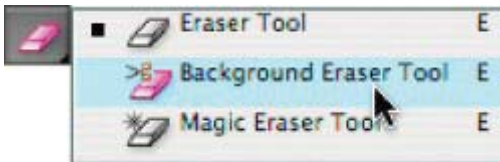


Background Eraser Tool in Photoshop



Hiding under the normal Eraser tool is a special version known as the Background Eraser. Click and hold on the Eraser tool until you see a drop-down menu—the Background Eraser is the middle tool shown in that menu.



When you click and drag on an image, Photoshop keeps a constant eye on what color is under the crosshair and deletes everything within the circle that is similar to that color.

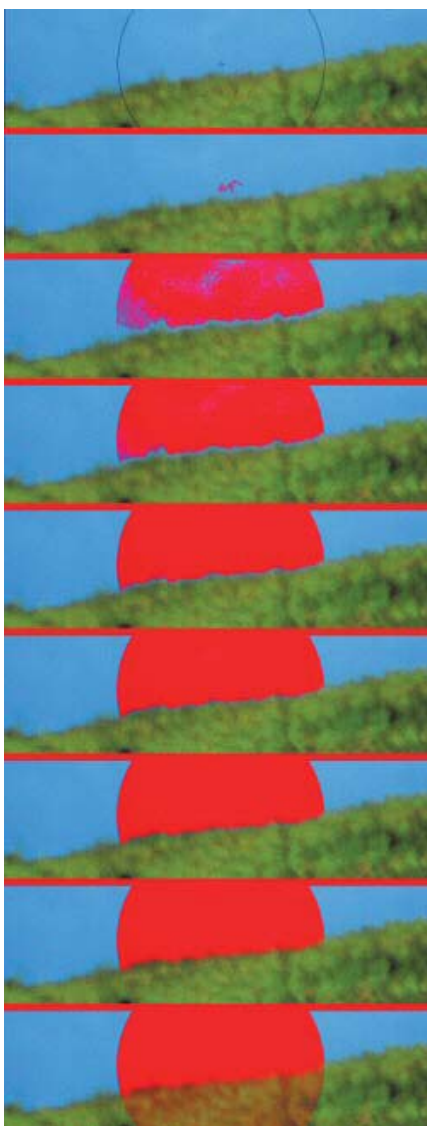


When you move your cursor over an image, you'll notice that the Background Eraser gives you a round brush with a crosshair in the middle.



Your job is to trace near the edge of the object you want to keep. It's okay to have the circular part of your cursor overlap the subject. Just never let the crosshair hit the subject; otherwise, it will start to delete that area as well.

The settings in the options bar at the top of your screen determine what should be kept or thrown away. The Background Eraser tool uses the Brush Presets palette that appears in the options bar. You can quickly change the size of your brush (eraser) using the bracket keys on your keyboard ([]). To change how hard the edge of the brush is, use Shift in conjunction with those same bracket keys.



Tolerance

Getting the right Tolerance setting is essential to using the Background Eraser tool successfully. This setting determines how much Photoshop will be able to stray from the color under the crosshair. If the background you are attempting to remove is very similar to the subject in brightness or color, you'll need to use a low Tolerance setting. Or, if the background is quite different from the subject, try a much higher Tolerance setting so that you can quickly remove the background without being overly careful about what you're dragging over.

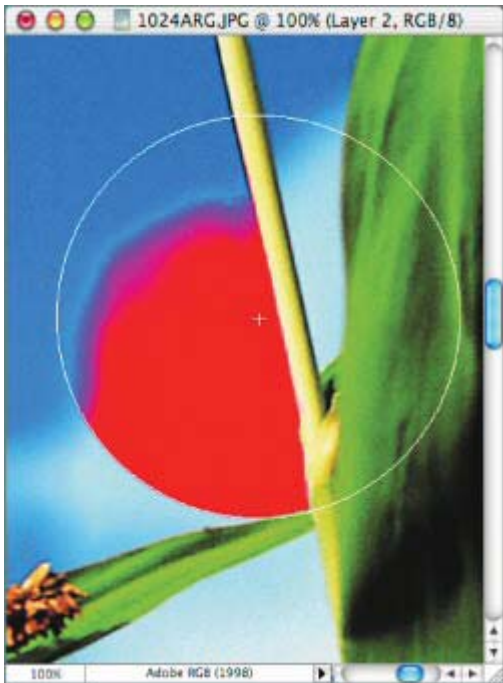
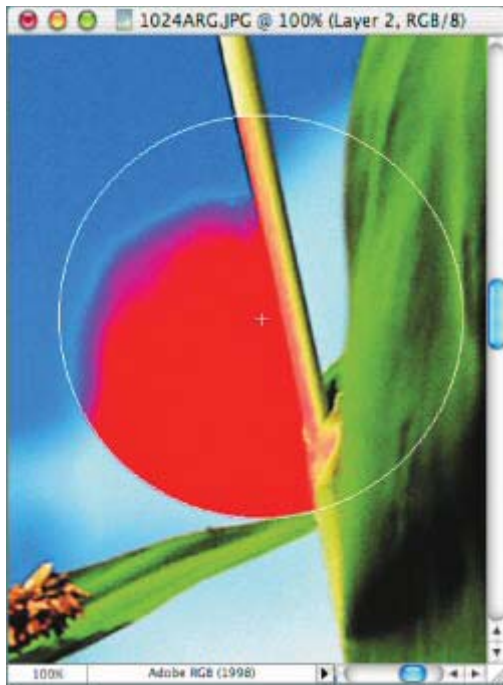
There are no hard and fast guidelines that can be given to you because this setting really depends on the image you're working with. It is suggested that you start with the default setting of 50%, and then if you notice that some of the subject of the photo is being deleted along with the background, try a lower setting. If, on the other hand, not enough of the background is being deleted, you'll need to ramp up the Tolerance to allow Photoshop to delete a wider range of colors. You can change the Tolerance using the number keys on your keyboard (1 = 10%, 3 = 30%, 23 = 23%, and so on), and you can change the setting each time you release the mouse button. I usually work in sections using different Tolerance settings as the background changes. If you mess up, just press Command/Ctrl-Z to undo the last step and then try again.

Tolerance settings used at left, from top to bottom: Original image, 1%, 5%, 10%, 20%, 30%, 40%, 50%, 60%.

Protect Foreground Color

On occasion, you'll find that the Tolerance setting alone isn't enough to isolate the subject from the background.

That's when you'll want to start using the Protect Foreground Color check box. With that check box turned on, Photoshop will start thinking about two colors: the one under the crosshair, which will tell it what to delete, and the foreground color, which will tell it what to save. While the Background



Sampling

If you find yourself getting frustrated because Photoshop is forcing you to be overly precise with your mousing, and you can see yourself going gray and toothless before you're done, you'll want to mess with the Sampling icons (from left to right: Continuous, Once, Background Swatch). Using the Continuous setting causes Photoshop to constantly keep an eye on the color that appears under the crosshair as you're moving your mouse.

Above is the original image. Below it is the result of using the Continuous option.

Eraser tool is active, you can hold Option/Alt and click on the part of your image you want to save—that will change your foreground color and therefore prevent the color you click on from being deleted. The only problem is that you might forget that you're protecting your foreground color, which can mess you up once you start working on a different part of the image where the color you are protecting is similar to the background you are attempting to delete. So be sure to keep one eye on this check box, and turn it off and on as you think necessary.



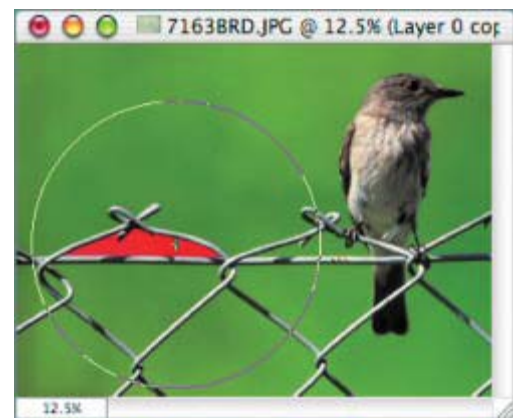
That's the default setting, and it works great with images that have multicolored backgrounds. If you have a background that doesn't vary in color much, however, you might want to try using the Once setting. With that setting, Photoshop pays attention to only the color under the crosshair at the exact moment that you click the mouse button. It won't stray from that color. That allows you to click on the background and then paint back and forth across your image without having to constantly pay attention to what's under the crosshair.



Just make sure that you don't drag across any areas of the subject that are very similar

to the background color. I mainly use this option on simple images that have a pretty big difference between the subject and background (like a dark tree against an almost solid blue sky). The Background Swatch setting is useful on those rare occasions when you can't find an easily clickable area of background color. I use that option after I've attempted to remove the background on an image using other tools, and then I notice a slight halo around the edge of my object. The halo is often too thin to target with this tool. Instead, you can click on the background color in the Color Picker, choose a color that is visually similar to the halo you are trying to remove, and then experiment with the Tolerance setting until you're able to remove it.

This image is divided into two halves. The left side shows what the image looked like after attempting to remove the background; the right side shows what it looked like after using the Background Swatch setting with a cyanish-blue background color.

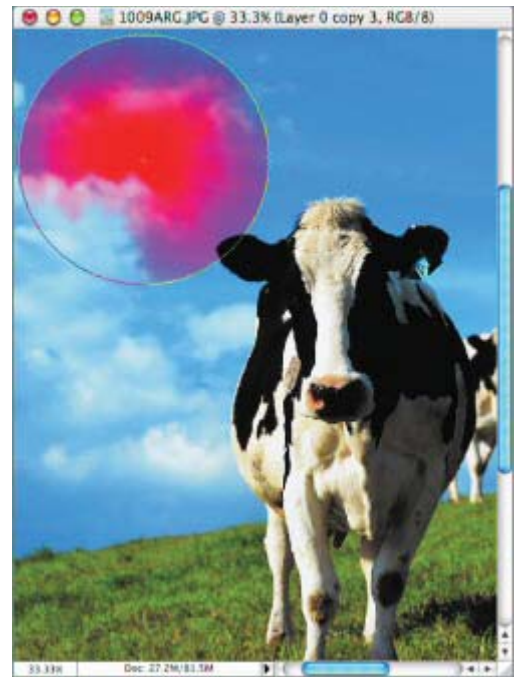


Limits

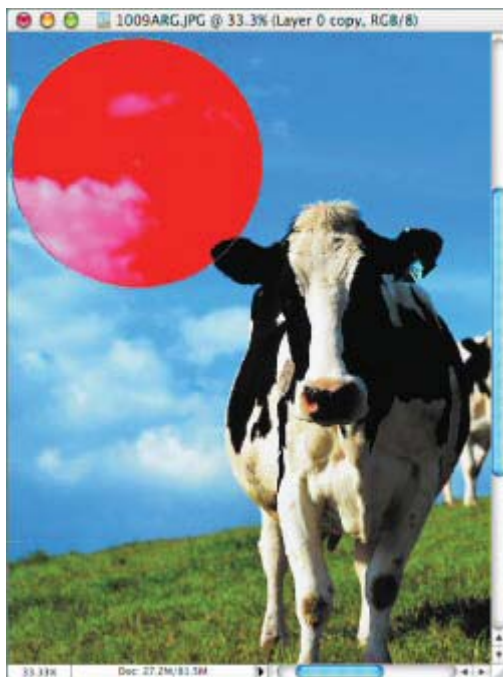
With default settings, the Background Eraser tool will delete only those areas that actually touch the crosshair. It won't be able to jump across one area that shouldn't be deleted to find another area similar to the one being deleted. That can cause problems when you're working with images of trees, fences, or other objects that break the background into multiple disconnected regions. The illustration at left shows the result of using the Contiguous option.



You can change that behavior by changing the Limits menu from Contiguous (meaning only touching the crosshair) to Discontiguous, which will allow it to delete the color that's under the crosshair from the entire circle, even if something like a tree branch isolates an area so it doesn't touch the crosshair. This illustration shows the result of using the Discontiguous option.



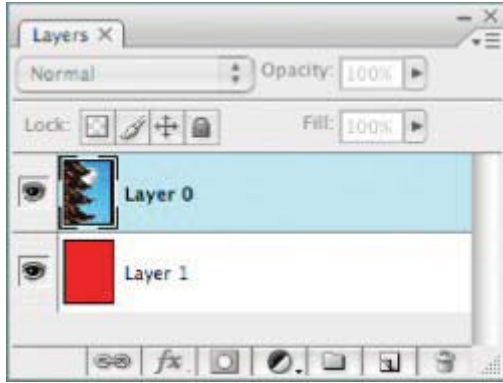
You'll also find an option in the Limits menu called Find Edges, which works similarly to the Contiguous setting but tries to prevent the subject from fading out into the background and becoming semitransparent. So, if you ever notice that part of the subject is becoming semi-transparent, as shown in the first illustration at left, choose Undo and try working on that area a second time using the Find Edges setting.



Tips and Tweaks

Now that you've seen all the options that go along with the Background Eraser, let's look at a few things that can help you get better results. When you started to use

this tool, you were probably very impressed with the results; later, however, you may have discovered that you weren't really seeing the whole story. The checkerboard that shows up under your image to indicate an area has been deleted makes it difficult to find the more finely detailed problem areas—the checkerboard can actually hide flaws in your erasure.



To really see what you're getting, Ctrl-click on the New Layer icon at the bottom of the Layers palette to create a new layer below the currently active layer. Next, change your foreground color to something that contrasts with your image (like a vivid orange color), and then press Alt-Backspace) to fill the active layer with your foreground color.



After doing that, you should be able to see any residue that the Background Eraser tool left behind. Just remember to click on the layer that contains the image you were working with so you don't start deleting this

solid-colored layer when you get back to using the Background Eraser.



You'll want to stay away from hard-edged brushes when you're working with an object that has a slightly soft edge. Hard-edged brushes often produce a series of circles that can make the edge of your image resemble a pearl necklace.

Above, using a hard-edged brush produces abrupt transitions in soft-edged objects.



When you switch to a soft-edged brush, the edge of the area you are working on should be nice and smooth, as shown at left.



For the ultimate in control, consider one

of the Wacom pressure-sensitive graphics tablet available in the lab. When using a tablet, you can click on the brush preview that shows up in the options bar at the top of your screen and set the Size or Tolerance setting to Pen Pressure. That will vary either the size of your brush or the Tolerance setting (or both) based on how hard you press with the pen. Many people like to use the Tolerance setting because then they can press lightly where there is a slight difference between the subject and background and press harder where there is a more pronounced difference. That allows them to trace around the entire edge of an object in a single stroke, which can save quite a bit of time.