setting it is possible that a “blur shadow” will be created. If a blur shadow is apparent, then follow the steps in Part 2 (details later in this article) to eliminate the shadow.

Details of Technique

Part 1

1. Load image into PS

I have loaded an image of a bull elk exhibiting rutting behavior in Jasper National Park, Alberta. The background of pine trees is coarse and harsh. This image is a good candidate for graduated background blur. The elk has a complicated outline which provides a challenging selection process.

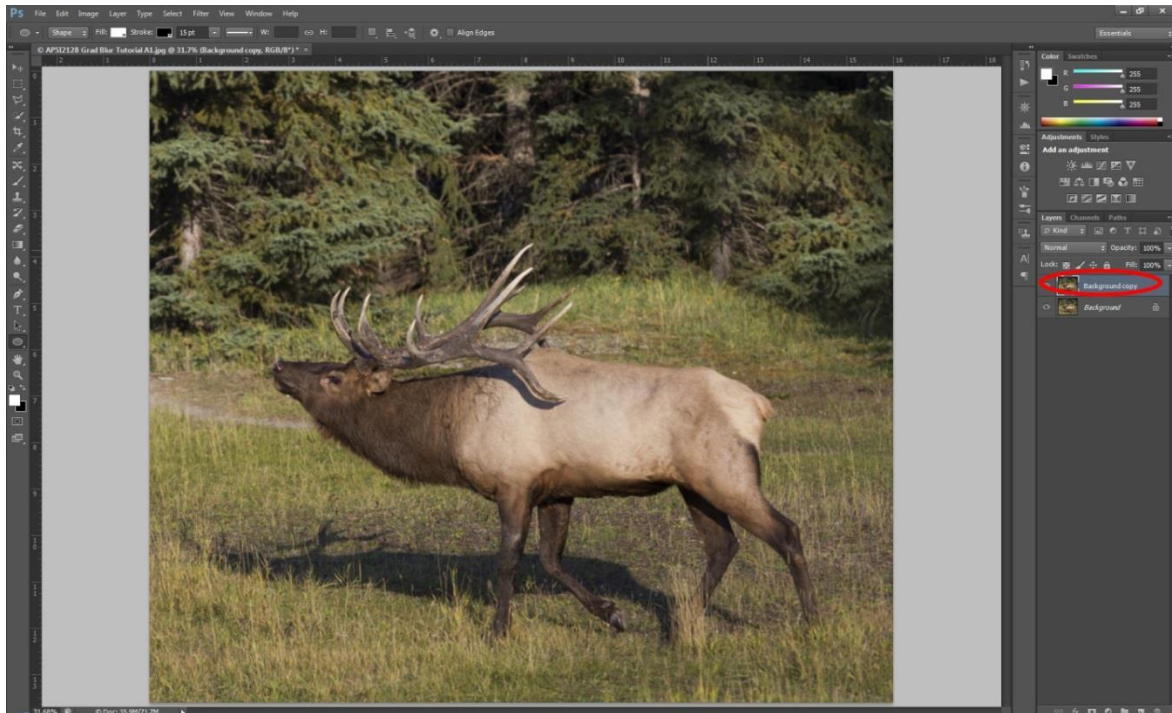


Elk in Rut in Jasper National Park

2. Duplicate the Background Layer

It is always a good idea to protect the background layer and work on a copy. This can be done in several ways:

- a. Select Layer>Duplicate Layer or
- b. Right Click (on a PC) the Background Layer and select Duplicate Layer
- c. Drag the Background Layer to the Create New Layer icon at the bottom of the Layers Pallet.



Duplicated Background Layer

3. Select the Elk

I find that the most accurate way to do a select is to use Polygonal Lasso Tool and very carefully trace the outline of the animal. One can use the Quick Selection Tool if the outline is simple enough, but I find that when used, I must “clean up” the selection with the Polygon Tool. This elk is not a simple selection. The antlers have “holes” that must be selected as well. There is also hair and fur to trace. While complex, it does create a more realistic result. This tutorial is not meant to be a lesson on selection. I refer you to expert and professional tutorials on the Selection and Refine Edge tools:

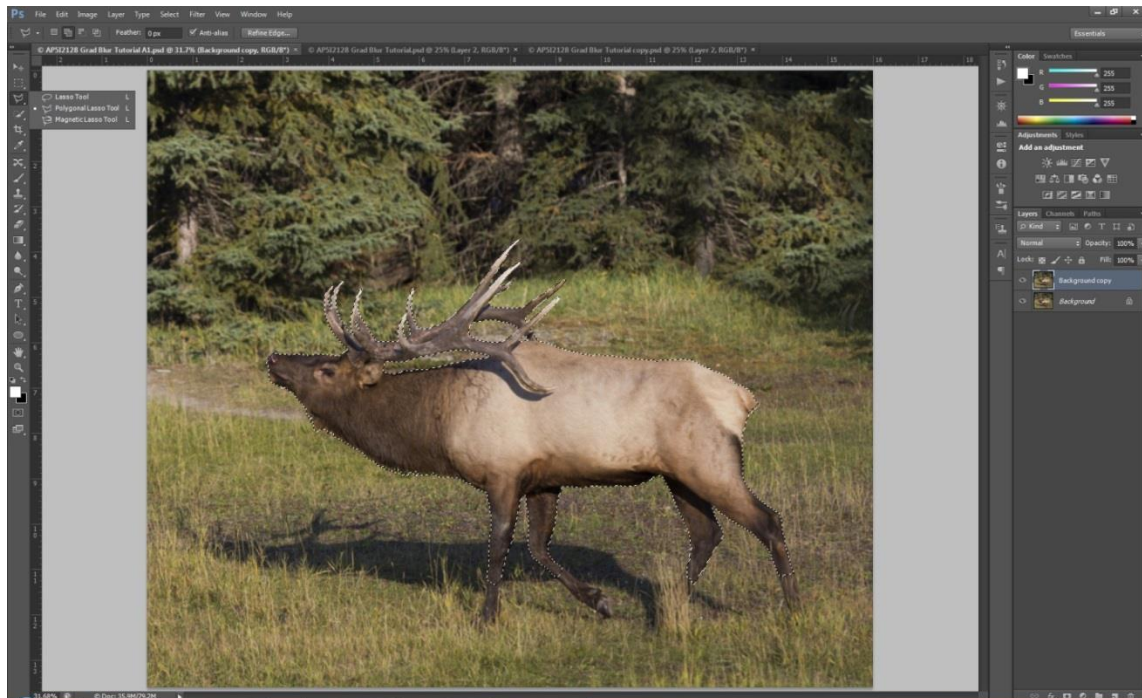
<http://tv.adobe.com/watch/learn-photoshop-cs6/selecting-soft-edge-objects-with-refine-edge/>

Notice the “marching ants” dotted line outlining the elk. Be sure to Save Selection frequently (Selection>Save Selection) as you proceed to create the selection outline. Mistakes can be easily be

made and having a saved selection allows you to go back and work from an intermediate save. Be sure to save the final version of the selection for future reference.

Also notice that the selection cuts across and above the feet of the elk. The feet will be below the beginning of the graduated blur horizontal line and therefore does not need to be included in the selection. This will become clearer in later images below.

Once the final selection is completed (and saved), use Refine Edge to refine the selection to capture the fine hairs in the fur.



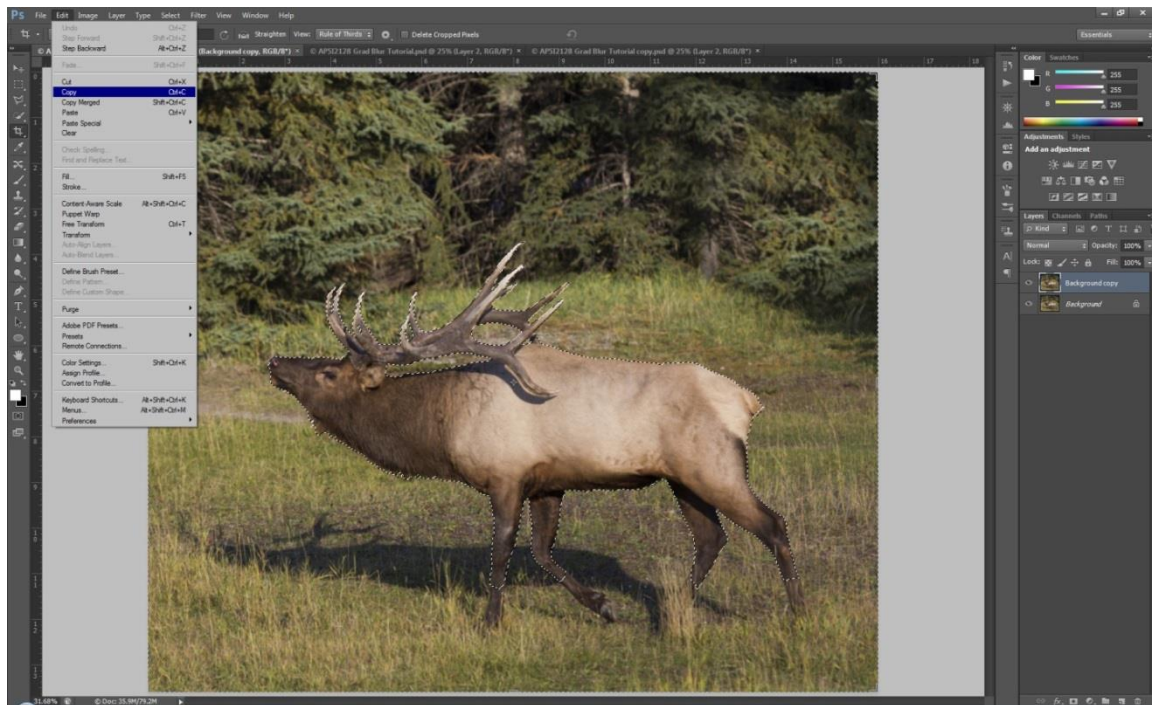
Elk with selected outline (marching ants) and refined edge

4. Copy and Paste Elk to a New Layer

Select the Background Copy Layer

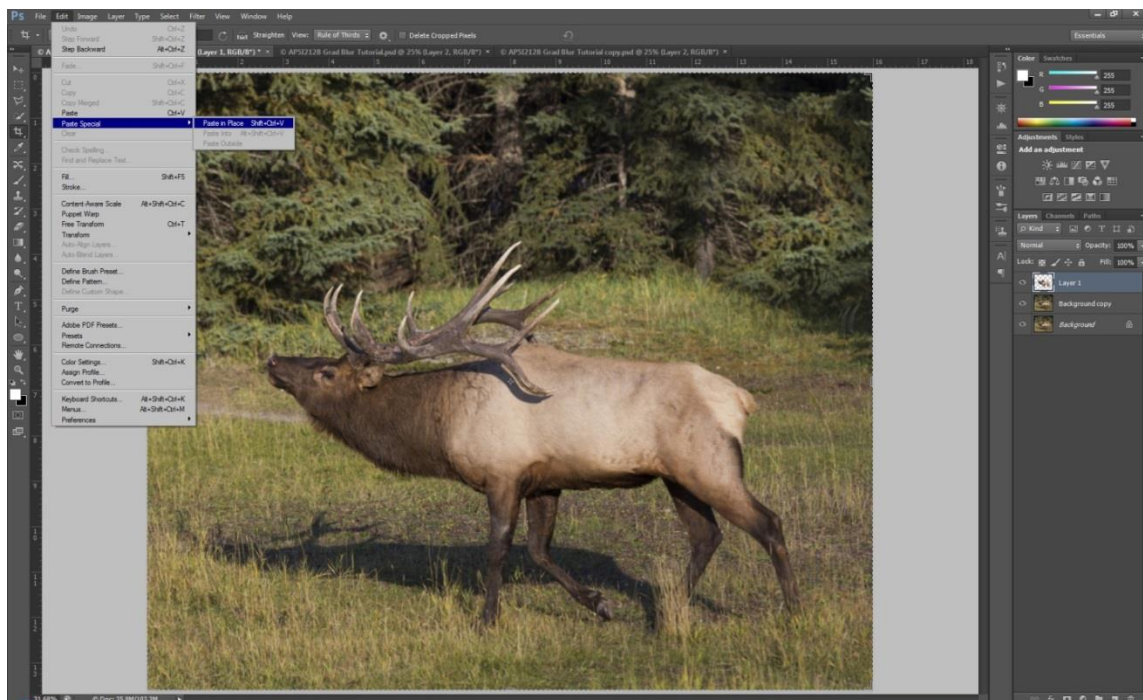
Select Edit>Copy

Select Edit>Paste Special>Paste In Place



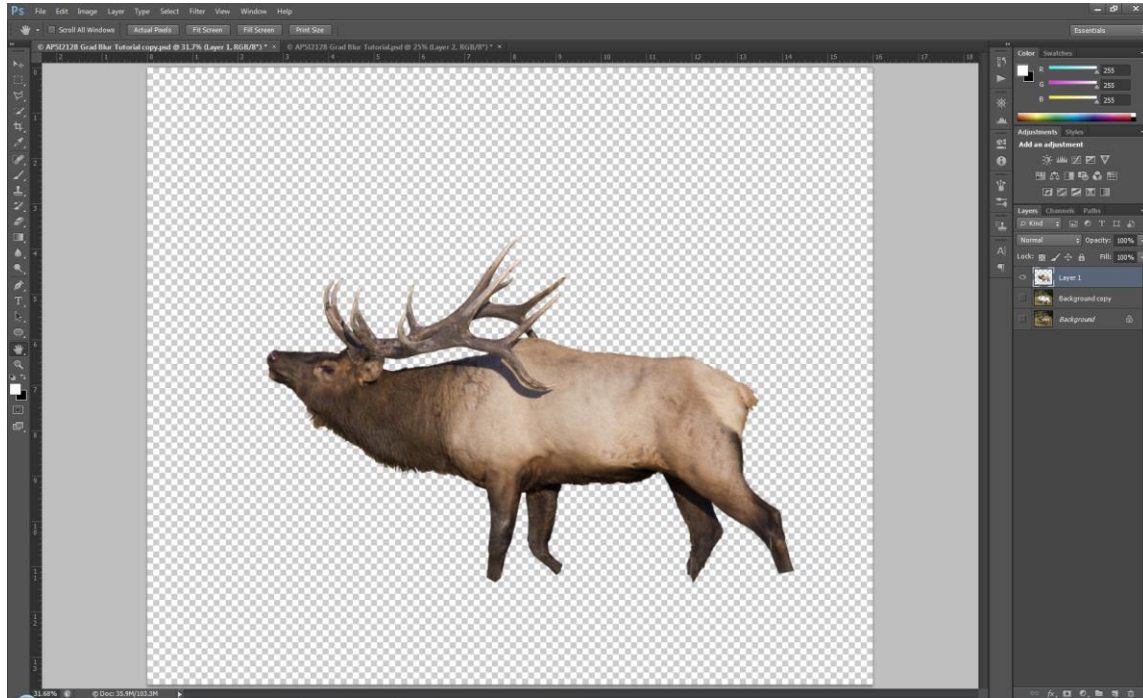
Copy Elk Layer

Select Edit>Copy



Copy Elk to a New Layer

Select Edit>Paste Special>Paste In Place



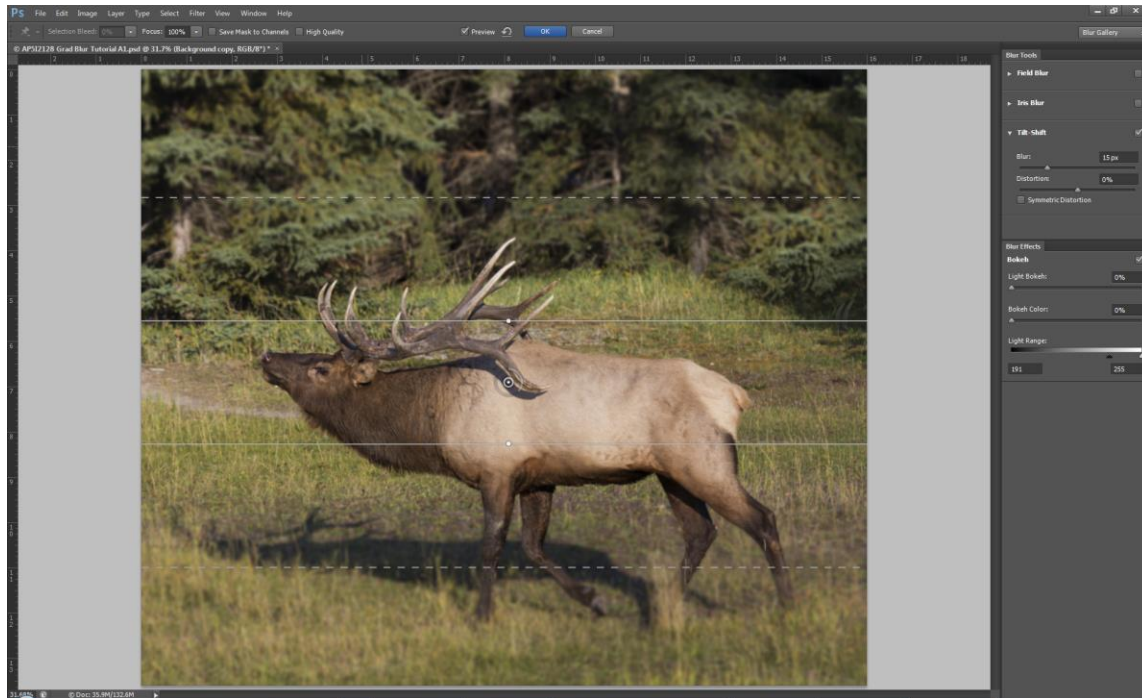
Elk Now on Layer 1

At this point we have a cutout of the elk on Layer 1. We can apply the Tilt-Shift blur filter on the Background copy layer, however, a blur shadow can sometimes be created along the outline of the elk. This depends on degree of blur and complexity of the outline. After the blur is applied, check carefully for a blur shadow. If a blur shadow is created, then continue on to Method 2.

5. Apply Tilt-Shift Blur Filter

Duplicate the Background Copy and call it T-S Blur 1

Select Filter>Blur>Tilt-Shift Blur



Select Tilt-Shift Blur

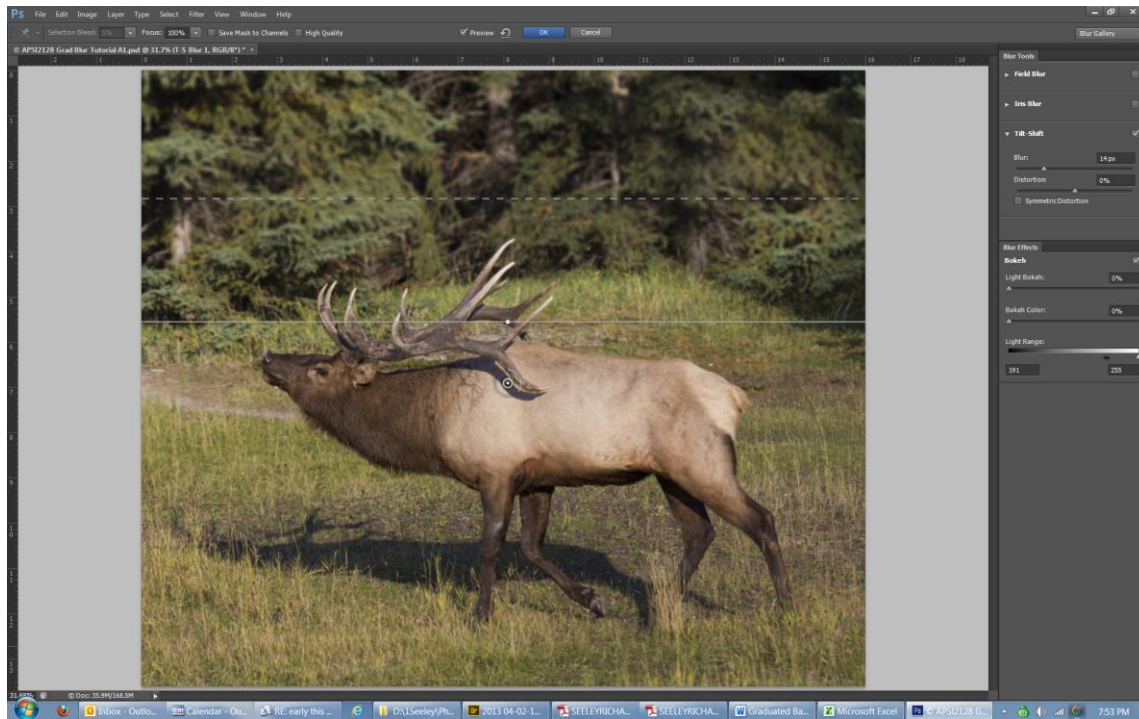
A quick review of the this blur filter is as follows;

The solid lines indicate where the blur begins. The dashed lines indicate the fulfillment of the blur to 100%. The area between the 2 lines will have a graduated blur from 0% to 100%. The dial in the center is used to change the intensity of the blur. Place the cursor on the end of the solid ring of the dial and move along the ring of the dial to change blur intensity.

For a more complete description of the operation of the blur filters see:

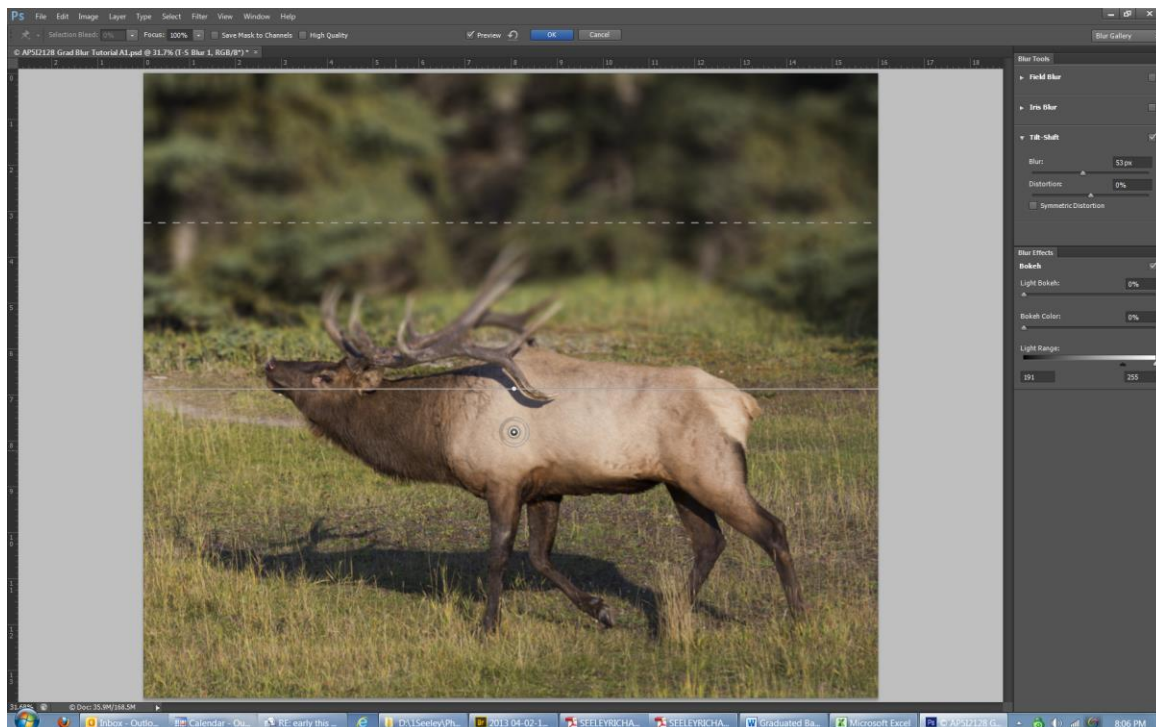
<http://tv.adobe.com/watch/learn-photoshop-cs6/blur-gallery/>

For this exercise, we want the foreground to be in focus and not blurred. To do so, “grab” the lower dashed line and drag it straight down to the bottom edge of the image. Do the same for the lower solid line. The resulting images should look like this:



Lower two lines dragged to the bottom edge of image

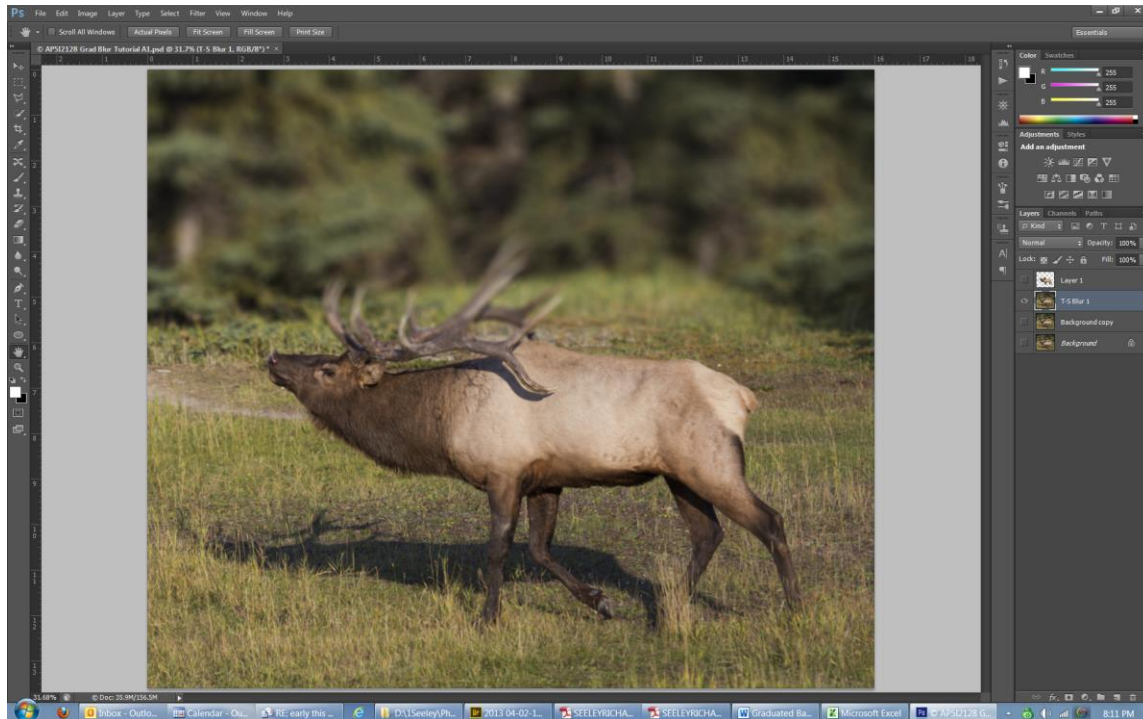
Now drag the blur dial, the upper solid line and the upper dashed lines to the appropriate position to create the blur that is desired. Adjust the blur intensity to an amount that looks best.



Upper Two Lines and Blur Dial Repositioned and Blur Amount Selected

In the figure above, the dial and upper lines have been repositioned. The blur intensity has been dialed to 53. One can see that there is a graduated blur between the solid and dashed lines. Unfortunately this includes the elk's antlers.

Click Ok to process and to return to the Photoshop view.

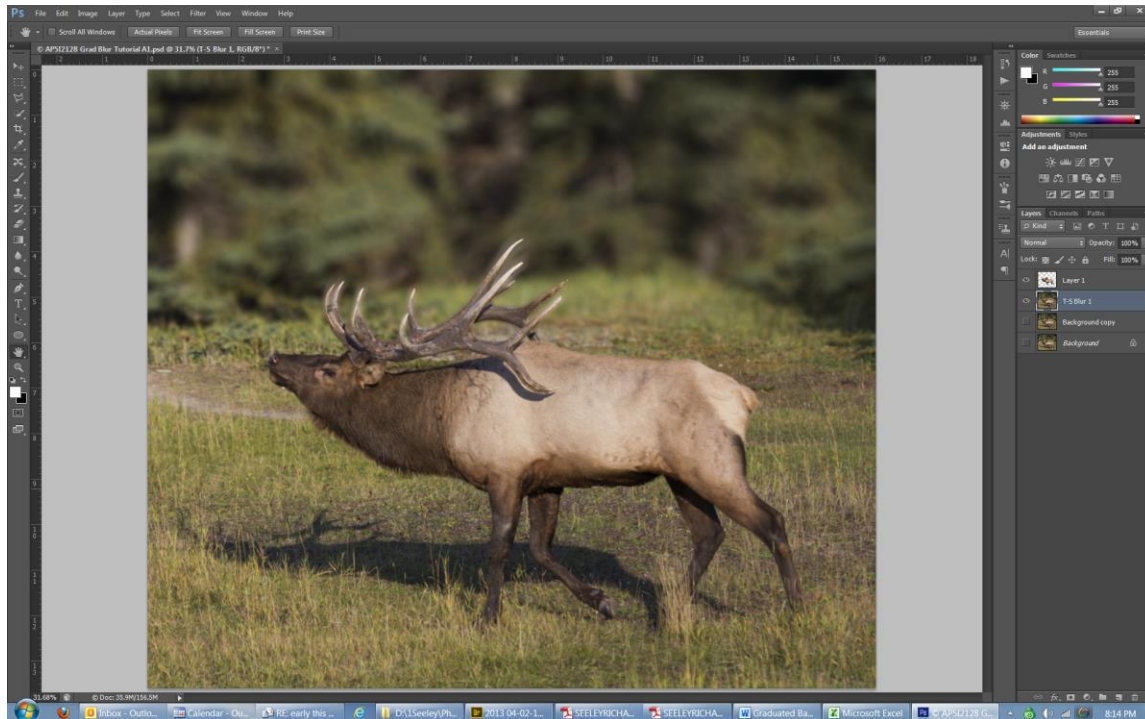


Graduated Blur Includes the Elk's Antlers

6. Make the animal layer visible

Making Layer 1(elk) visible brings the elk back into sharp focus.

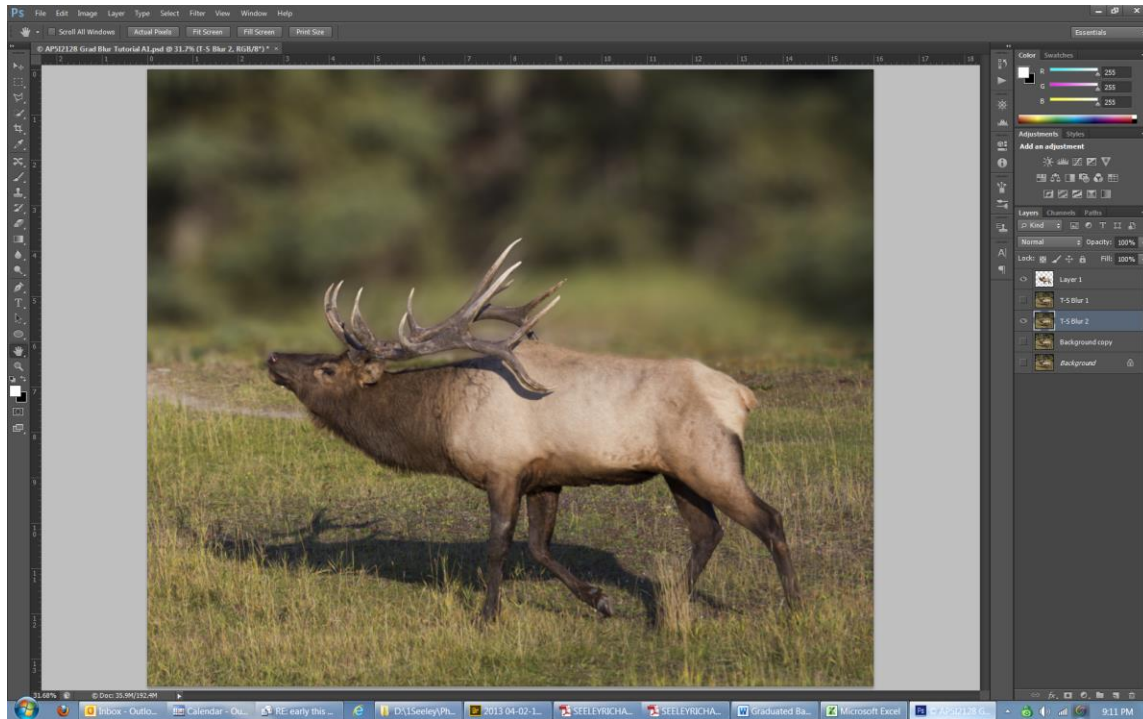
7. Create additional Tilt-Shift blur layers, if necessary



Elk in Focus, Background with Graduated Blur

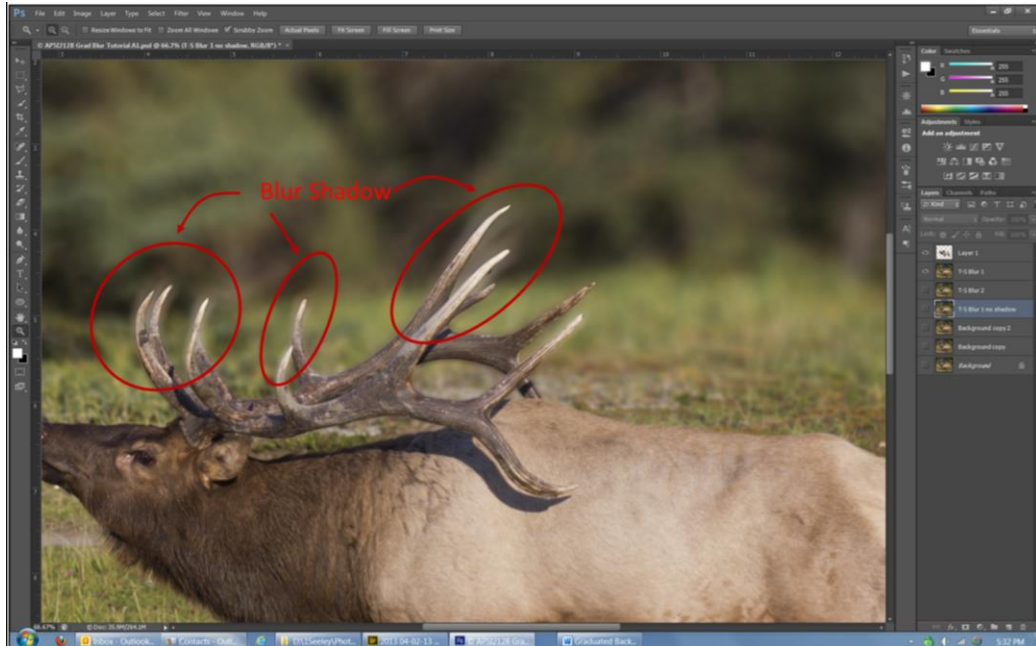
Now we have an elk in sharp focus and a graduated background blur.

However, if one looks closely at the antlers, a blur shadow can be seen. In some cases the shadow is not visible. It depends on the blur intensity. With a high blur intensity the blur shadow is not visible, but the degree of blur then tends to be unrealistic. Experiment with various intensities and positions to the start and end lines of the graduated blur filter. First make another T-S Blur layer by duplicating the Background copy layer and proceeding through another blur configuration. The various configurations are now on separate layers and can be viewed by selectively making each one visible.



Another Blur Configuration with a Higher Intensity of 102

If a blur shadow is visible, then proceed to Part 2. You can see a blur shadow around the antlers (especially the longest antlers) in the picture below:

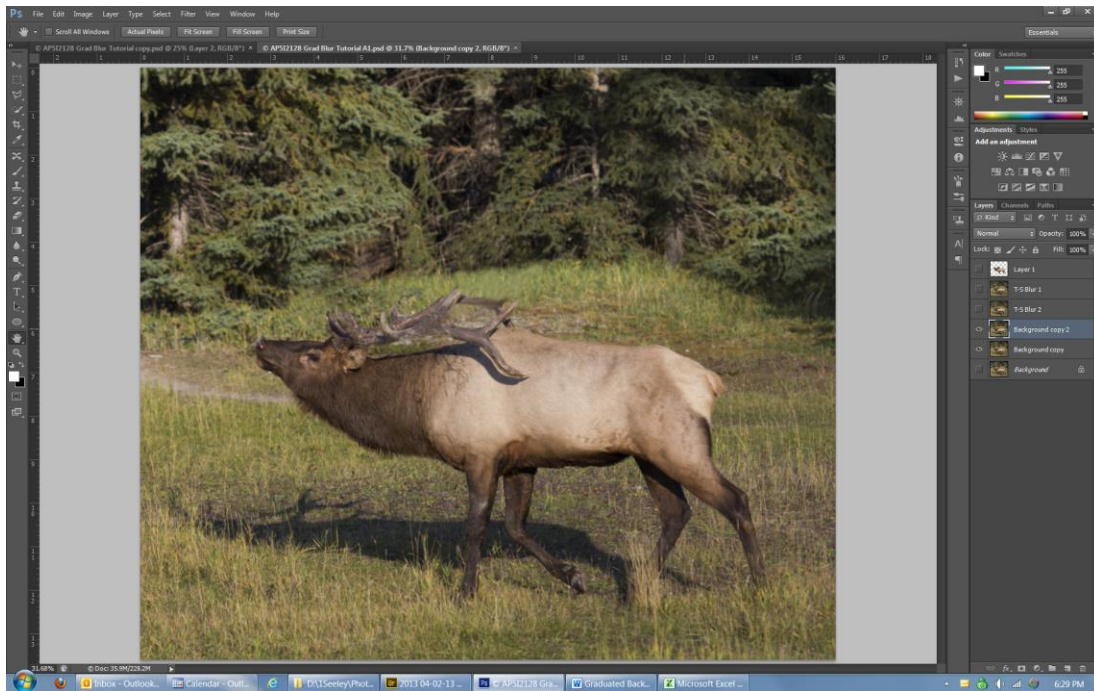


Blur Shadow

Part 2

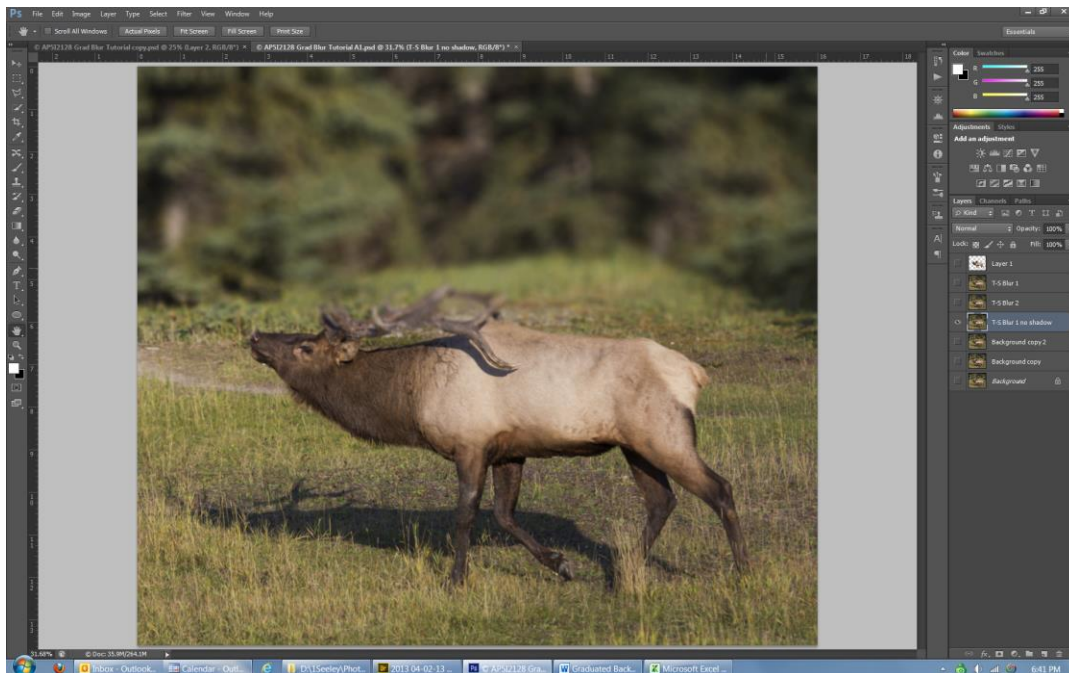
The challenge is to eliminate the pixels that are used to create the blur shadow. In this case, one can see that the shadow is formed along the upper edges of the antlers. The blurring of the antlers “bleeds” into the background. This can be eliminated by cloning over some of the antler edges with background pixels.

1. Duplicate the Background Layer. It will automatically be labeled Background copy 2
2. Clone (Clone Stamp Tool) over those edges that have a shadow, using image background pixels onto the Background copy 2 layer.



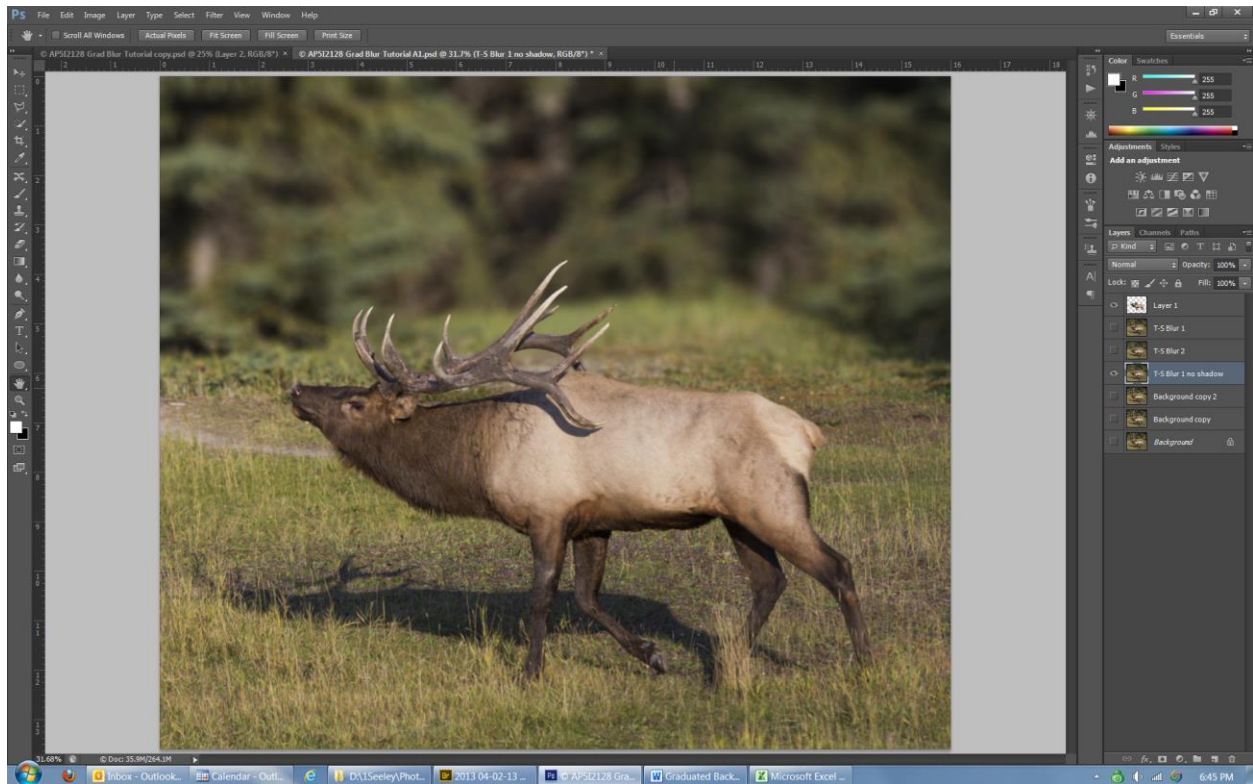
Cloning over parts of antler edges to eliminate blur shadow source pixels

3. Duplicate Background copy 2 and name it T-S Blur 1 No Shadow (or name it for whichever blur configuration that is considered the best one of the several alternatives).
4. Apply the Tilt-Shift blur filter to this layer using same parameters as the selected blur configuration.



Tilt-Shift Blur Filter applied again

5. Make Layer 1 (Elk) visible



Layer 1 (Elk) made Visible

At this point, the antlers are visible, the background is a graduated blur and there are no blur shadows.

Done.

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