

Processing via Merge to HDR Pro in Photoshop

How to export photos from Lightroom to create HDR images via Photoshop

Processing HDR files via Photoshop

Lightroom can be used to edit 32-bit files, providing they had been saved using the TIFF format and have been flattened, or have been generated in Lightroom using the new Photo ⇒ Photo Merge ⇒ HDR command via the Library module (which creates an HDR DNG file). This means that instead of using a dedicated HDR editor, you can tone edit high dynamic range images via Lightroom. You can then edit 32-bit files just as you would a regular image, except the Exposure slider range adapts to extend the exposure range from +/- 4 stops to +/- 10 stops. In practice, editing a 32-bit HDR file is not that much different from processing a regular raw or TIFF image except you potentially have a much greater dynamic range to play with. This will all depend on the quality of the 32-bit master image you are working with. But I have found that the results I can achieve using Lightroom as an HDR editor are pleasing. Working with the Basic panel tone controls, it is generally a lot easier to achieve the desired tonal balance compared to working with the HDR toning controls in Photoshop. While Photomatix Pro's controls are quite intuitive to work with, I find the Lightroom approach helps steer you away from creating the rather obvious "HDR look." However, if you push the Shadows and Highlights sliders to their extremes, the results may look a bit artificial.

As I just mentioned, you can now create HDR DNGs directly within Lightroom CC / Lightroom 6, but the following steps show how you can alternatively take images in Lightroom and use the Merge to HDR Pro feature in Photoshop to generate a 32-bit TIFF HDR master image.

TIP

It may be a good idea to set up a Smart Collection like the one shown in Figure 1 to filter out all 32-bit master files in your catalog.

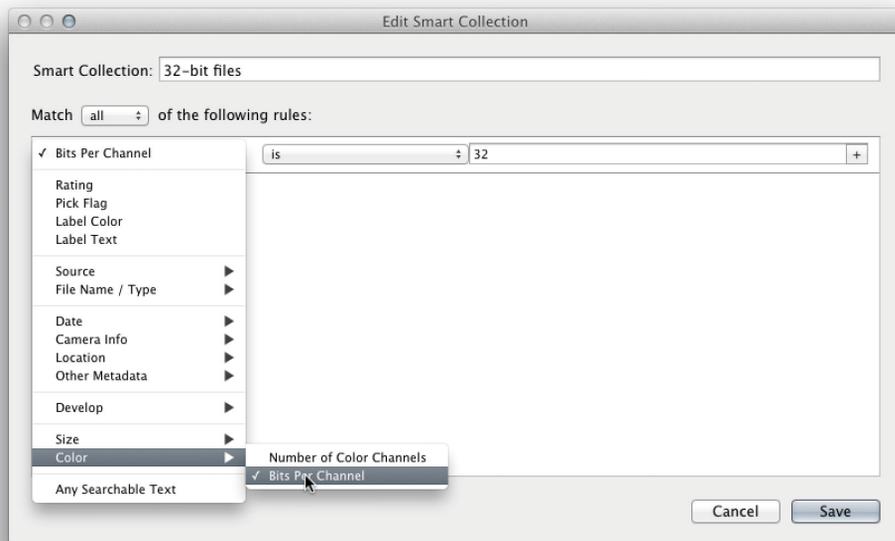
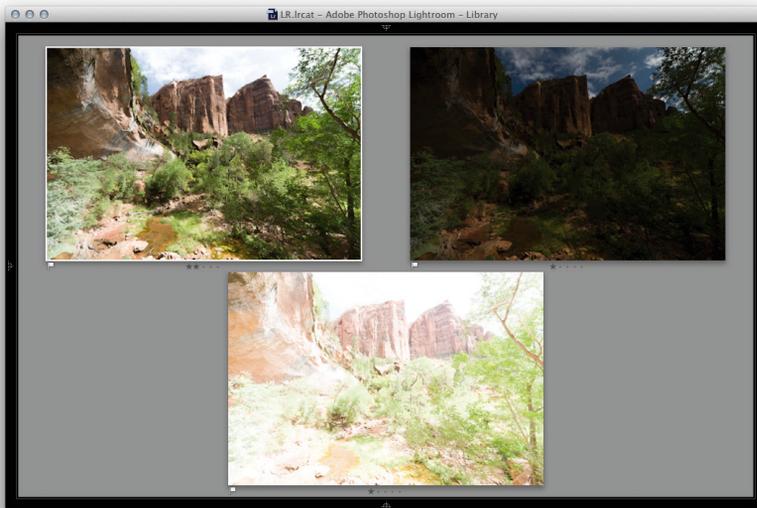


Figure 1 To filter out 32-bit files in Lightroom, it is a good idea to create a Smart Collection like the one shown here.



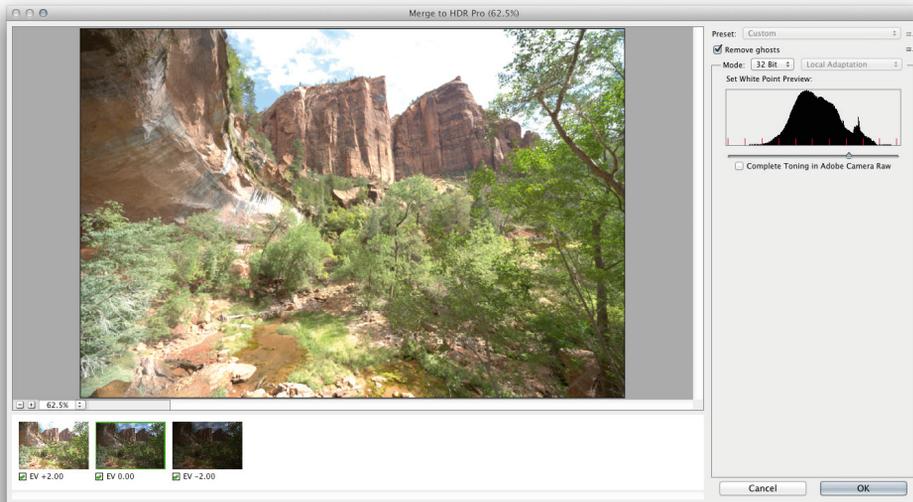
1 To begin with, I needed to create an HDR file. For this example, I selected three photos that were shot two stops apart, where the camera was set to aperture priority mode and the shutter speed only were adjusted with each bracket. This ensured that the aperture and depth of field was consistent for each exposure. I also set the sharpening Amount slider to zero (see sidebar).

NOTE

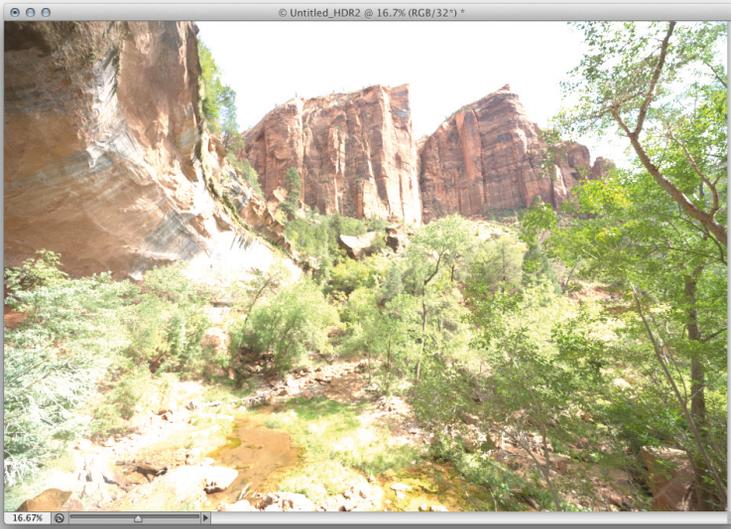
When generating an HDR master file in the way shown here, it is usually best to disable the sharpening beforehand since the Merge to HDR process will tend to generate artifacts if the images used have been pre-sharpened.

NOTE

If using Photoshop CC, the Merge to HDR Pro dialog shown in Step 2 now has a "Complete Toning in Adobe Camera Raw" option that reveals a "Tone in ACR" button at the bottom. Clicking this will open Camera Raw as a filter in Photoshop CC and allows you to continue the tone editing in Photoshop. In this example, I wanted to take the photo back into Lightroom, so it was important to deselect this option.



2 I then went to the Photo menu and chose Edit in ⇨ Merge to HDR Pro in Photoshop. This opened all three images, blended them together, and presented the Photoshop Merge to HDR Pro dialog. You can use this dialog to tone map and render an 8-bit or 16-bit image from the 32-bit HDR data, but here I selected the 32-bit option and clicked OK to render an image in 32-bit mode.



3 Here is how the 32-bit file appeared when viewed in Photoshop. It didn't look that great at this point. This was because it was a high dynamic range master, and the Photoshop preview could only show one segment of the overall image file exposure range (you can, if you like, select the 32-bit Exposure slider option from the document window status bar to adjust the preview exposure). At this point, I chose File ⇒ Save to save the image as a TIFF and add it to the Lightroom catalog.



4 Here is how the saved image looked when previewed in Lightroom, where, by default, zero settings were applied in the Basic panel.

