

Quick Masking Composite

Let's finish with some tips about combining multiple images into a quick composite.



I started with these two images.

LASSO & MAGIC WAND To select the sky divers, I started by making a crude selection around one of the them using the Lasso tool, I then held the **Option** key (Mac) or **Alt** key (Win) and clicked within the selected area where the blue sky was, using the Magic Wand tool to remove that area from the selection. I selected the second sky diver in a similar way. I just needed to hold **Shift** when I made the initial selection with the Lasso tool so that it would not replace the selection that was already active.



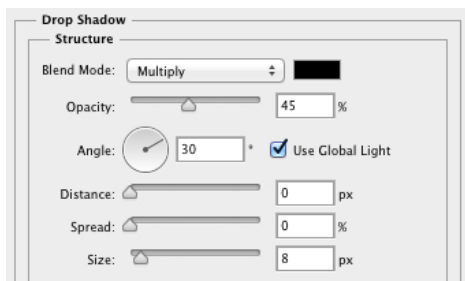
Left Initial lasso selection **Right** Result of clicking with Magic Wand tool while holding Option.

COLOR RANGE To add the yellow smoke to the selection, I held the **Shift** key and chose **Select > Color Range**. Holding Shift when choosing that command adds the selection made using the Color Range command to the existing selection. In Color Range, I chose the eyedropper tool and clicked on the most vivid yellow area of the smoke. I then chose the Eyedropper tool that shows a plus sign (+) next to it and clicked on other areas of the smoke where I couldn't see the sky showing through. After clicking on 6-7 areas, I increased the Fuzziness setting until some of the sky started to show up in the preview image and then backed off until I found the highest setting that didn't select any sky. This technique can also be used to remove the background of fire.



The Color Range command was used to add the yellow of the smoke to the existing selection.

DROP SHADOW The light yellow smoke did not provide enough contrast against the white clouds in the background. To add more separation, I choose **Layer > Layer Style > Drop Shadow**, which added a soft dark area behind the smoke. I had to make sure the Distance setting wasn't too high, otherwise the shadow would appear some distance away from the smoke. I also had to lower the opacity setting until the shadow wasn't too obvious.



Drop shadow settings used.

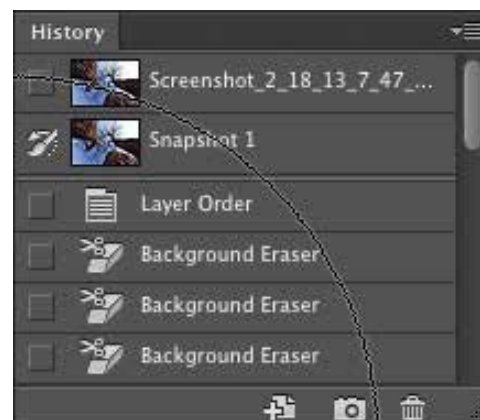


The yellow smoke does not separate from the white clouds.



Adding a drop shadow helped.

BACKGROUND ERASER Just having a skydiver with some clouds was not quite enough, so I decided to add some trees. After placing the trees on a layer above the sky but below the skydivers, I used the Background Eraser to remove the background on the trees.



History panel with snapshot created.

The Background Eraser can be used to delete the background as long as the background is different in color from the subject. Since it deletes areas instead of using a Layer Mask, I decided to make sure that I could always bring areas back by choosing **Window > History** and then clicking on the Camera icon at the bottom of the History panel. I also clicked in the empty area just to the left of the newly created snapshot so that the History Brush would be set up to paint with the current state of the image. At this point, I chose the Background Eraser and changed the following settings that are found in the Options bar that spans the top of the screen:



Trees before being incorporated into the composite.



Background Eraser settings used.

- 1) Chose a soft-edged brush.
- 2) Chose the middle icon to set the Sampling to Once.
- 3) Set the Limits pop-up menu to Discontiguous.

These settings cause the Background Eraser tool to only pay attention to the color that is under the crosshair in your cursor at the moment you click and will then think of that same color until you release the mouse button. It's also able to delete multiple chunks of the image instead of only working on one unbroken area where you first clicked the mouse. At this point, I was ready to get the crosshair that appeared in the middle of my brush to be over the bluest area of the sky. I then clicked and dragged over the entire image to delete that color from within the image. I clicked again while the crosshair was on top of some white clouds and passed over most of the image. I continued to do that until the sky looked completely gone.

DARKEN EDGES I could see hints of white on the edges of the thinnest branches of the tree. To correct this, I turned on the Preserve Transparency choice (it looks like a tiny checkerboard above the layers near the lock icon). This prevents any changes made to the layer from affecting the areas that have been deleted. I chose the Brush tool, held the **Option** key (Mac) or **Alt** key (Win) and clicked on a medium brightness area within the branches. I was generally looking for an area darker than the halo-like edge that was appearing, but not as dark as the darkest areas in the branches. Next, I set the blending mode for the brush tool to Darken in the option bar at the top of my screen so that it would not be able to brighten the darker areas within the branches. At this point I painted over any areas of the branches that looked to have white halos, replacing them with darker pixels.



White residue on edges of thin branches.



Result of painting in Darken mode using Preserve Transparency.

REFINE EDGE

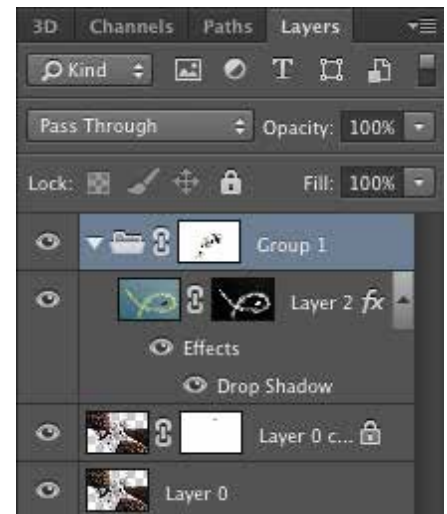
I zoomed on to the sky divers and noticed that there was also some light-colored fringing on the edge of that area. Since they vary in color a lot more than the branches, I decided to use a different technique to fix their edge. After making the sky diver layer active and clicking on its layer mask, I chose **Select > Refine Mask**. Once the dialog box appeared, I moved my mouse outside of the dialog and onto my image. I painted with a small brush around the edge of the sky diver, which caused the edge to lose any remnants of the old background.



Residue of old background visible on edge of skydiver.

Result of painting around the edge of the skydiver using Refine Mask.

DUAL MASKS Now that I had all three layers incorporated into the image, I had the desire to intertwine the layers so that the skydivers appeared to move both behind and in front of the trees. Since I already had a layer mask attached to the sky diver layer, I held **Shift** and clicked on the folder icon at the bottom of the layers panel to place the sky diver layer inside of a group. I then clicked on the layer mask icon (circle inside a rectangle icon) at the bottom of the layers panel to add a mask to the group. By doing this, I could use the mask attached to the sky diver layer solely for removing the background and use the mask on the group to hide portions of the layer where I want it to look as if the tree was in front of the sky divers. I could then also reposition the sky divers and the mask and the group would stay stationary, therefore still lining up with the tree.



The masked group hid areas of the smoke.



The smoke obscures your view of the trees.



Masked areas appear to be behind the tree.

To hide areas of the smoke, I held the **Command** key (Mac) or **Ctrl** key (Win) and clicked on the thumbnail image for the tree layer to load it as a selection. That selected all the tree branches (any area of that layer that wasn't empty). I then typed **Command-H** (Mac) or **Ctrl-H** (Win) to hide the selection and then painted with black wherever I wanted the yellow smoke to look like it was behind the tree.

HISTORY BRUSH Once I was done with the composite as a whole, I started to look closer at the image to see if I could find any problems. I noticed a few small areas of the tree trunk were semi-transparent which allowed me to see the sky through the bark. To fix that problem, I made sure the tree layer was active, chose the History Brush (which looks like a brush with a curved arrow around it) from the toolbar and painted over any areas of the tree trunk that should look solid, but were instead semi-transparent.