Creating a Custom White Balance
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Most photographers don't bother creating a custom white balance because they say " I can fix it in Camera Raw." While it is true you can adjust the white balance after the shot in Camera Raw you have to realize that the proper white balance is made up of three sliders, the Temperature, Tint and to a degree the Exposure. So in order to get the perfect white balance in Raw processing you need to get these three sliders exactly perfect. That is time consuming and you are only making your assessment based on your memory of what the scene looked like. By creating a custom white balance in the filed you are eliminating these variables and taking your picture correctly in the first place. The whole process of creating a custom white balance takes about one minute and will save you a lot of time in the long run, as well as giving you a very accurate color rendition of your subject.

Here is a scene I photographed at a local nature center. The upper left image was shot at a preset white balance of Daylight, notice how blue the fog was rendered. In the upper right I set the white balance setting to Auto, notice the blue is gone but the fog is not neutral either. In the lower left I made a guess (albeit a bad guess!) and manually set the white balance to 6050 Kelvin, the fog is less blue than the original but still too blue. In the last image I shot a custom white balance and look how natural and neutral the scene appears. Then for all the images taken that morning I did not have to adjust the color at all in my images.

CUSTOM WHITE BALANCE

DAYLIGHT (5500)   AUTO (10250)

MANUAL GUESS (6050)   CUSTOM 8300

Here are the steps for creating a custom white balance:

1. Photograph a neutral gray card – I print my own from Photoshop or you could buy a card designed for creating white balance one company that makes these is WhiBal

Another option is to use a device such as the BaLens which also serves as a lens cap and therefore is always available.

2. Once you take the image of the card or the use the BaLens then you go to your camera menu and look for "Custom White Balance registration." The wording may vary slightly by camera manufacturer. I am showing Canon but the steps may look different for various models of camera as well!
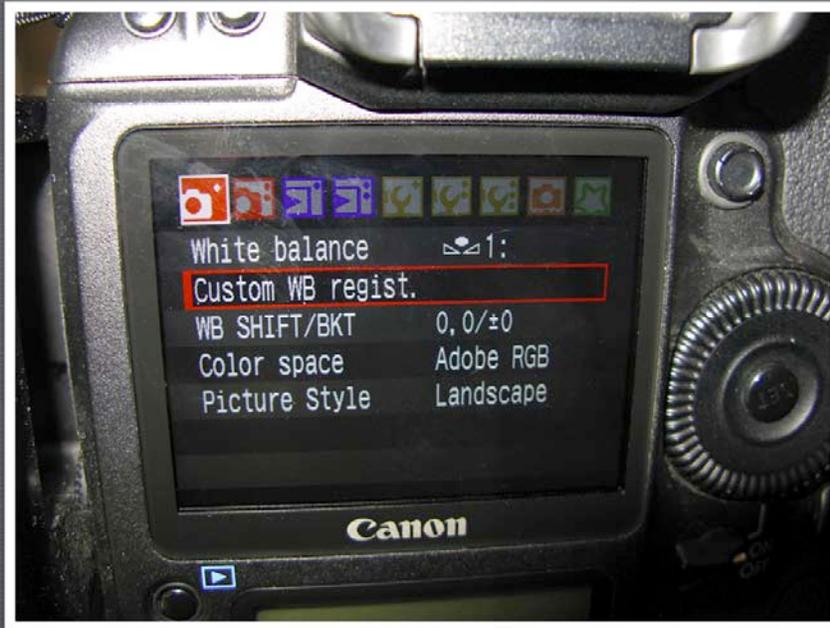
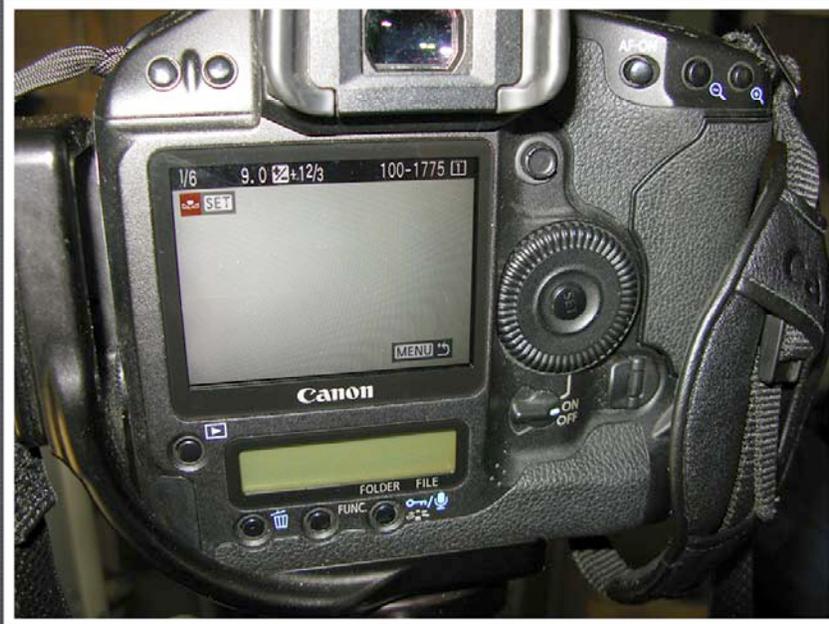3. Choose to register the image on the card (the image you just took)

4. You should see the image you just took. In this example of the gray card the whole screen is gray, if I were using the BaLens I would have a gray circle in the middle of a black field. When you see the image you press the "Set" button on your camera.

5. The camera asks if I want to use this info to create my white balance, I say OK. On most cameras you can only set one custom white balance and you will see a message telling you to set the white balance setting on the camera to the custom symbol. On this camera I can save up to 5 different custom white balances so in this case I creating custom white balance number 2.
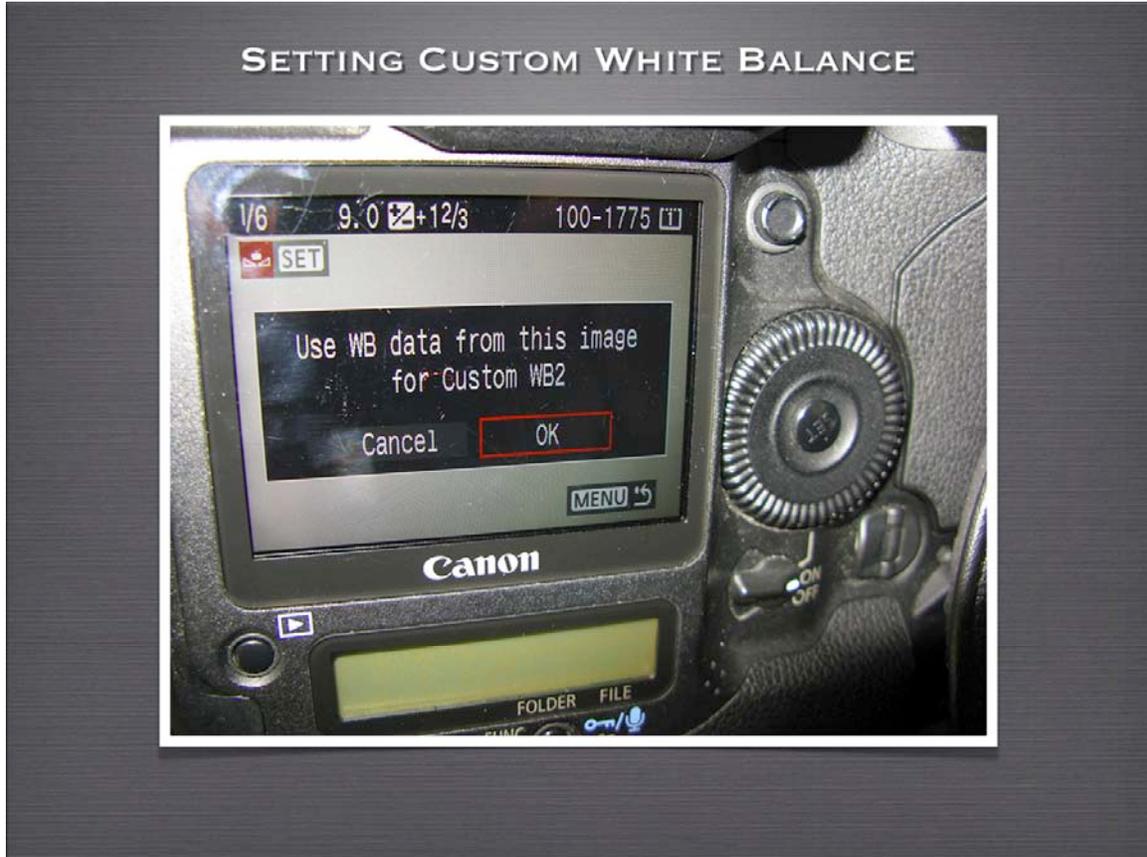
6. The camera reminds me to set the White Balance setting on the camera to number 2 in this case or just Custom if your camera only records one custom setting.

7. I set the camera to the Custom setting in the White Balance menu. And I am done! The whole process takes about one minute. And then I leave this setting for as long as I photograph under those lighting conditions. On a typical day I take make one custom setting at sunrise, one after about 9 AM when the sun is high and another as sunset is approaching. I hope this helps you get more accurate color!