ATTENTION:

The following pages are for illustration purposes only. They are not final layouts and may not have captions, final proofreading or even final selections of images. In fact, the entire layout could change from what you see here, although the core elements will remain. You get to see this work in progress at this point so you have an idea of what we will be covering on this topic. This layout is not for public release.

B&W
Transformation

Go from a weak color photograph to strong, dynamic black-and-white by taking advantage of HDR technology along the way

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICK SHEREMETA

The technique that I'm about to illustrate will take your photos to the next level, creating killer black-and-white images. The method is fairly straightforward and utilizes the HDR Pro functionality already built into Adobe Photoshop CS5 and CS6. Best of all, it doesn't require any special add-ons or plug-ins either. I've never been too crazy about high dynamic range (HDR) images and had never done much with HDR, until recently, that is. Much of the color HDR work I've seen often appeared to be way overworked, unreal and sometimes actually rather garish, but that's just my personal opinion and shouldn't influence anyone's creative efforts in this regard. This viewpoint set me to wondering, however: What could one of those over-the-top color HDR images look like as black-and-white? Well, much to my surprise, the outcome was, to say the least, astounding! The resulting contrast and range of tonalities was something that I certainly would be hard-pressed to achieve through hours of dodging and burning, and layer masking. Let's see how it's done.

1)

2)

ABOVE: Final image.

Figure 1. HDR Pro Dialog panel.

Figure 2. An HDR Background layer with a Black & White Conversion layer added. The tonal adjustment is affected by moving individual color sliders or using the Targeted Adjustment tool (TAT) to make adjustments directly from the image.

Example 1: HDR Pro Image

In this example, I'll create a black-and-white image using an HDR composite for the background image. The first step is to pick three or more image frames taken at various bracketed exposures, just as would be done to create any HDR image, and open these selected files in Photoshop. If you're not familiar with the HDR process, here's how to do it.

With the individual images opened in Photoshop CS5 or CS6, select File > Automate > Merge to HDR Pro from the Menu bar. The Merge to HDR Pro Dialog panel will open. Accept the Files default under the Use option, and click on the bottom-right option button to Add Open Files. You'll then see the files you opened listed. Make sure the Attempt to Automatically Align
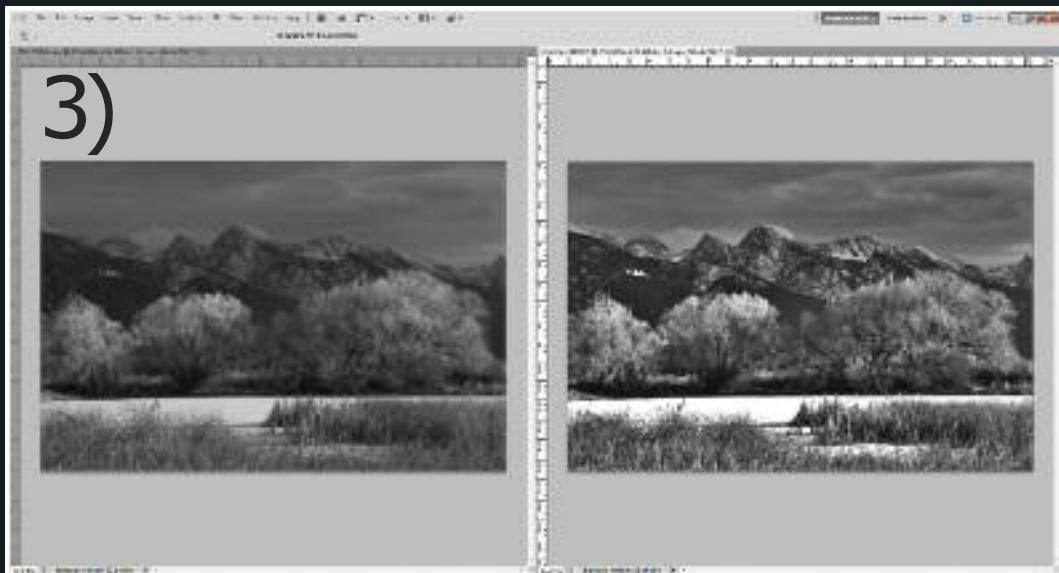
Figure 3. A black-and-white conversion using the Black & White Adjustment Layer in Photoshop created from a single color image (far left) and created from an HDR Pro color composite image (left).

Figure 4. Original color image (right); a color image with a Black & White Adjustment Layer added (center); and an HDR toned color image with a Black & White Adjustment Layer added (far right).
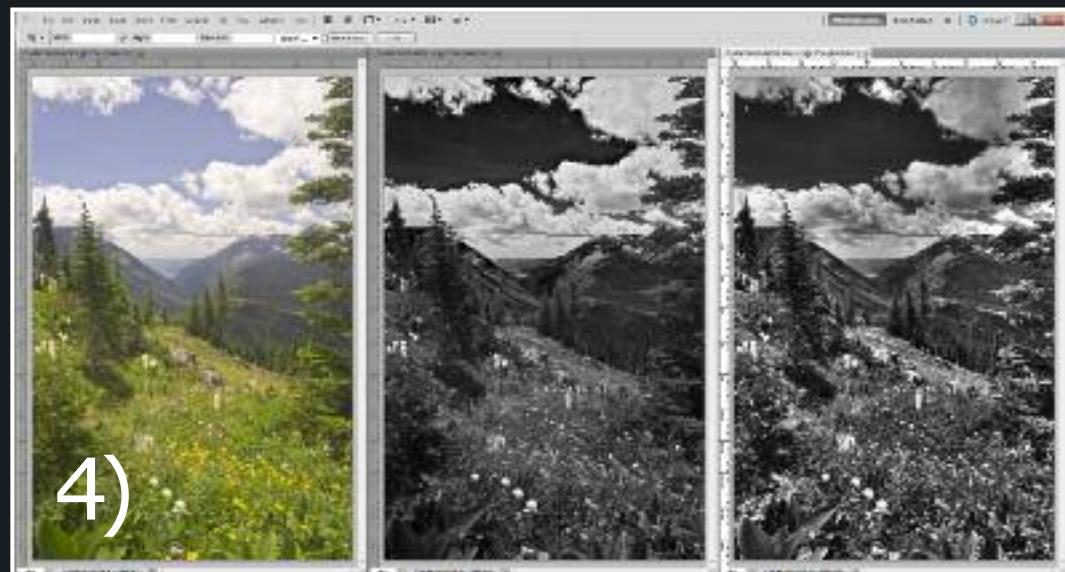
Source Files box is checked; click OK.

At this point, a Script Alert may open, telling you that files converted from the Camera Raw format may lose detail, i.e., that it's best to use RAW images. Don't panic; just click OK to proceed. Assuming you're already working with RAW image files (which is what I always work with), you can ignore the warning and simply continue. If you're using files other than RAW files, you either can carry on and see how things work out or cancel the operation and start again with RAW images. Depending on the images used, you may need to experiment a little to see what works best. A second warning Dialog panel may open advising that a loss of dynamic range may occur when merging files converted from the Camera Raw format—another

reason to work with RAW image files. It's obviously apparent now that it's best to work in RAW. As with the previous alert, click OK to proceed.

If you use Lightroom to catalog and manage your images, the process is a little simpler and faster. From Lightroom, highlight the individual images to be used and from the Menu bar select Photo > Edit in > Merge to HDR Pro in Photoshop, or simply right-click on any one of the highlighted images and select Edit In > Merge to HDR Pro in Photoshop from the drop-down menu. If you're working from Lightroom, you won't get the Photoshop warning dialogs regardless of the file format used.

Now that we're in Merge to HDR Pro, here's how to proceed. For this particular example, I chose a winter scene

consisting of a frozen pond lined with cattails and stately cottonwood trees framed by the Mission Mountain Range in northwestern Montana, complete with an ominous stormy sky in the background. I used three bracketed exposures, as shown in Figure 1, to make the composite HDR image with Photoshop's HDR Pro, and I chose Superrealistic from the Preset pull-down menu. Holy cow! You may say to yourself, "Surrealistic can yield some pretty wild results!" While that's often true of the color image, once it's converted to black-and-white, the difference can be strikingly and quite pleasing.

For my images, I've found that Surrealistic gives me great results, and the only changes that I make (again, depending on the image) are to the Strength
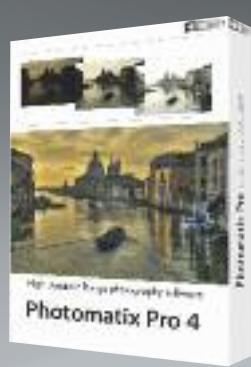
HDR Software Options

There are a number of software options for HDR work. HDR, **High Dynamic Range,** is an effect that's easy to overdo, and the resulting images can look garish, gritty and "hyper-real." Because there's so much overuse, many nature photographers shun the technology without giving it a try. The real fact is that HDR software, when used carefully and in moderation, lets you pull out detail that brings a photograph much closer to what your eye sees. In this article on converting color to black-and-white, Rick Sheremeta uses HDR software to enhance the image prior to the conversion to monochrome, and the results are incredible. Here are a few software options you should know about.

HDRsoft Photomatix. One of the pioneers in the technology, HDRsoft's Photomatix remains a popular and powerful option. Photomatix Essentials and Photomatix Pro are standalone programs for Windows and Mac OS X. Some of the features are available as plug-ins for Lightroom, Photoshop and Aperture. Photomatix Essentials is $39, and Photomatix Pro is $99. Go to www.hdrsoft.com for more details.

Nik Software HDR Efex Pro. Nik Software is well-known for its "photographer-oriented" interfaces and controls. HDR Efex Pro uses the company's U Point technology, a variety of presets and the ability to make precise adjustments to give you maximum control over the HDR effects. The $99 program can be used as a plug-in for Photoshop, Bridge, Lightroom and Aperture. Go to www.niksoftware.com for more information.

Unified Color Technologies. There are different levels of computer and Photoshop users, so Unified Color makes different levels of its HDR software. HDR Expose 2, 32 Float v2 and HDR Express each has its own level of sophistication. If you want to cover your bases, the company offer a Combo Suite, which includes HDR Expose 2 and 32 Float v2 for $199. We don't have space here to discuss each program in detail, but you can get all of the information at www.unifiedcolor.com.

and Detail sliders. I do this if I need to recover any detail in blown-out areas like the sky or other brightly lit objects. For this image, I pulled back on the Detail slider (under Tone and Detail) to recover some of the detail on the tops of the tree branches, which were very bright, in this case, from 300% down to about 198%, and simply accepted all the other pre-set values. Make sure the default Local Adaptation is selected for Mode. It's also always a good idea to check the Remove Ghosts box, otherwise any subject movement between frames, including passing clouds, will affect the final composite image, giving objects a ghostly blur. Now, click OK to start the HDR process.

Note that each image is different, and the resulting effect may not be to your liking; therefore, it's a good idea to experiment to see what works best for your specific photo as far as presets or adjustment sliders are concerned. You also may ask at this point, and rightly so, why not just use one of the Monochromatic HDR presets? You can, and as with any other software conversion tool, the HDR Pro Monochromatic presets can offer some good results, depending on the starting images used and assuming they meet your desires and objectives. The big difference in the method that I use is that I have greater control over the final outcome. I have much more latitude for managing the tonality of the final black-and-white based upon the fine-tuning of individual colors in the HDR composite image. This isn't possible if the Monochromatic presets are used.

After the HDR composite image is created, add a Black & White Adjustment Layer. You can do this several ways. From the main Menu bar, select Layer > New Adjustment Layer > Black&White, or select it directly from the Adjustment panel (half black and white icon), or from the Create New Fill or Adjustment Layer icon at the bottom of the Layers panel (half black and white icon).

As seen in Figure 2, controlled tonal adjustments can be made within the Adjustment panel by moving individual color sliders. If you prefer to work directly on the image on a particular object or area, as opposed to using the sliders, simply use the Targeted Adjustment tool (TAT). To use TAT, click on the Hand with the Arrow icon in the upper-left side of the Adjustments panel to activate it; now, hover with your mouse or tablet pen over the area of interest on the image, then click and drag left or right while holding down the mouse button to darken or lighten that area (color), respectively. Note: Not only will the area picked be affected, but everything else within the image that is of the same color will be affected as well. On some images, this may not be desirable; however, it's nothing that can't be fixed through the use of layer masks, but then that's another story beyond the scope of this article.

Example 2: HDR Toning

You say you'd love to try this technique, but don't have multiple exposures from which to create an HDR composite—not a problem. I'll show you how the same effect can be achieved using HDR toning in Photoshop using a single color image.

I've selected a landscape scene taken along Glacier National Park's Highline Trail, one of my favorite hikes. Although the subject matter is terrific, the image itself leaves something to be desired. Midday light is harsh and rather contrasty—not so great for a color image, but a terrific candidate for black-and-white conversion.

Open the image in Photoshop. From the main Menu bar, choose Image > Adjustments > HDR Toning. The HDR Toning panel will appear; it's analogous to the Merge to HDR Pro panel from Example 1.

Again, as in Example 1, I chose Surrealistic from the presets. If there are highlight areas that now appear blown out in the Preview panel (in this case, clouds and white flowers), reduce the amount of the Strength slider, under Edge Glow, and/or the Detail slider, in Tone and Detail, until detail begins to reappear. For this image, I reduced Strength from 4.0 to around 2.5, and Detail from 300% to about 110%—again, these aren't hard-and-fast recommendations and will vary from image to image. The important thing is that detail returns to white blown-out objects or areas—use what looks pleasing to you.

After the HDR toning is complete, *(Cont'd on page 82)*

TRANSFORMATION

add a Black & White Adjustment Layer just as was done in Example 1. Adjust individual color sliders, or use them in combination with the TAT to achieve the desired result. Figure 4 shows a comparison between the original color image, the color image to which a Black & White Adjustment Layer has been added, and a third that received HDR toning prior to adding the Black & White Adjustment Layer. As in Example 1, the HDR-toned image has much greater visual impact than a simple straight black-and-white conversion.

Experiment, And Explore The Possibilities

The techniques outlined here illustrate the visual impact that can be achieved through the use of HDR compositing or HDR toning of a single image as part of the black-and-white conversion process. Obviously, the same effects can be achieved with intensive dodging and burning, and/or detailed masking techniques, but with a much more time-consuming and labor-intensive effort. Since no two images will be alike, and each individual photographer will have his or her own preferences for how the final image is to be rendered, some trial and error will be necessary to determine which HDR presets or adjustments are best suited for the task at hand. Once you get the hang of things, it will become second nature to create vibrant black-and-white images with a minimal amount of time and effort. And, of course, nothing prohibits you from applying any further adjustments for improving your image even more to better meet your particular needs or creative objectives.

Although I'm using Photoshop's HDR Pro in my examples, there's no reason why you can't use other software to create the HDR composite image file before converting to black-and-white. **OP**

*To see more of **Rick Sheremeta**'s work or learn about his workshops, visit www.alpenglowproductions.com.*