

PHOTOSHOP'S REFINE EDGES TOOL

Over the years, Adobe has introduced several tools to help Photoshop users isolate elements of our images and then extract them for other uses, i.e., placing them on a more neutral background. Channel Masks, the first tool, was a manual and inexact process. The Extract tool, introduced in successive versions, made a huge difference in the process but was discarded in CS4. The Extract tool was replaced with the Refine Edge tool. CS5 contains an improved version of the Refine Edge tool that makes it much easier to clean up selections and create seamless blends. It also helps when extracting people or animals with hair that is difficult to isolate and select.

The "egret" example shows how to select and extract two egret chicks from a busy background, place them on a cleaner background and still retain the detail of their feathers.

Here are the steps involved:

STEP 1: Open your image.

STEP 2: Make a rough selection using the Quick Selection tool. Do this by placing your cursor inside the area you want to isolate and then spreading it out to the edges. If you end up selecting too much, just hold the Alt/Opt key to remove areas from your selection. A rough isolation is sufficient at this stage.

See an example of this in the first image, where the "marching ants" (the movable dashed line) of my selection are visible. The second image shows the selection after I turned on Quick Mask Mode (the tool looks like a camera on the bottom of your toolbox; look for a rectangle with a circle in the middle)—the chicks were isolated from the busy background but the result is not acceptable.



Rough selection with "marching ants"



Rough selection shown with Quick Mask

STEP 3: Take your selection, choose Refine Edges from the Tool Option bar above the image. (If you checked the selection in Quick Mask Mode, be sure to remove this action by clicking it again. If you don't, you will not be able to select the Refine Edge button.) Clicking Refine Edges will bring up the dialog box shown here with the resulting edge Radius I caused by my slider adjustment choices. There are several key features to this dialog box.



Refine Edges dialog box and resulting edge

STEP 4: Choose a View option. View Mode will be most useful to you. Then toggle through the seven options and see which one shows the edges of your subject the best: Marching Ants, Overlay, On Black, On White, Black & White, On Layers or Reveal Layer. In this case, the white birds placed against black best shows detail in the feathers. If it were a person with dark hair, white might be a better background.

STEP 5: Slide the Radius slider to the right to any random amount and then click the box at the top that says "Show Radius." This will reveal an outline of your selection. Notice that the outline thickens and shows more of the surrounding area, depending upon how many pixels you selected in the Radius slider.

STEP 6: Toggle the Smart Radius box on and off and see if it helps your selection. Adobe defines Smart

Radius as “Automatically adjusts the radius for hard and soft edges found in the border region. Deselect this option if the border is uniformly hard- or soft-edged or if you want to control the Radius setting and refinement brushes more precisely.” In this case the whole edge is soft so it works better off, but in some instances it may help to have it on.

STEP 7: Move the Radius slider to get to the edge of what you are trying to capture—in this case, the tops of the hairy looking feathers. (See previous screenshot.) In this example I had to slide it all the way to the right. If your area does not extend as far as these feathers did you will not have to go so far.

If your selection still does not include areas you want, add them to the selection by painting them in. The brush on the left of the Refine Edge dialog box is selected by default. If you are missing an area you want included in the Radius, paint on that area with your cursor. You can make your brush larger or smaller by adjusting the number on the regular Photoshop toolbar (not in the Refine Edge dialog box). If you want to see the underlying image while doing your work, choose Overlay in the View drop down menu. If you have too much showing in your Radius area, hold the Alt/Opt key and paint to remove from the selection. The paintbrush shows + or - depending upon whether you are adding to the radius (+) or subtracting from it (-).

STEP 8: Once the Radius includes the info you want, click the box that says “Decontaminate Colors,” on and off, and see if it helps your colors look cleaner. This will remove background color from your subject, making it easier to blend the subject into a new background, if that is your intention. In this case, some beak color was picked up in the feathers so I turned it off. There have been many images I’ve worked on, however, where leaving it on has helped.

STEP 9: From the Output To drop-down menu, select New Layer with Layer Mask. This will give you your finished selection (extracted image) on a new layer with a layer mask. The advantage of having the layer mask is that you can refine the selection by painting on the mask with black to remove parts or white to add parts to the selection, allowing you further fine-tuning.

STEP 10: If you want to place your selection on a different background, you need to add another layer. Open the new background image, size it to the same size as your original image, then select, copy and paste it into the original image. If you want it to paste below your selection then make the Background layer active before pasting and it will appear in between the Background and your selected layer.



Finished image with layers

Now I have an image of the egret chicks on a more neutral background without the distractions of the original image. Making selections with fine detail has always been one of the most difficult tasks to accomplish in Photoshop, but by using new Refine Edge tool properly, this task has become much easier.☺

Lewis Kemper sells his Photoshop training DVDs, “The Photographer’s Toolbox for Photoshop,” through his website at <http://www.LewisKemper.com>.



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