

Where Is That Picture? (A brief guide to organizing - and later finding images on your computer)

Here is a good introduction to the subject <<http://www.graphics.com/article-old/digital-photography-fundamentals-storing-and-managing-your-images> >

As you become more serious about digital photography, one of the biggest challenges is to store, keep safe and later find images when you need them. In this article, I am going to talk about organizing your collection, touch on finding images and describe the software that might be helpful. This is not to diminish the importance of keeping your images safe. Backing up or keeping copies - and not altering or editing the originals is very important.

There are two primary methods for organizing images. The first, a folder structure, is the one most people start with. It can be done without any specialized software; so it is well suited to beginners. The method relies on folders or nested folders (in fact, not too different from the photo albums we used to use in the days of film and 4x6 prints). We name the folders to assist in remembering the contents. Windows has a built in browser, Windows Explorer, that allows us to view the folder structure and access the contents. There is, and I assume in Apple systems, a limited search capability. This method is the least time consuming and the simplest, but it can quickly result in an overloaded and confusing mess as the number of images, the number of folders and the use of different storage locations grow.

So, using a folders structure as your sole method of organizing and finding images is best suited to beginners or those who cannot afford the sophisticated software required. The more advanced organizing and retrieval systems are known as D.A. M. (Digital Asset Management). One can argue too that folders exclusively are best for anyone with little time to spare. An exception - and I am one - might be the rare serious (and by definition non-professional) photographer who is relentless in culling images, keeping only the very best and, perhaps, backing those up as prints. In addition, I also make digital slide shows finding this a satisfying method of sharing photographic memories with family and friends. For this enthusiastic amateur, the main thing for me is the act of taking photos - the places I've been and the experiences I've had (being fortunate). My bank of images is very secondary.

I want to devote what time I have for photography to taking images, so I have found that the best way to take better photos is to learn to recognize and cull the many poorer ones I take.

Deleting images in camera is too disruptive and wastes precious battery life, so I do it later and learn in the process. I depend on a professional grade browser - an image viewer - (I like the speedy Photo Mechanic software for viewing, rating and discarding images). I also use a systematic method. The only other photo software I need is a stand-alone raw developer (Photo Ninja in my case, but there are even free open source alternatives) and some sort of basic image editing program like Photoshop Elements or PaintShop Pro. Both these photos have cataloguing features as well.

This is not the method recommended for and which most club members will follow, including and especially those who might aspire to be semi-professional, aim to become a photographic artist or even carve out a career in photography. Their best choice is one of the advanced image software packages

like Lightroom or Aperture that allows for key wording and offers advanced search capabilities. (confusingly perhaps, one continues to use folders as repositories for images, though the naming of such is not so big a factor). There are other packages too, some relatively inexpensive, like ACDC Pro, Breeze Browser Pro, IMatch, MS Expression Media, Adobe Bridge, DigiKam and others. These programs have varying capacities for image editing ranging from very basic to advanced. The most sophisticated image editing and art work is reserved for only a few programs like Photoshop CS. If that is your choice you will need to consider a cataloging system separately.

These capable programs allow you to tag (provide keywords to facilitate later finding - which are imbedded in the image file data), rate by colour coding or other means and they have sophisticated cataloguing capabilities - including across various media and backup drives - which allow you to track and find/retrieve your images. These impressive capabilities will work for tens of thousands of images. It is though imperative, in using these sophisticated systems, to follow a disciplined procedure for naming, key wording and processing and managing your images. This can be time consuming, but it is critical to managing a large image collection. In other words you need to be absolutely methodical and consistent in your habits. If that's not you, then your efforts will as assuredly break down as do overloaded folder structures.

I earlier mentioned culling. However, you may decide to keep all of your images. Certainly memory cheap compared to what it used to be. There is some value in seeing how you developed as a photographer. Many of us come to view our old images in a new light as we develop skills and as our preferences evolve. A previously over looked image might be salvaged or turn out to be a gem after all. Perhaps you earlier didn't have the skill set to work it to perfection. Black and white imagery comes to mind. And if you develop an interest in making composites or more artistic layered creations, having an extensive library of images could be invaluable. Just keep in mind though that the larger your collection the more critical is the need to properly manage it.

Each of us has to find our own strategy. Whatever method you use, and I suppose some hybrid form is even possible - for instance you could use key wording or tagging with a simple folder system and use some cataloging/retrieval software like Imatch - it is critical that you adopt a system that suits you and your needs. The temptation - and often for good reason - is to do what most people do, though this may not be your best choice as it often involves a steep learning curve (granted lots of tutorials and help is available) and, paradoxically maybe, the most popular can be the most expensive. The prominent choices are also driven by an upgrade path.

To conclude, if you are struggling with managing your images, and especially if you are a relative beginner, learn about the choices you have - and adopt a plan - follow it. It is so much easier, while you have only a small collection of images, to build a system that will make your life so much simpler in future. If you have a large collection, and it is a mess, why you have something to keep you occupied over these winter months.

Frank Dwyer 11/30/2015