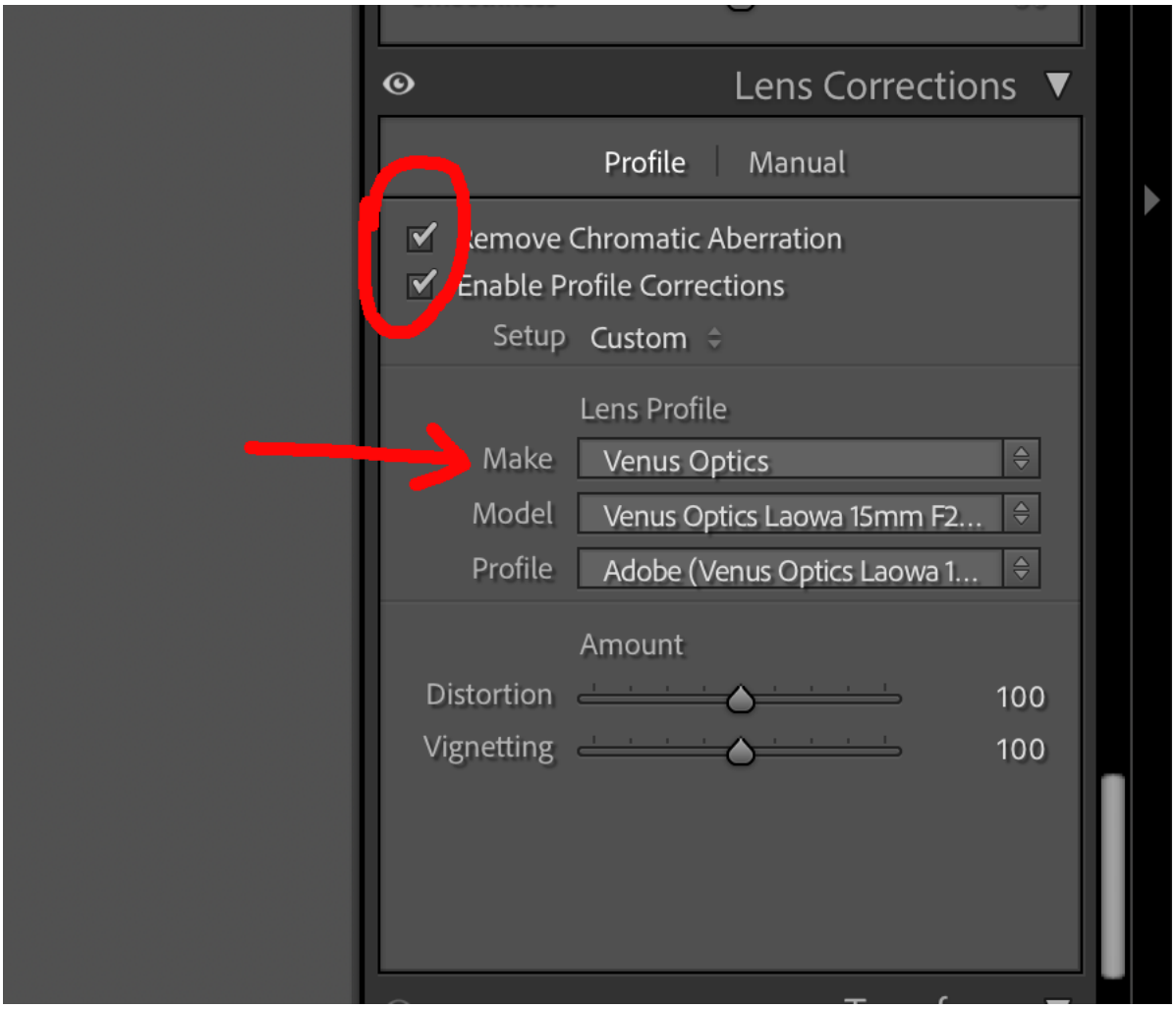
I put together a little tutorial for those of you who are new to editing aurora photos, and need a little help starting out…

This editing tutorial to shows what I do step by step to edit the typical aurora image. While I am using a Canon mirrorless camera and shooting in RAW format, the steps here should work for any camera (even a cell phone camera) providing that you shoot in a RAW format, and not in JPEG. These steps are also done in Lightroom, but many other editing software programs work pretty much the same, so you should be able to follow along in the software of your choice. The attached photos are numbered 1 through 9, and correspond to the steps as I go along.

We are going to work on a very generic image of mine (see image #1), but the same general edit steps will apply to just about any aurora photo. This is what I start with, straight out of the camera, which should be similar to one of yours if it is unedited RAW format. Kind of “blah”, right?

This first step is important to do before any edits, which is found in Lightroom's Develop mode under "Lens Corrections" (see image #2). It helps with distortion and vignetting, which all lenses have to some degree. Make sure the two checkboxes are selected, then pick the make and model of your lens.



The next two things will be a starting point as well as a temporary thing, but it helps me decide how far to push any of the edit steps afterwards. In years past, clicking on "Auto" was horrible 90% of the time, but Lightroom (and most other software) has improved to the point to where it gets you in the general ballpark. So, click "Auto" (see image #3)

Next, I change the color Profile at the very top from Standard, to Landscape. This will make the colors pop! Many times, I will tone the colors down later in editing, but that varies on each photo. So here is what we have so far with only those two edit steps.

It's looking better than the RAW file, but the color temperature and overall exposure are in need of adjustment. Auto will typically make it too bright because it still is programed to think "daytime". So, we typically need to bring the exposure down a bit until it looks a bit more natural. I'll also adjust the color temperature (and to a lesser extent, the hue) until the overall colors looks more natural as well.

From here we need to adjust Curves and a few other things that will get us closer to our final image. Keep in mind there is a lot of back and forth while fine tuning – and it will all be to YOUR personal taste in the end, not mine. So here is what I do to get closer to our final image.

There are five basic steps (see image #4):

1: You can see that we have not enough blue in the sky and too much magenta, and what was green in the aurora is appearing yellow. So, I adjust the sliders (mostly Temperature towards blue, lightly Hue towards green). I'll still fine tune this at the end, but now is when we want to be close.

2: Next is to bring the exposure down so it looks like nighttime again, instead of almost daytime. Keep an eye on your photo as you move the slider and stop when you like it.

3: Jump down to the Curves section. By us bringing the exposure down, it has shifted the histogram over to the left. I want to recover some of the dynamic range, so I slide the curves point from the top right corner closer to the left. Make sure you don't clip the histogram. I'll keep it back to the right a bit – the amount is by personal taste. Simply keep your eye on your image as you move this and see what appeals to you.

4: Fine tune the Highlights, Shadows, Whites & Blacks until it looks realistic to you. You should only have to move any of these just a bit (if at all). The amounts will vary image to image. Again, watch your image as you tweak these.

5: Time to make the stars pop a bit. While normally cranking up the Clarity in a daytime photo past +10 looks horrible, nighttime photos can handle it. I did this one to +25. You probably don't want to go much more than that because things start to look weird if you do. Texture can also help at times making the stars pop, but use it lightly. I typically set it between +5 to

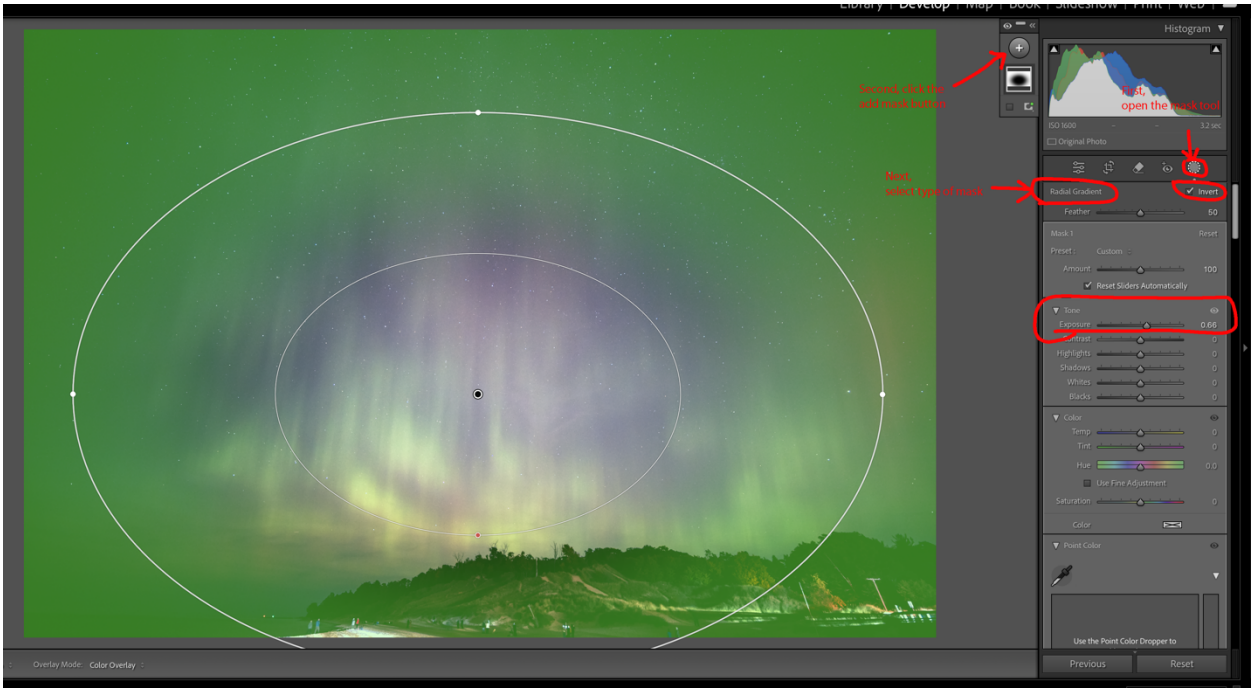
+15 when needed… but this image did not need it. Dehaze is a personal choice. Some photographers swear by it, but most swear at it. I choose not to use it at all. If you use it, use this one sparingly. Never more than +10 or -10.

If you decide at this point that the colors are too vivid (or not vivid enough), go ahead and adjust the Saturation and Vibrancy sliders. I took the saturation down, and the vibrancy up.

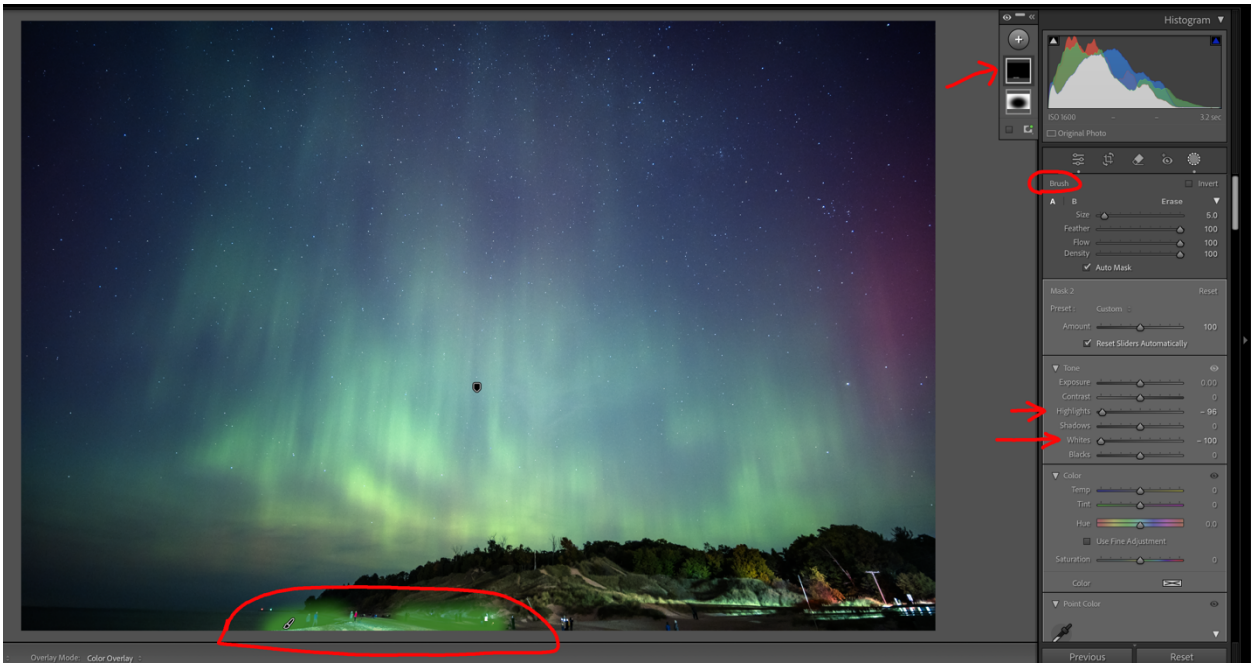
We are getting there! But we have more to go. Now that we did the previous steps, we can see that it still looks too purple to be natural, and the green parts of the aurora still look too yellow. Again, this is to personal taste and can vary image to image. So here is what I did to the Temperature and Hue (see image #5).

These next two edit steps are not going to be used on all photos, but occasionally either one (or both) can help. So, what we want to do is create a mask. A mask will only affect a chosen section of a photo to edit. I will wait until I am almost done editing to add these simply because it will be more precise.

This first mask will be a common one if you shoot with a wide lens, or any lens that still has vignetting even after you do your lens corrections (which was the first thing in this tutorial). I usually wait until this point to see if the image still suffers from it. You can see how much darker this image is around the outer third of the image. So, open up the mask tool (see image #6), select “Radial Gradient” and drag it over the brightest part of your image. From there click the “Invert” checkbox (the mask should now be in the outside of your image). Adjust the exposure until the perimeter is as bright as the rest of your photo. You might have to adjust the size of the mask to match up better with the dark area (you will know).

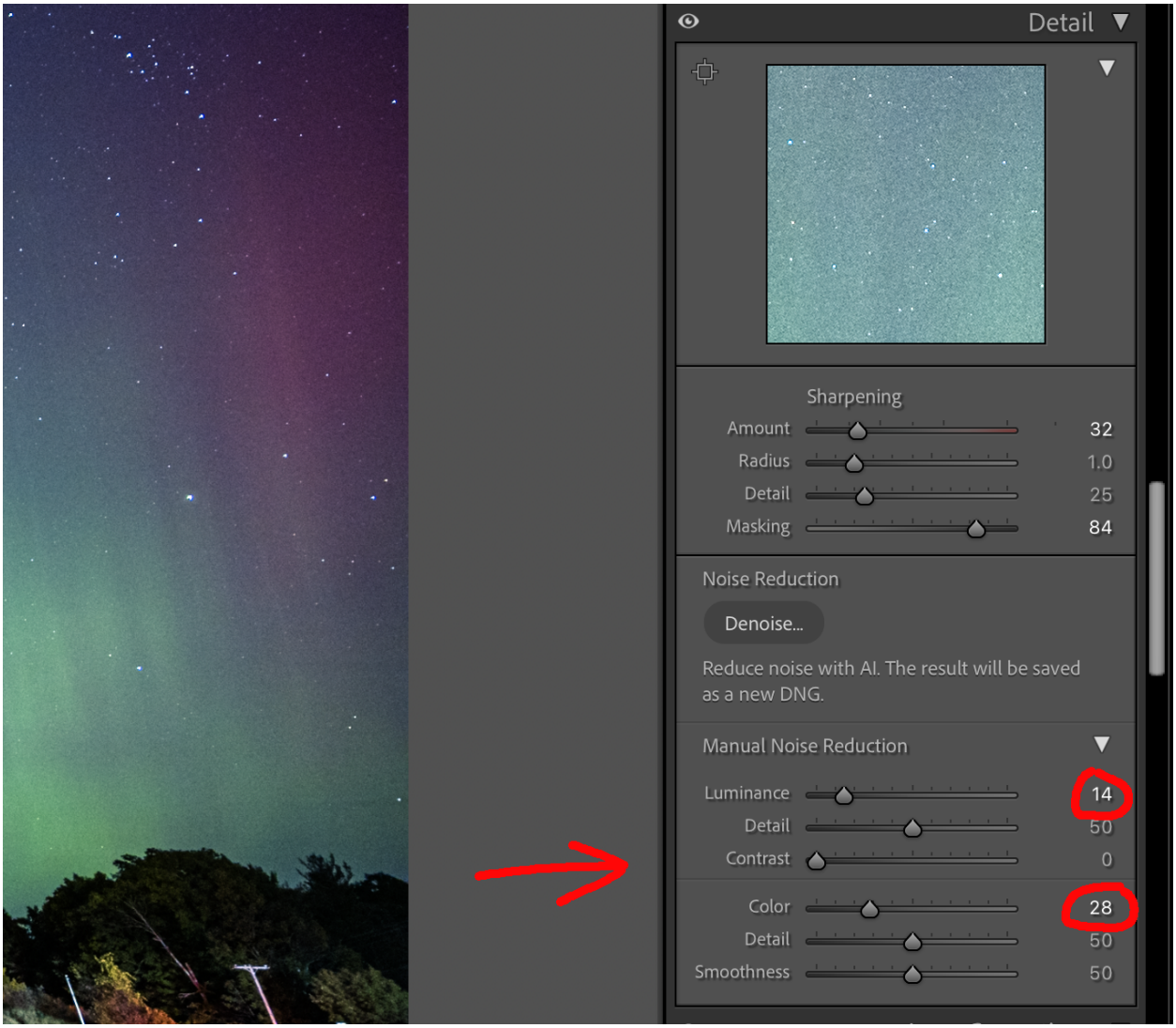


The second mask is a small one. Looking back at image #5 I don't like how bright the flashlights are in the lower center of the photo. Your photo might have other bright objects in the foreground which are distracting. One option is to use the Clone or Remove tools (which are AI based in the software), but I don't like using these two tools because at that point your photograph is no longer a "photograph"… in my personal opinion it becomes "AI Art". So, we are going to keep this a photograph. Select a new mask (see image #7), and this time we will use a Brush mask. Simply brush over the area that is too bright. It's ok if it extends beyond the bright part. From there, simply adjust the sliders for Highlights and Whites all the way to the left (-100).



Looking at image #7 there still is a lot of random lights along the bottom, but at least they are pretty consistent with luminosity now since we adjusted the real bright area. I prefer to leave everything as is because of the human interest, but you might decide to remove it all. That's your call.

My final step is always Noise Reduction (see image #8). Go lightly on this. If you overdo it, things will get muddy, stars may be mistaken for noise and be hidden away. You can see my settings here.



And this is what I end up with (see image #9). Compare it to the original, and you can see that we have brought out a nice amount of detail, and natural color, without the colors being way overblown.

If you have questions on how this was edited that I didn't explain well enough… or questions in general about nighttime photography… feel free to ask. I love helping others with this.

If this tutorial helped you out, and you would like to say "Thanks" in the way of buying me a coffee, you can support this coffee junkie's habit here: https://buymeacoffee.com/garysyrba Yes, I am a coffee addict... no, I do not want to seek treatment in rehab, but thank you for asking. :)

While I have only been doing digital photo editing since 1995 (crap, is that really 30 years?!?) I have been heavily into photography since my teens back in 1974 (don't do the math – please). If you are curious about my work in general, you can see where I moved my website over to a little over a year ago by clicking here: https://garysyrba.shootshareprint.com