

Enhancing Images Using Radial Gradients

by Milton Heiberg

Gradients are good devices to tone down the edges of an image. The basic goal of composition is to keep the viewer's attention within the frame long enough to digest the message that the image is sending. So we try to direct the viewer's eye immediately to a point of reference—usually, but not necessarily, the main subject. Often the viewer's eye is misdirected to a brightly lighted foreground, a bright sky blazing through treetops, or at the corners of the frame from a white overcast sky. Any area or object that is brighter than the main subject or point of reference is an attention stealer.

With a reverse radial gradient the background becomes subdued and subtle, without an in-your-face-manipulation that naturalists frown on. This “procedure” (NOT MANIPULATION) maintains the truth-in-nature qualities of an image. It can be used in many ways with great flexibility, and maintain image integrity and believability. Many software packages give you an adjustable vignette that you can apply to the perimeter of the frame. In many cases it takes care of the problem, but if used too often it can become a noticeable stereotyped repair job.

The image below was shot at minus one f/stop to hold the highlight areas on the gator's face. While this has an advantage in darkening the foreground vegetation and water background, it also made the subject too dark.



RAW image (20070721-4152_Orlando-Wetlands-Gator)

Stats: f/19, 1/45 sec., ISO 100
Canon 20D, Canon 500mm f/4L + Canon 1.4X, Evaluative metering -1 f/stop on the exposure compensation scale.

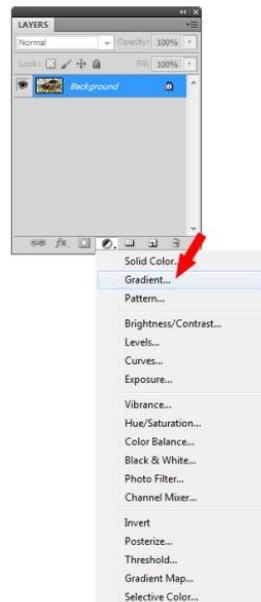
Once the image was cropped, color and density adjusted, it looked pretty good as is, but some light areas in the foreground still stole attention away from the alligator's face. The bright areas of water were not bad, but also competed a bit with the subject.



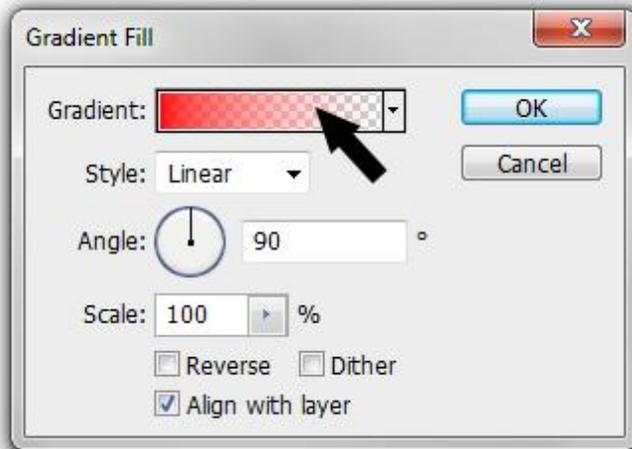
Cropped & Shopped

This is where "Milton's ☺. Reverse Radial Gradient" comes in. I've been using this technique for many years to reduce attention-stealing highlights whenever they appear within the frame. You should consider making an **Action** for this lengthy process, and have it forevermore with just two keystrokes. We will go through it using Photoshop CS5, but you can adopt this technique to any software that features gradients.

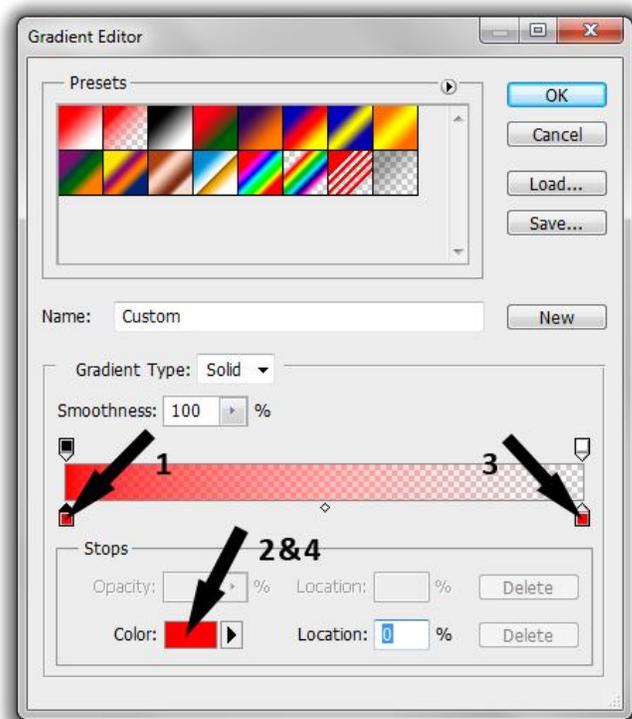
1. In Photoshop's main menu, go to **Window/Layers** and click on the split circle icon at the bottom of the **Layers** pallet, then click on **Gradient**. You may want to precede this step with starting an **Action*** and have the process ready for all time.



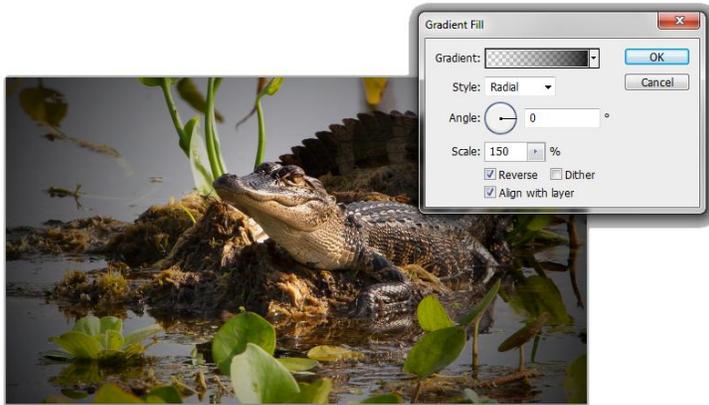
2. The **Gradient** pallet may have a color of tint left over from a previous use. So the next sequence of painful steps are the best reason to make this an **Action**.



Be sure the "Foreground to Transparent" gradient preset (as seen here) is selected. Then click on the **Gradient** scale itself.

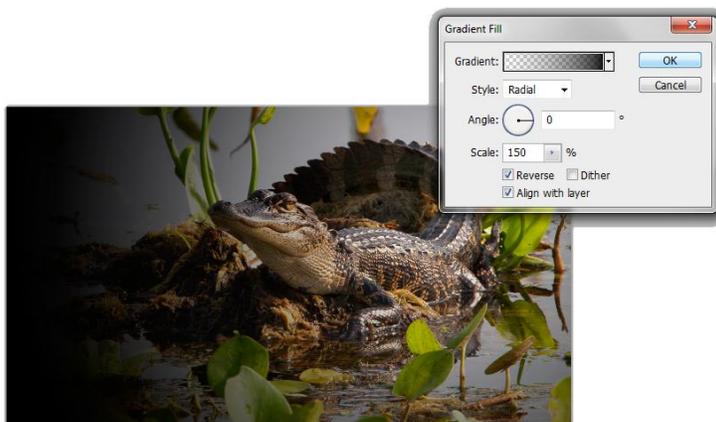


Click ink well (1), then click the color box (2) and convert the color to solid black in the color pallet. Click Color Pallet **OK**. Do the same with (3) and (4), then click **OK**.

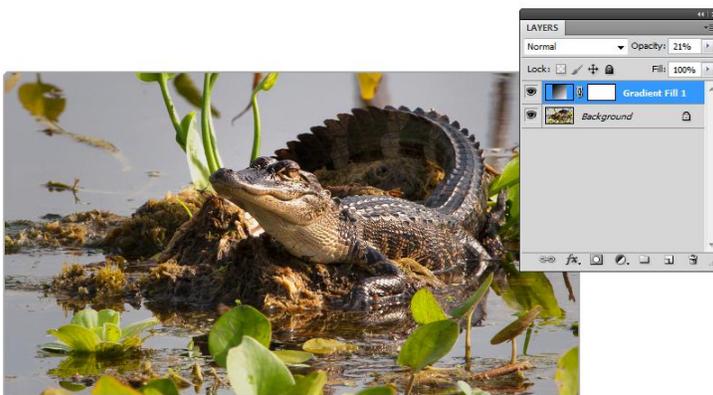


In the **Gradient Fill** pallet, set:
Style to Radial
Angle to "0" degrees
Scale to "150"
Check the **Reverse** box, and click **OK**.

This is overkill, but you begin to see the idea.



Now, with the **Gradient Fill** pallet still open, use the **Move** tool to reposition the gradient. (In this case I dragged the gradient layer to the right.) Click **OK**.



In the **Layers** panel, move the **Opacity** slider to the left until the busy foreground is subdued, but the gradient is not obvious. In this example 21% opacity gave me a pleasant balance of tones.

3. If you are creating an Action, you should go to the **Action** panel now and click the square to the left of the red dot to end the action sequence.

In any event:

- Select the **Paint Brush** tool.
 - Set the opacity to **100%** in the options bar.
 - Hit the keyboard “D” to set the foreground color to black.
 - Click the mask portion of the **Gradient** layer icon in the **Layers** panel to activate it if not already activated, and paint out the parts of the subject where you want to restore detail.
4. Last finishing touches:
 - Flatten image.
 - Keyboard **Ctrl+J** for a duplicate.
 - Sharpen the duplicate to taste.

5. Before and After:



Before gradient



After gradient

I use this **Radial Gradient** procedure often for my nature subjects, especially with landscapes and bird portraits where the brightness of the background calls attention away from the subject. Keep in mind that the gradient must be subtle enough to not be an obvious distraction itself. #

*How to create an Action:

1. Open an image file in Photoshop. To create an Action you must have an image open.
2. Go to the **Window** pull-down menu and select **Actions**.
3. On the bottom bar, to the left of the Trash icon, click on the **Create New Action** icon.
4. In the **Actions** dialog panel, give the action a name (e.g., "Reverse Radial Gradient"). Leave the second box as default. Select (e.g., **Shift+F12**) in the Function key box. Click on **Record**.
5. Back on the **Action** panel, on the bottom bar, the second icon from the left side is a dot that will light up RED. You are now ready to begin the steps of the Action. Begin and continue through the complete process.
6. Last step: Click on the **square** to the left of the red dot. This ends the recording and saves the Action.

From now on you merely keyboard **Shift+F12** to run this Action.