Photoshop Layers: A Primer, Part 1 - David Jenkins

Sometimes we can get so involved with the techniques of Photoshop that it's possible to overlook the basics. My original brief for articles for this newsletter was to describe ways that Layer Modes would be useful for improving our bird shots, and after looking at a number of techniques, I'd like to review some layer basics and highlight the features in the tool subset within the Layers palette.

Now that Lightroom 4 (and soon 5, as it is in beta - try it for free), and Aperture 3, have become so versatile in both handling our image libraries and making some major image enhancements all from the one product, many of us are no longer using many of the simple techniques in Photoshop. The reason is simple. LR4 and AP3 are both using layering techniques, but doing it behind the scenes.

So here's a review of the basics of layers. It is intended to help you gain a little more experience with creating, working with, and managing, the results from Layers.

The power of layers is that they are non-destructive. They don't permanently change pixel values, and they can be turned off, copied to other images, and arranged to meet the needs of output or display.
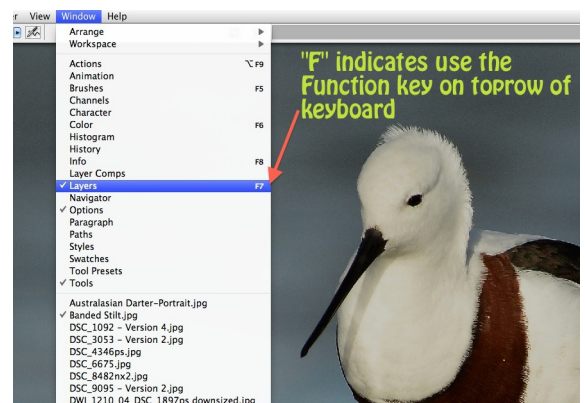
Layer Basics

1. The Layer Palette can be activated in a number of ways.

To display the Layers Palette:
> **Menu bar > Windows > Layers**

You'll notice a little **F7** along side indicating that tapping the Function Key 7 (F7) will show or hide the layer palette. That's my preferred way of working.


2. When you open an image, be it from a file, or via Adobe Camera Raw, Photoshop automatically calls it Background Layer.

Background Layers have a special characteristic that needs to be understood: **You can't move a Background Layer to another level in the layer palette.** You can, however, change its name and status to that of an ordinary layer and then it can be moved.

Click on the layer name box and you'll get a dialogue sheet where you can make a name
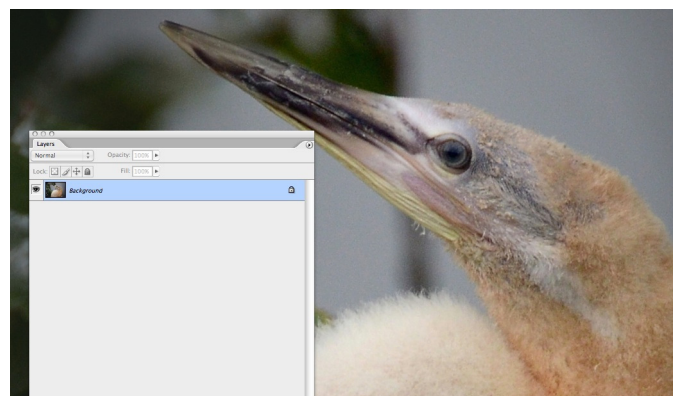
change. Then it's no longer a Background layer. I can't imagine in bird photography where that is going to be a big deal.

3. Speaking of opening an image, brings us to **Saving** an image, and I recommend that you always save an image after it has been opened, or converted. Save it in Photoshop (PSD) format: **myimage.PSD** When you do this, the layers and changes you'll make will be saved right along with the image details. And it doesn't overwrite your original file.
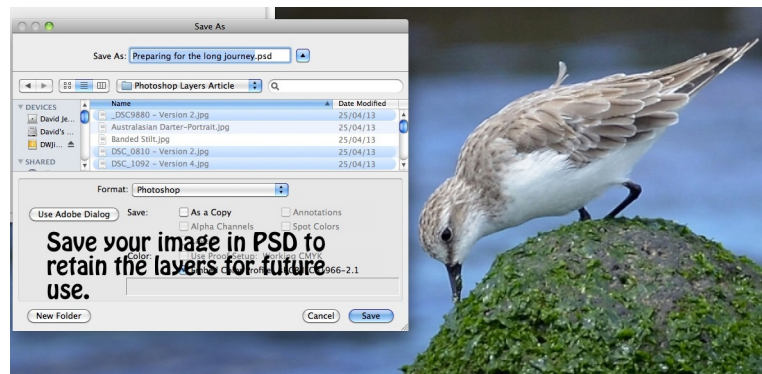
4 At the top of the Layer Palette box is a drop-down box, usually showing "Normal". This is the **Blend Mode**, and once you open it, you'll find all the various Layer mode options we've reviewed in previous tutes. Leave it at Normal for now.
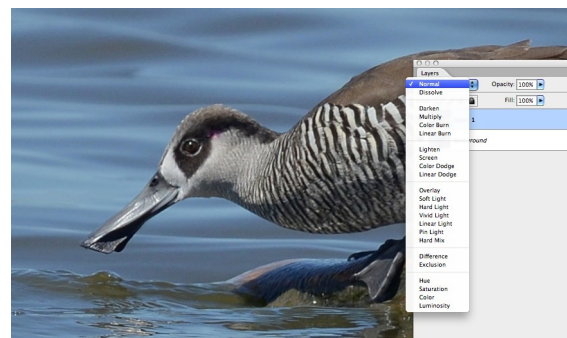
5 To the right of that is **Opacity**, usually 100%, but again it's a drop-down box, and a slider which will enable you to control the opacity of a layer. You need to have added at least one layer to enable the box. In a nutshell, it allows the values from the layers underneath to show through, but you'll probably think of it as making the top layer more and more transparent. (That will get me kicked out of the Photoshop fraternity.)
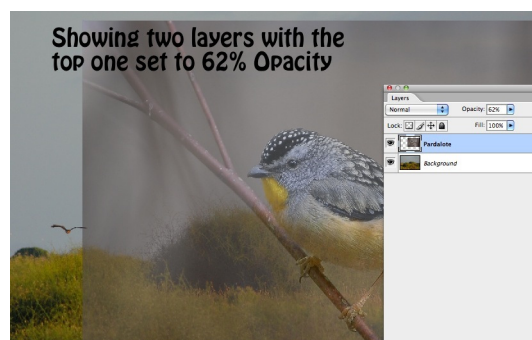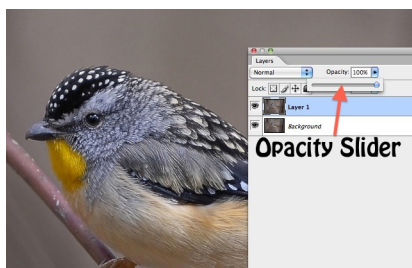
Fill - below Opacity - is similar, but different, and we'll not worry about it for our bird pictures. When you pop on your graphic artist cap, it will have value.

6   Below that are four boxes that control the **Locking** of a layer. Again, not of great interest for bird images, so we'll move on.

Layer locking

7. On the Left Hand side of the Layer palette is a little tiny box that looks like an eye. When it's active you can see the layer in your image - "**Eyeball**" it.

When it's unchecked, (click on the eye icon to disable it) the Layer is still there, but inactive and you can't "Eyeball' the contents of the Layer.

Cool, because you might want to create a number of effects, such as a light, a dark and a contrasty version of the image. Make each on an Adjustment Layer and you can turn them on and off without having to have three separate versions of your image. LR and AP3 users will see that is what happens when you create Versions.

Eye turned off. Layer is not visible.
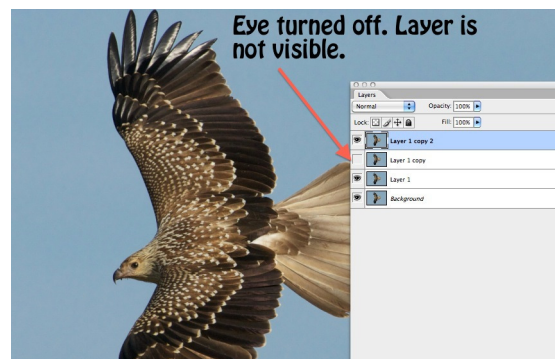
8. Next to the eye is the **Layer Organiser**. It's on the same level as the 'eye' that turns the layer visibility on and off. It will have a little thumbnail on the left-hand side, indicating what the layer is doing: a thumbnail of your image, a T for text, a graph for adjustment layers, etc.


9. If you want to **rename** a layer - and I recommend it - then click on the layer name; it will become blue and you can type a new name for that layer. Changing "Layer 2" to "More blue in the sky" is a typical example. I always try and give each layer a name that's helpful in working out what it is doing. Then when I reopen the image in the future I'll be able to see what has been done.
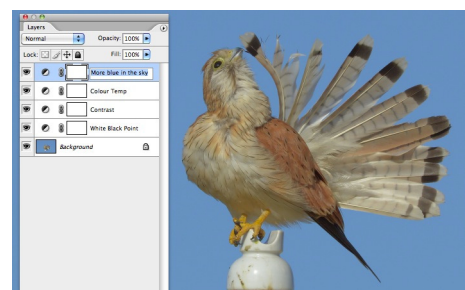
10. Layers can be **moved** above or below one another (exception being the Background Layer); to do this **click** anywhere in the layer in the layer organiser, **hold and drag** to the new location.

Click, Hold and Drag to reposition layer
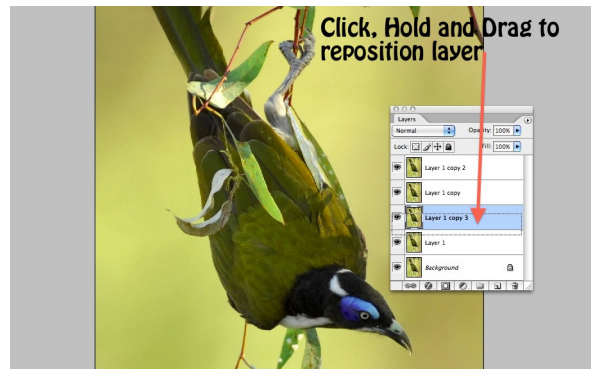
11. Importantly, *a layer must be active for it to be changed, altered, or affected by the imaging tools* such as Brush, Erase, Clone, etc. It will always be the layer that has a blue cast over that layer in the Layer Organiser. *If you have that layer turned off, it can still be affected. Just because you have a layer 'eyeballed' does not in any way imply that it is the active layer.* The one with the blue cast is the working layer.

Active layer is Blue
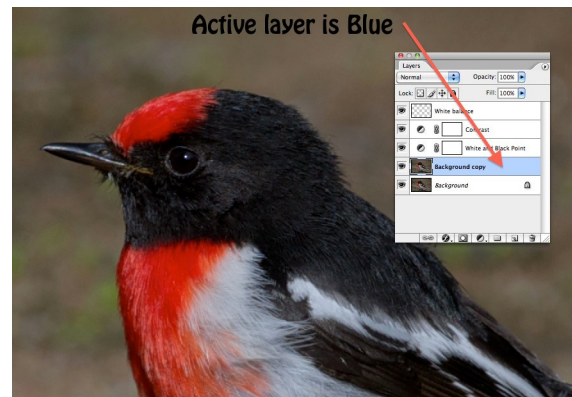
12. And finally, for this part. When you are in the Layer Organiser and a layer is active, if you right-click on the mouse a range of optional actions are shown. To bird photographers the most useful are Duplicate Layer, Delete Layer, and Layer Properties. Most of the other ones are for you when you put your graphic artist cap on and are making those wonderful creative arty projects.

Right Click to have access to quick layer options.
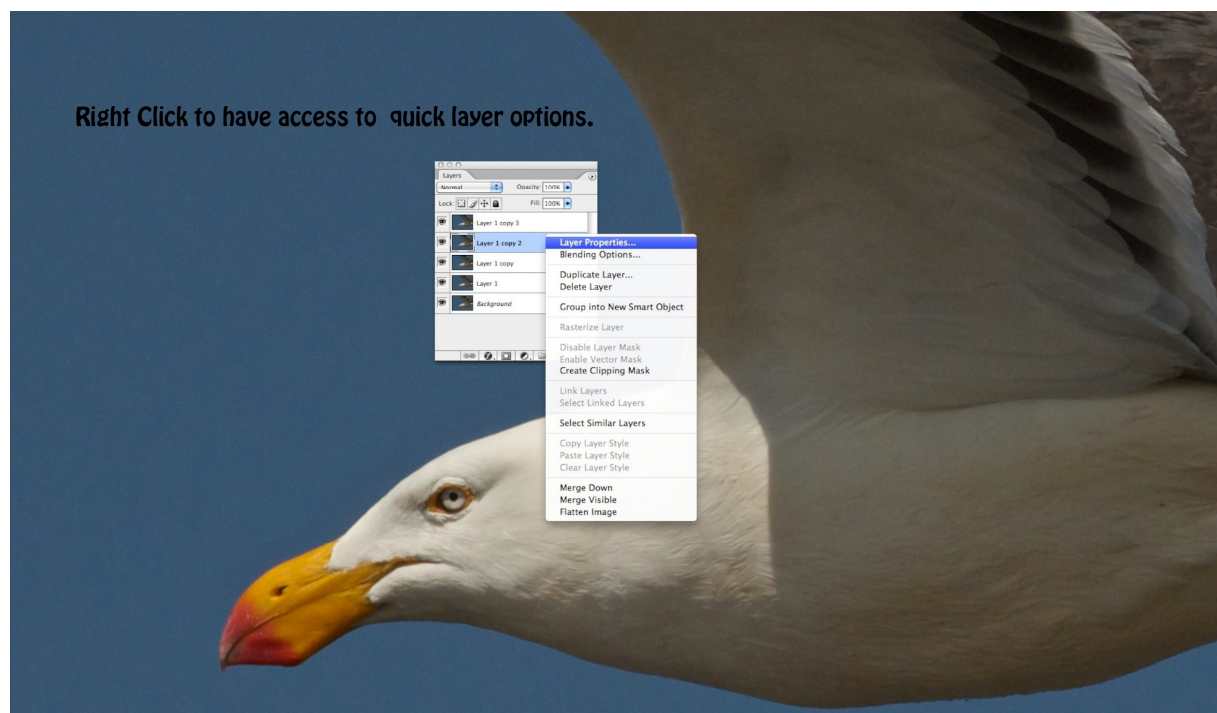
More next time. For now, enough of the computer and keyboard. Go and commit photography. We do.