How to Add Falling Snow to a Photograph

Nothing adds to a winter photo like falling snow. And while capturing falling snow with your camera can be tricky, adding the snow later with Photoshop is easy.

In this tutorial, I show you step-by-step how to create your own falling snow effect in Photoshop. And new in this updated version, I also show you how to avoid performance issues with Photoshop when adding the snow to larger images.

Here's an example of what the final snow effect will look like when we're done.

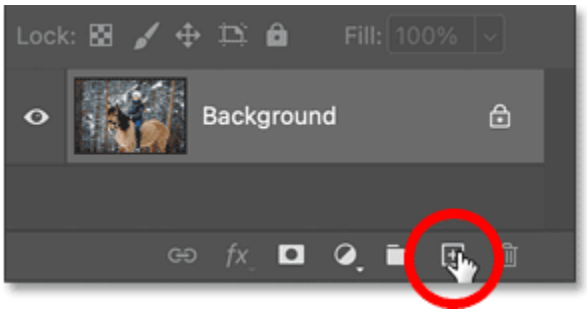
Falling snow created in Photoshop.

The original photo.

Step 1: Add a new layer for the snow

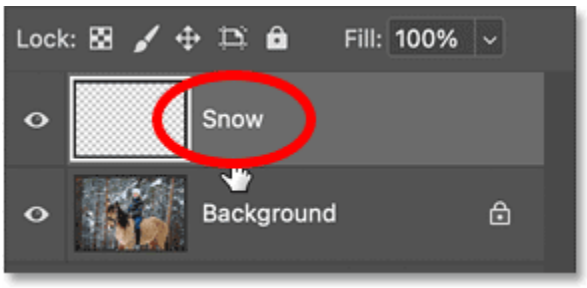
In the Layers panel, the photo is on the Background layer.

Add a new blank layer above the image by clicking the **Add New Layer** icon.



Clicking the Add New Layer icon.

Then double-click on the new layer's name and rename it Snow. Press **Enter** on a Windows PC or **Return** on a Mac to accept it.

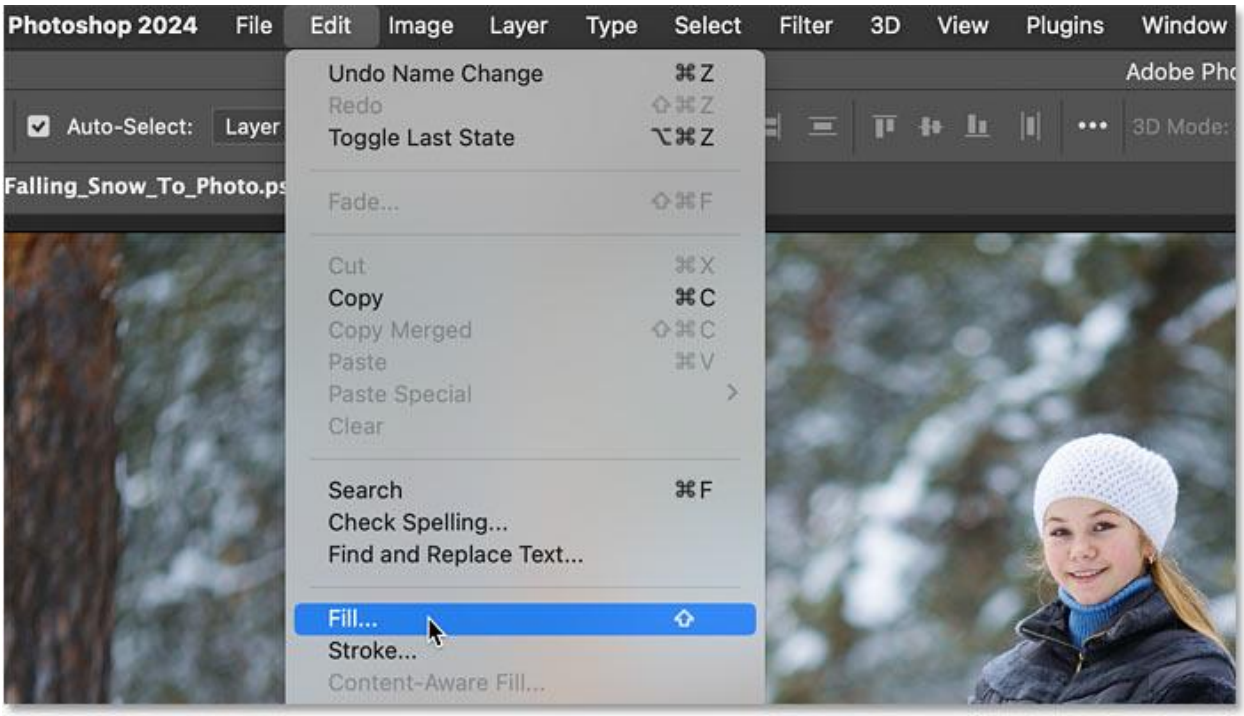


Renaming the layer Snow.

Step 2: Fill the layer with black

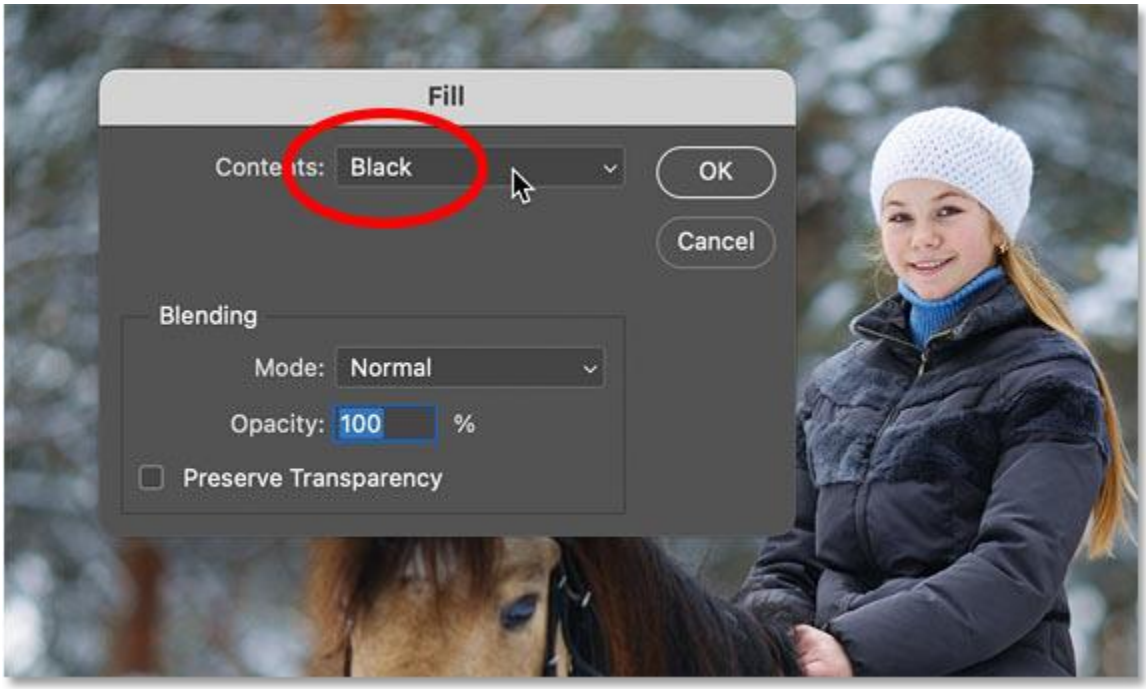
We need to fill the new layer with black.

So go up to the **Edit** menu in the Menu Bar and choose **Fill**.



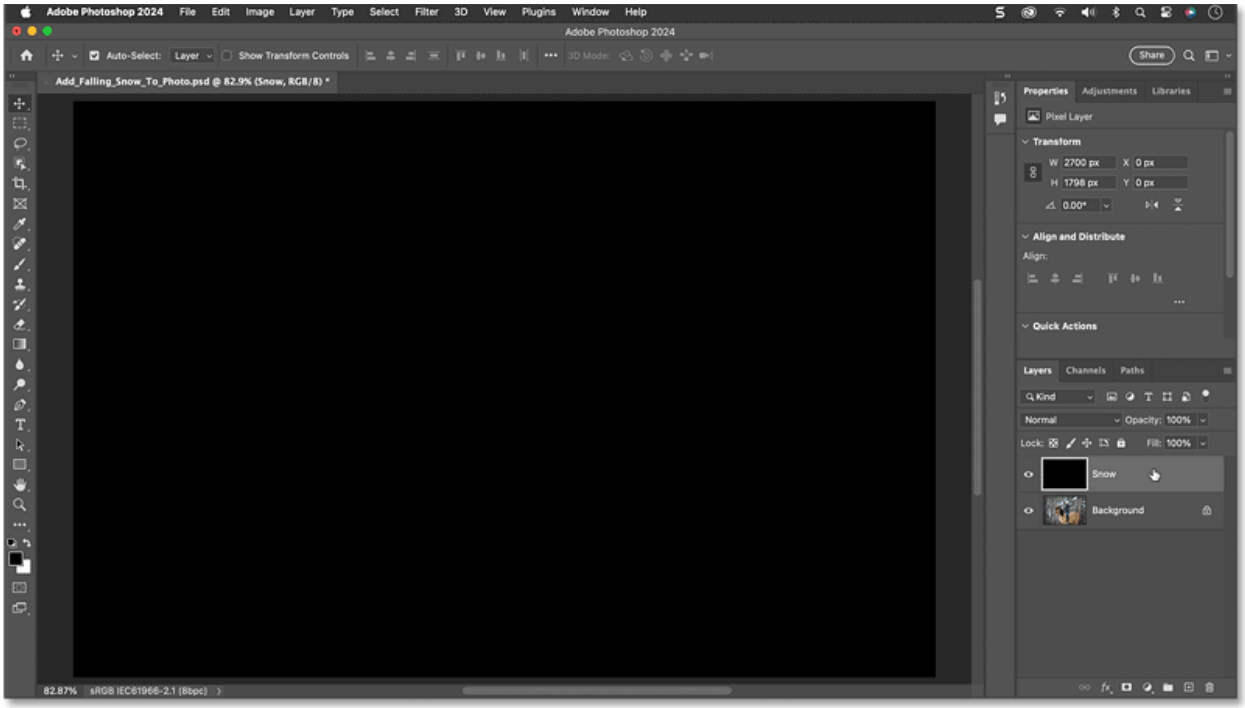
Choosing Fill from the Edit menu.

In the Fill dialog box, set the **Contents** to **Black** and click OK.



Setting the fill contents to black.

The image is temporarily hidden from view.

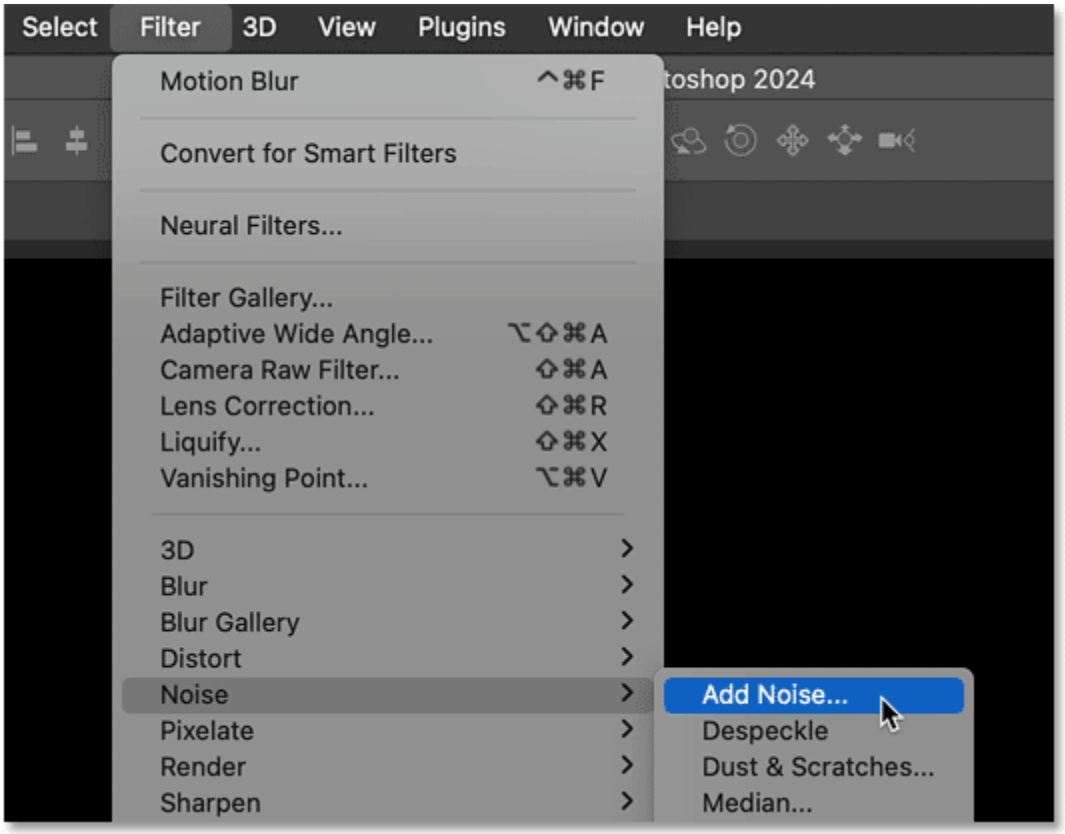


The result after filling the layer with black.

Step 3: Add noise to the layer

To create the snow, start by adding some noise to the layer.

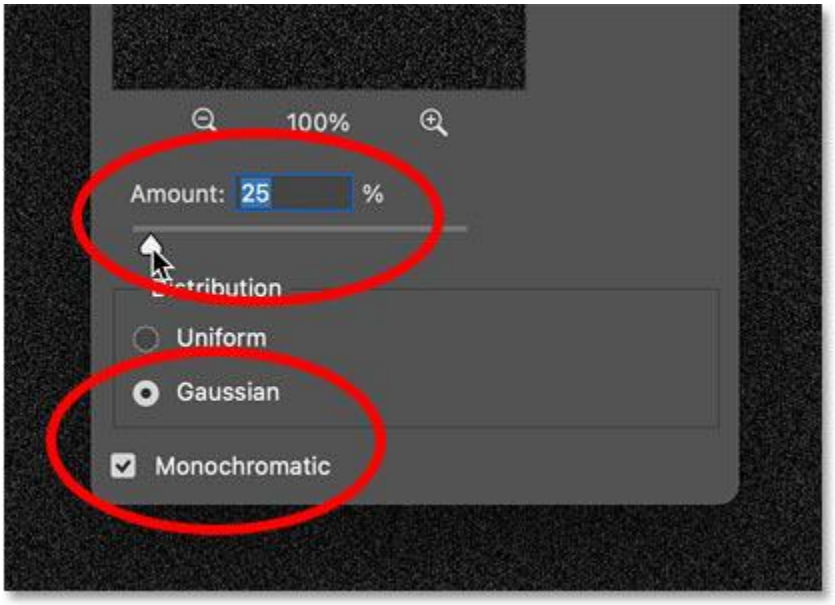
Go up to the **Filter** menu, choose **Noise** and then **Add Noise**.



Selecting the Add Noise filter.

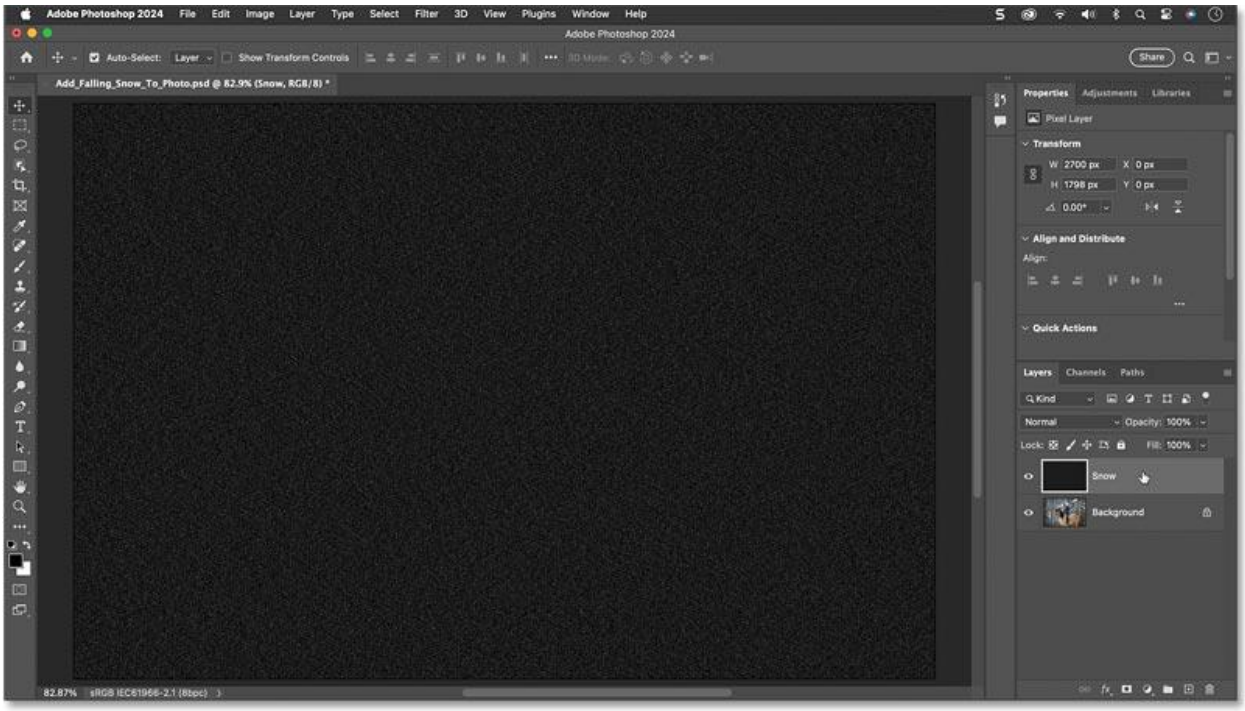
In the dialog box, select **Gaussian** and **Monochromatic** at the bottom.

Then set the **Amount** of noise to around **25 percent** and click OK.



The Add Noise filter settings.

Photoshop fills the layer with noise.

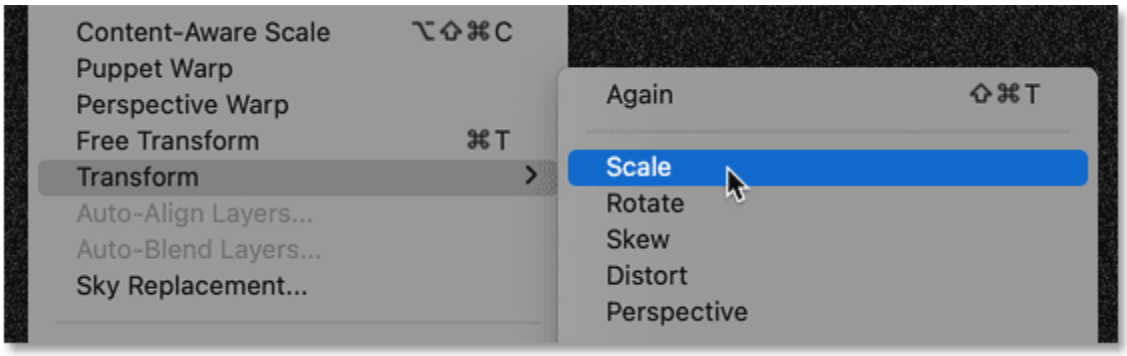


The result with the noise added.

Step 4: Scale the noise

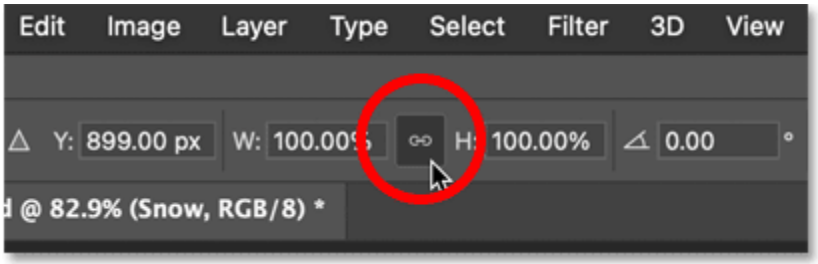
The noise will eventually become our snow effect, but one problem is that it's too small.

So lets scale the noise by going up to the **Edit** menu, choosing **Transform** and then **Scale**.



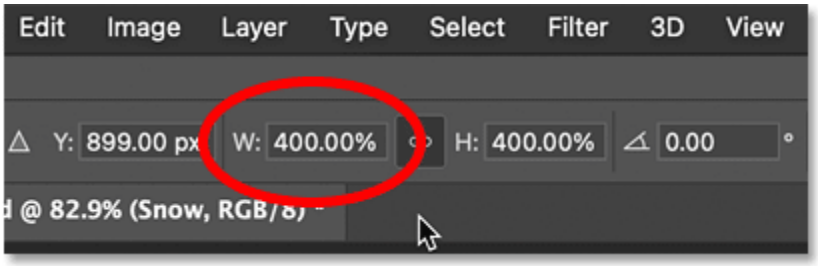
Choosing the Scale command.

In the **Options Bar**, make sure the **link icon** between the Width and Height fields is selected.



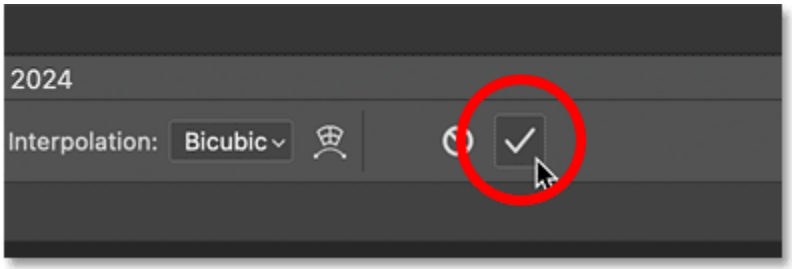
The Width and Height should be linked.

Then change the **Width** to **400 percent**. The Height will change to 400 percent as well.



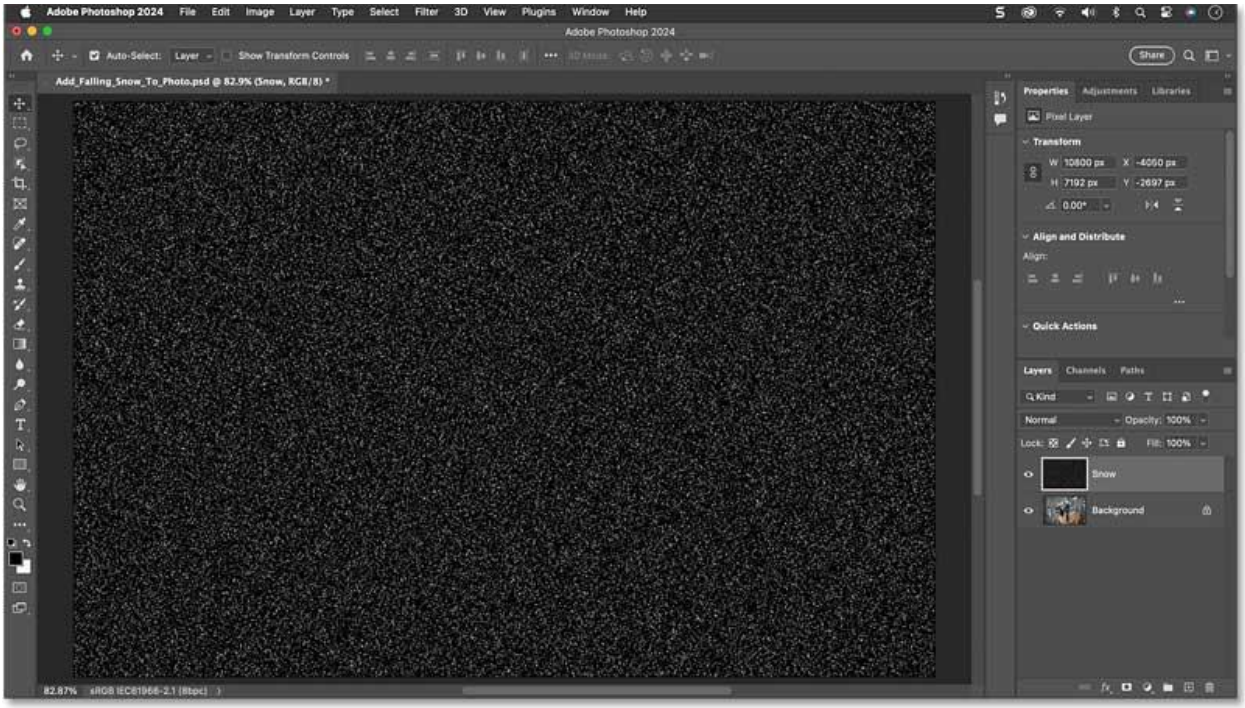
Scaling the width and height by 400 percent.

Click the **check mark** in the Options Bar to accept it.



Clicking the check mark.

The noise is starting to look more like snow.

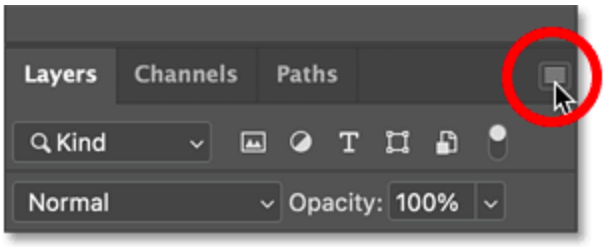


The result after scaling the noise.

Step 5: Convert the snow layer to a smart object

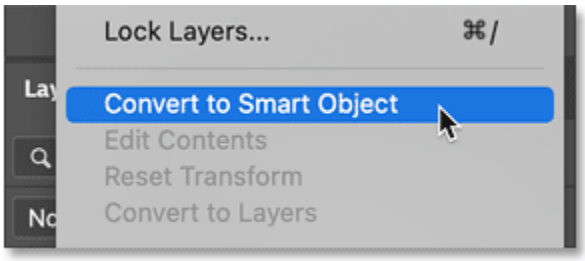
Before we add any filters, let's first convert the snow layer into a smart object. That way the filters will be applied as smart filters, which means we can go back and change their settings if we need to.

With the snow layer selected, click the Layers panel **menu icon**.



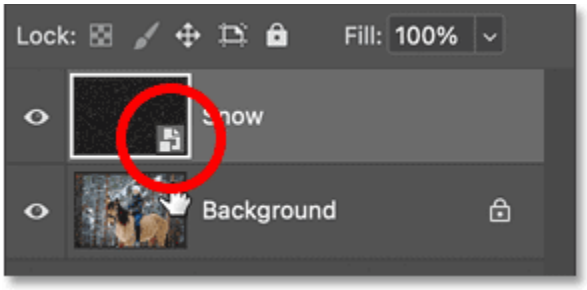
Opening the Layers panel menu.

Then choose **Convert to Smart Object**.



Choosing the Convert to Smart Object command.

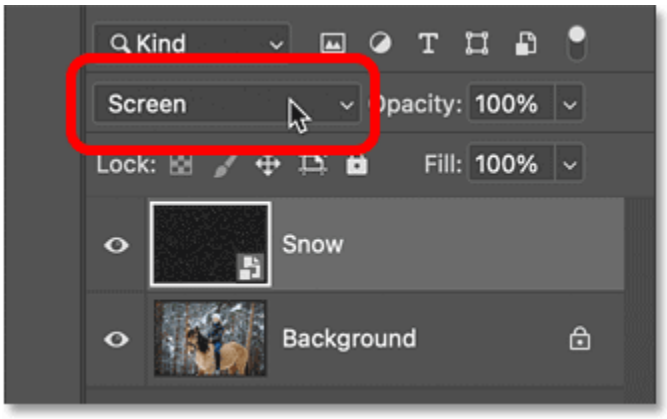
A **smart object icon** appears in the lower right of the thumbnail.



The smart object icon.

Step 6: Blend the noise with the photo

Still in the Layers panel, blend the noise with the image by changing the blend mode of the smart object from Normal to **Screen**.



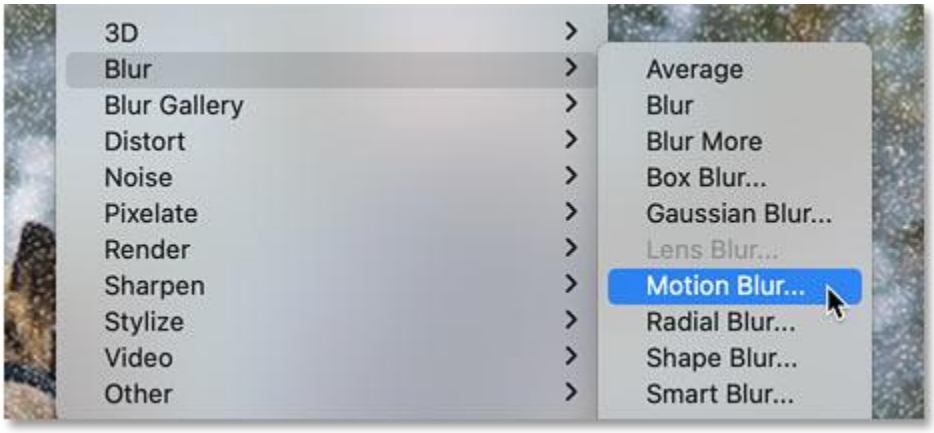
Changing the blend mode to Screen.

The Screen blend mode hides the black areas on the layer and leaves only the white noise visible.

The noise is now blending with the photo.

Step 7: Add motion to the snow

To make the snow look like it's falling, go up to the **Filter** menu, choose **Blur** and then **Motion Blur**.

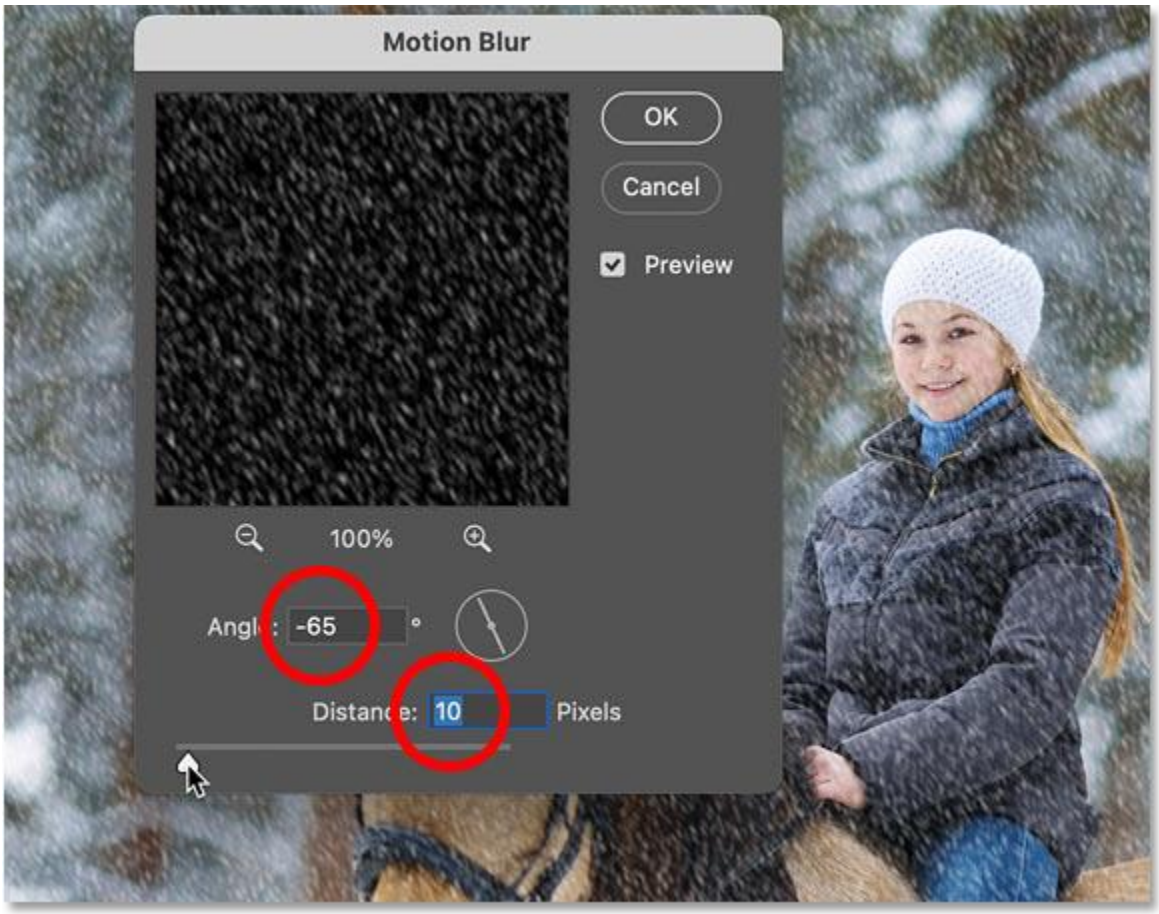


Choosing the Motion Blur filter.

In the dialog box, set the **Angle** to the direction you want the snow to be falling from. I've set mine to **-65 degrees** so it's falling from the upper left.

Then adjust the amount of motion using the **Distance** slider. Don't set it too high or the snow will look more like rain. Lower values work better, so I'll set mine to **10 pixels**.

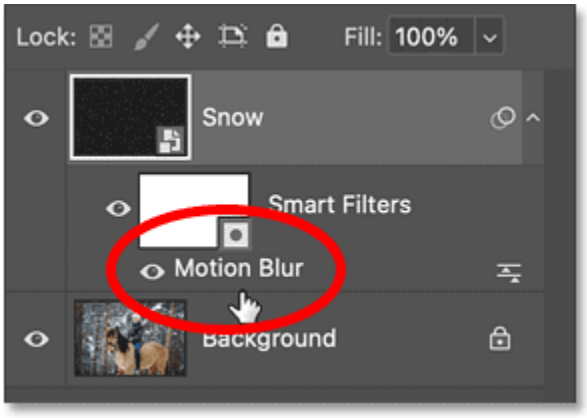
Click OK to close the dialog box.



The Motion Blur filter settings.

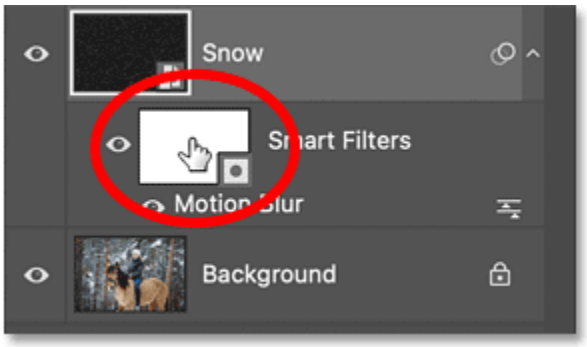
The Layers panel shows that the Motion Blur filter was applied as a **smart filter**.

You can double-click on its name to reopen the dialog box if you want to try different settings. But I'm happy with the result.



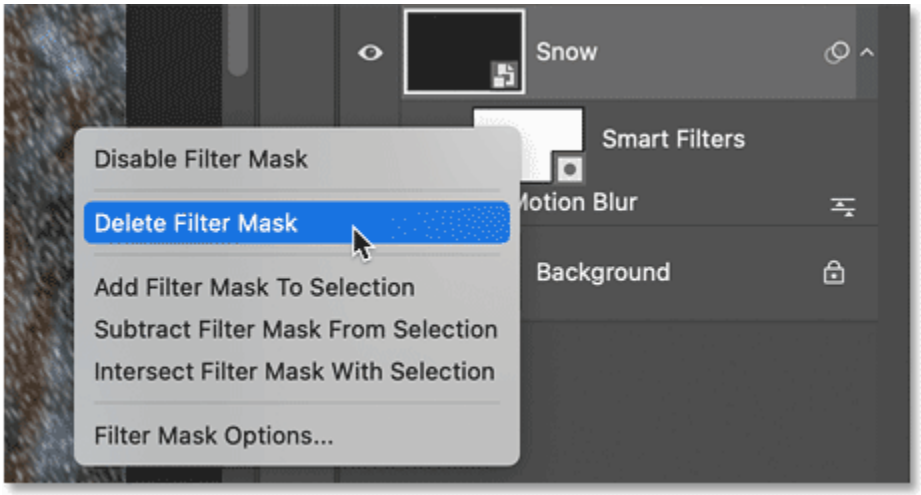
Smart filters are listed below the smart object.

Also in the Layers panel, we have a new **filter mask** (the white thumbnail) that's taking up a lot of space.



Smart filters include a filter mask by default.

We don't need the filter mask for this effect. So lets delete it by right-clicking on it and choosing **Delete Filter Mask**.

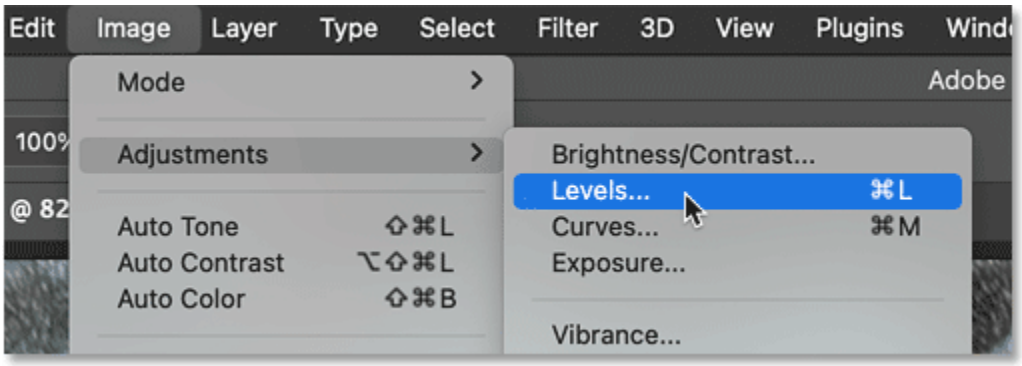


Deleting the filter mask to make room in the Layers panel.

Step 8: Reduce and brighten the snow

Next we'll reduce the amount of snow and brighten the snow at the same time.

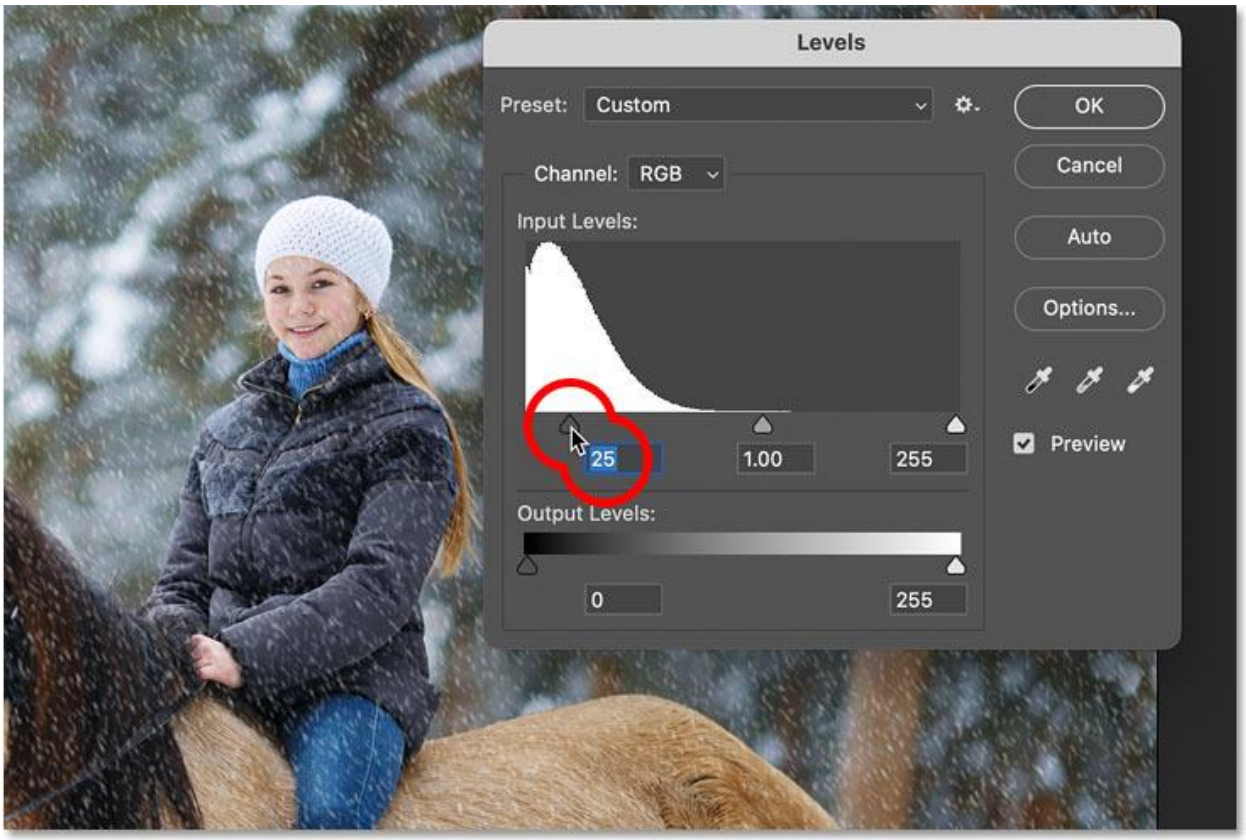
Go up to the **Image** menu, choose **Adjustments** and then **Levels**.



Adding a Levels image adjustment.

To reduce the number of snowflakes, click on the **black point slider** below the left side of the histogram and begin dragging it to the right.

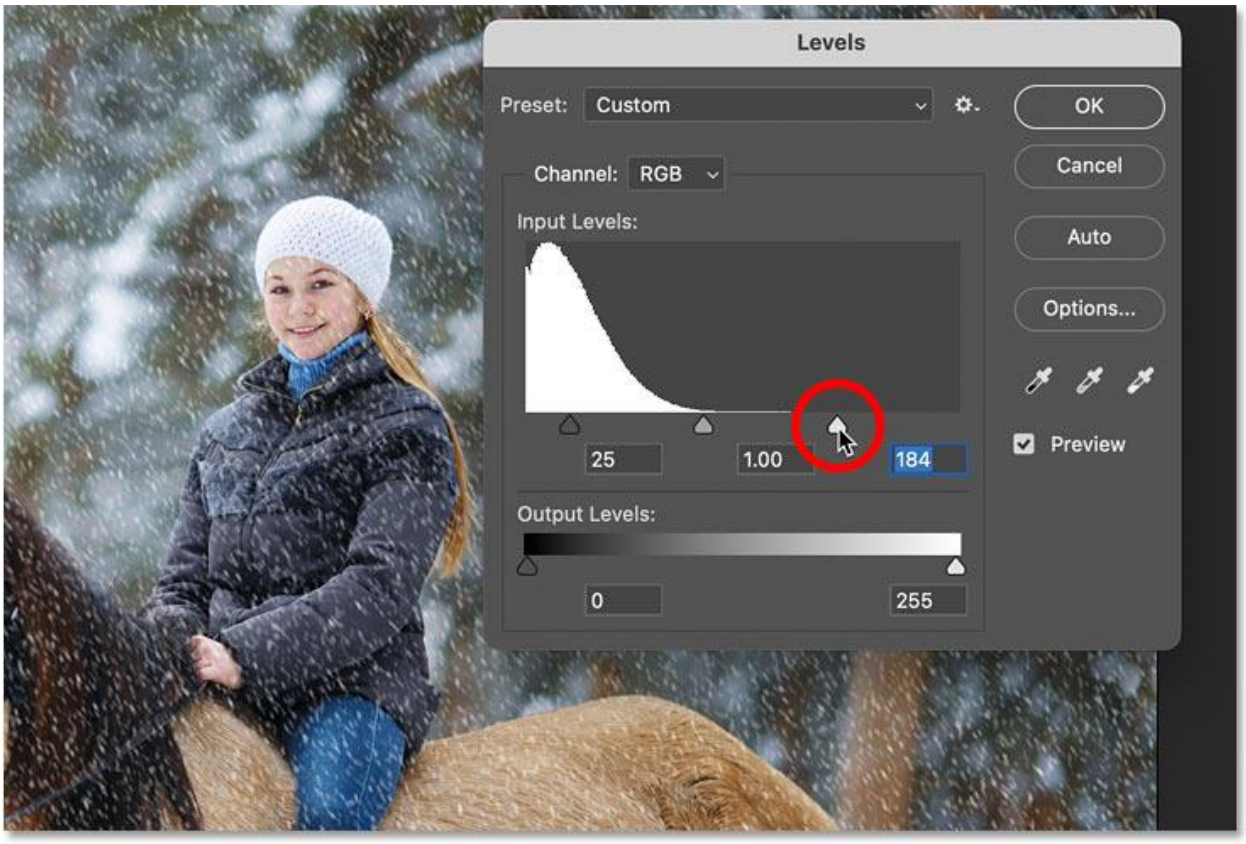
As you drag, you'll see the darker snowflakes begin to disappear, leaving only the brighter flakes visible.



Dragging the black point slider to reduce the number of snowflakes.

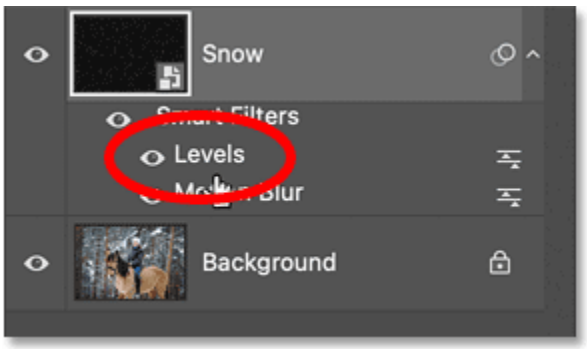
Then to brighten the remaining snowflakes, click on the **white point slider** below the right side of the histogram and drag it to the left.

When you're done, click OK to close the dialog box.



Dragging the white point slider to brighten the snowflakes.

Back in the Layers panel, notice that even though Levels is an image adjustment, not a filter, Photoshop still applied it as a smart filter which means that you can double-click on its name to reopen the dialog box and change the settings if needed.

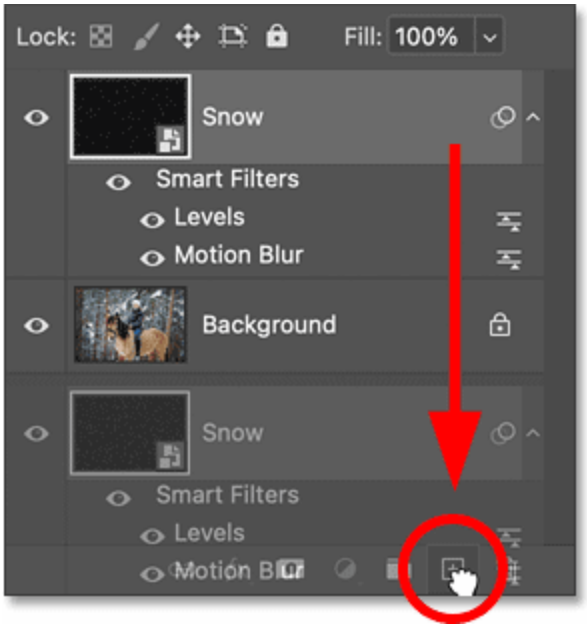


Levels is also added as a smart filter.

Step 9: Duplicate the snow layer

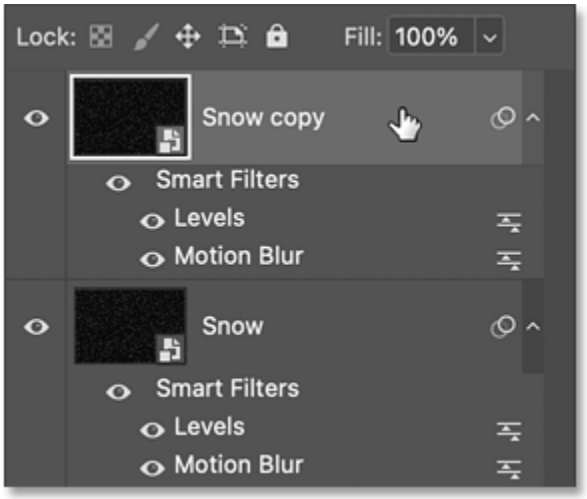
At this point, the initial snow effect is done. But let's add some depth to it by adding a second snow layer, this time with larger flakes so they'll look like they were closer to the camera.

In the Layers panel, make a copy of the Snow smart object by dragging it down onto the **Add New Layer** icon.



Duplicating the Snow smart object.

The copy appears above the original, along with a copy of our smart filters so we don't need to reapply them.

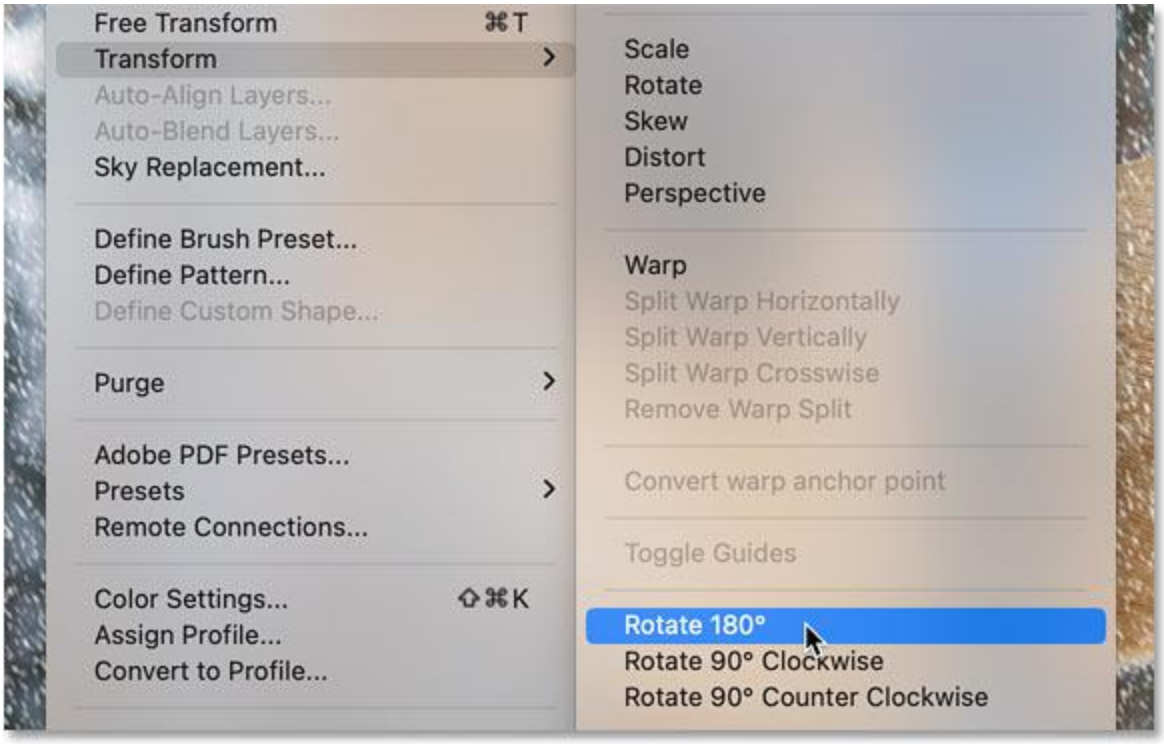


The copy includes the smart filters.

Step 10: Rotate the second snow layer

Let's rotate the copy so the new snowflakes are not just sitting on top of the originals.

Go up to the **Edit** menu, down to **Transform** and choose **Rotate 180 degrees**.



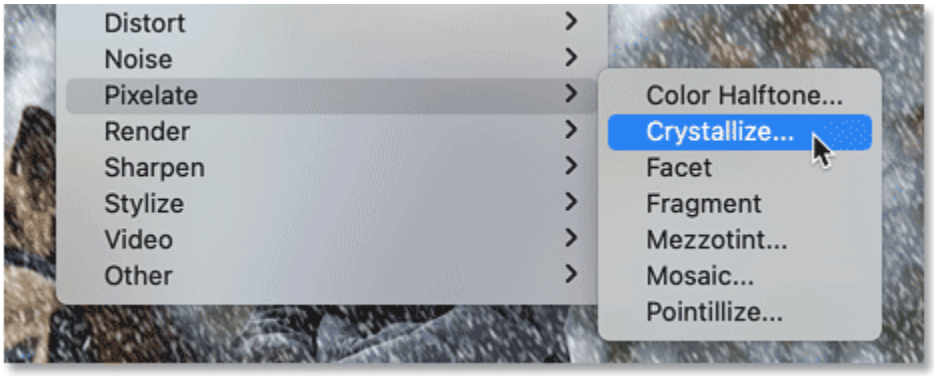
Choosing the Rotate 180 degrees command.

Rotating the copy doubles the amount of falling snow.

The result with the copy rotated.

Step 11: Make the snowflakes larger with Crystallize

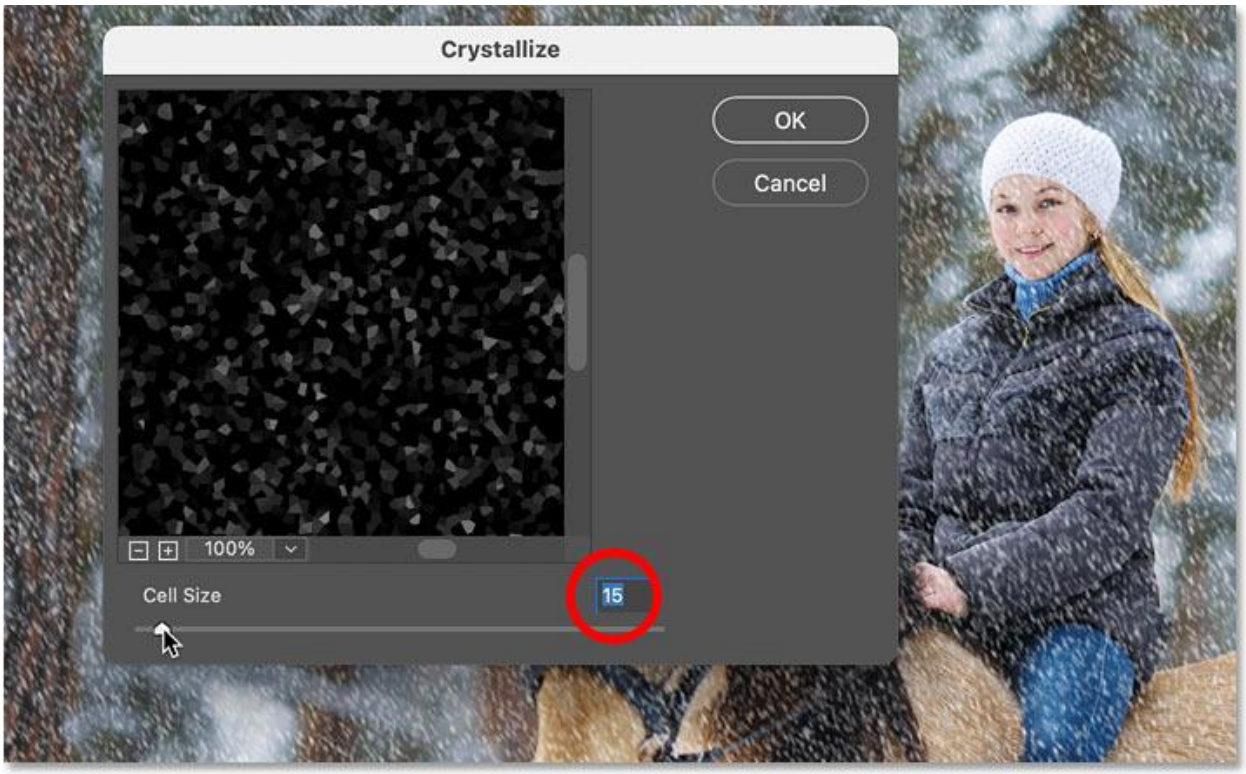
To make these snowflakes larger than the originals, go up to the **Filter** menu, down to **Pixelate** and choose **Crystallize**.



Opening the Crystallize filter.

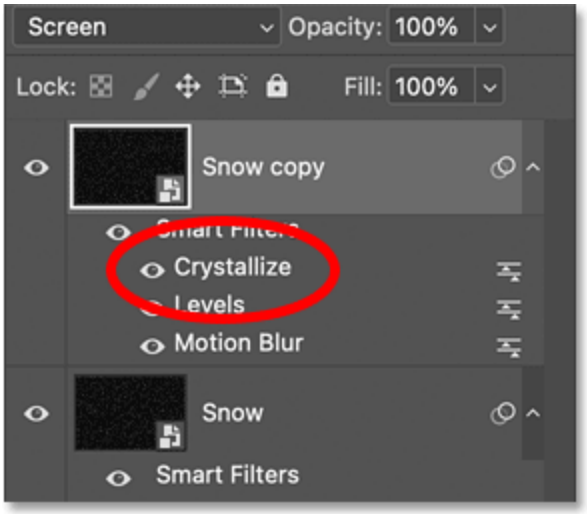
Increase the **Cell Size** at the bottom to somewhere between 10 and 20. I'll go with **15**.

Then click OK to close the dialog box.



The Crystallize filter setting.

If the flakes look too big, or not big enough, just double-click on the Crystallize smart filter in the Layers panel and try a different setting.

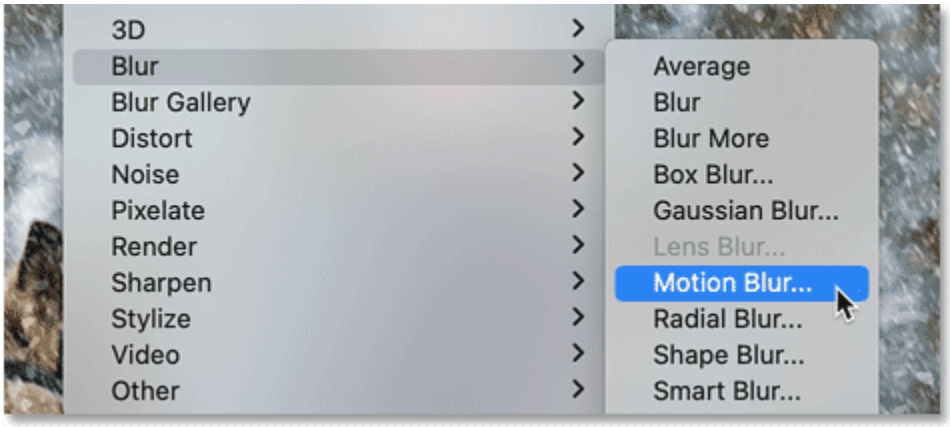


The Crystallize smart filter.

Step 12: Add motion to the snowflakes

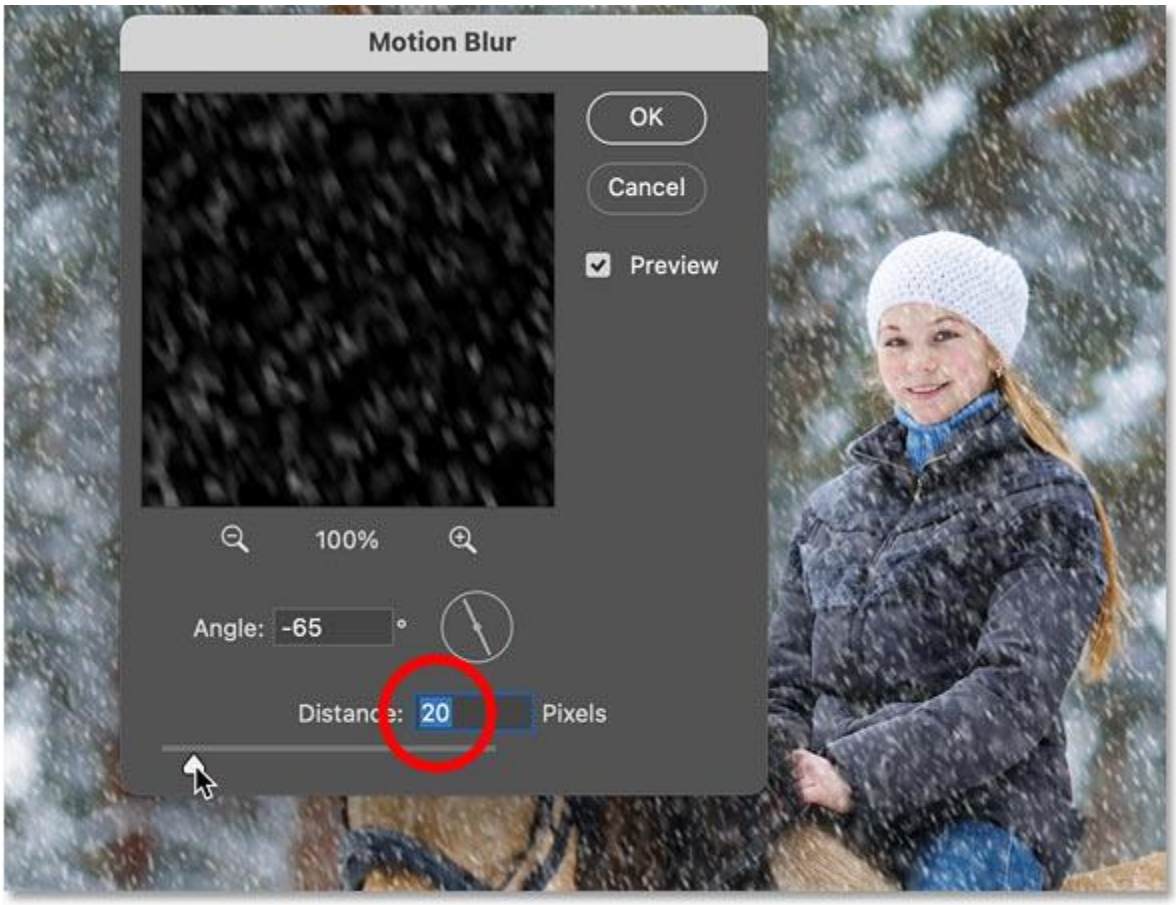
The only problem with the larger flakes is that they don't have any motion applied.

So go back to the **Filter** menu, back to **Blur** and once again choose **Motion Blur**.



Adding a second Motion Blur filter.

Leave the Angle the same so the snow is falling in the same direction. But because these flakes are bigger, increase the **Distance** to around **20 pixels**. Then click OK.

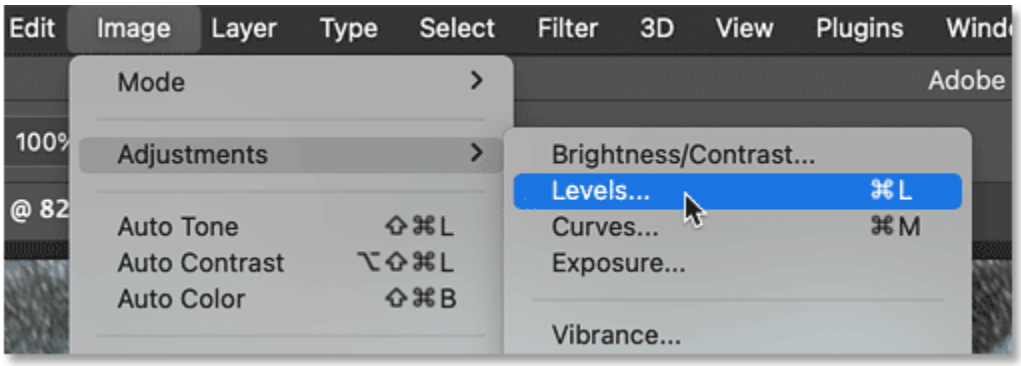


Increasing the Distance for the larger snowflakes.

Step 13: Reduce and brighten the larger snowflakes

Finally, let's reduce and brighten these larger flakes by adding one more Levels adjustment.

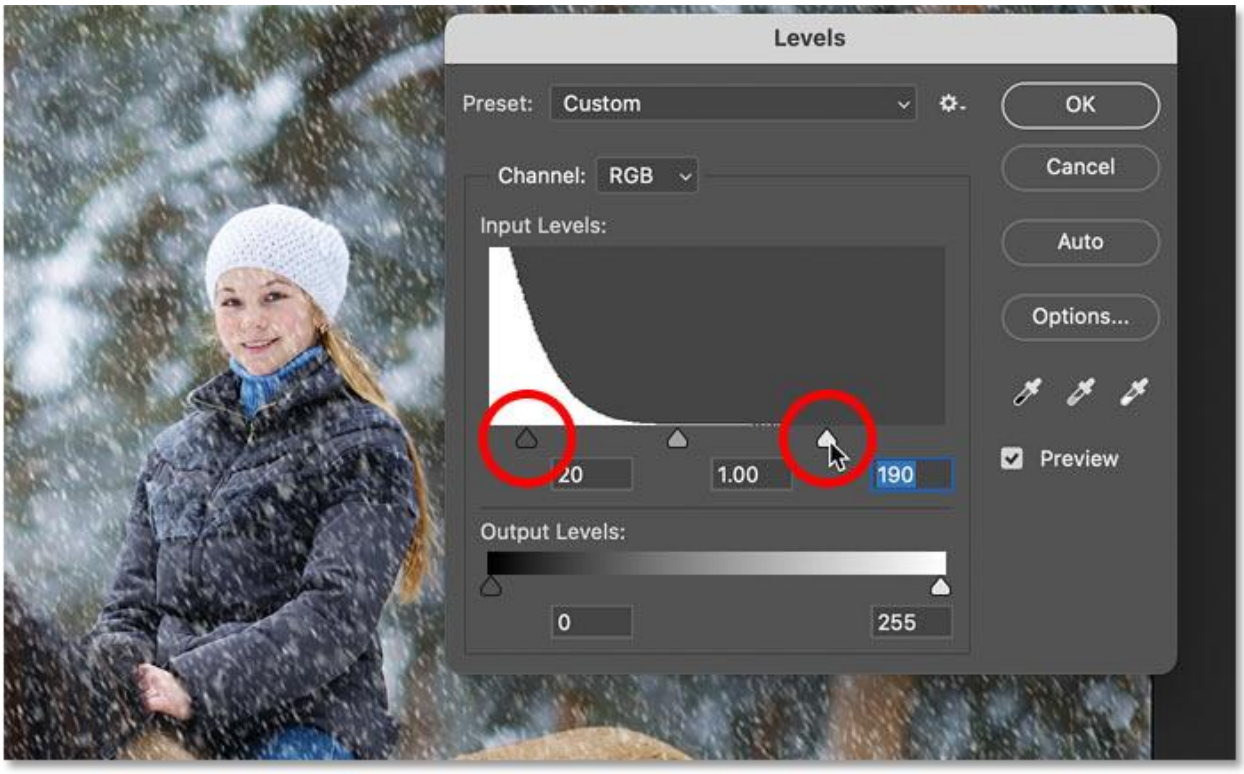
Go back to the **Image** menu, back to **Adjustments** and choose **Levels**.



Adding another Levels image adjustment.

Then just like we did before, drag the **black point slider** to the right to reduce the number of flakes, and drag the **white point slider** to the left to brighten the ones that remain.

Then click OK to close the dialog box.



Adjusting the black and white point sliders.

And with that, we have our completed falling snow effect.

Falling snow added in Photoshop.

Save as a Photoshop file named snow-your initials and then resize the image. Save as a jpg and post the before and after photos on your webpage by class time tomorrow.