Photo File Management

One great advantage of today's digital cameras (DSLRs) is that unlike film cameras of yesteryear, there is no (apparent) cost of shooting hundreds of pictures during a day's shoot. But there is a hidden cost. Today's DLSR cameras create large sized files, in some cases 80 Megabytes every time you press the shutter. It doesn't take long before the serious photographer runs out of computer storage space. This is the hidden cost of digital photography, the time and money spent on managing thousands of image files.

It is not uncommon to find photographers who have 100's of Gigabytes, or even Terabytes, worth of photos. The sheer number and size of the files can easily overwhelm the basic computer set up.

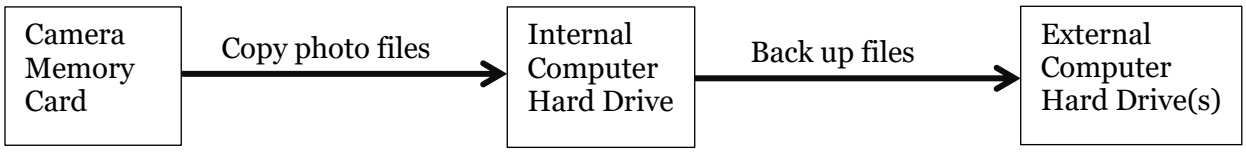
With that many images taken over the course of many years, finding a particular image is another challenge. Without a good file management system, photographers, and digital artists in general, find it time consuming and frustrating to find an image that "I know I took" sometime ago…

Developing your own file management system requires a bit of planning. It is as much a part of the photographic workflow as editing.

There are three basic concepts that need to be considered:

1. File storage and backup (Where do I store photos and how do I protect them?)
2. File structure (What file structure is best for my workflow?)
3. Organizing the files for retrieval (How do I find a photo later?)

File Storage and Backup



Avoid putting all of your photos on just one storage device. *Always* have them stored in two (or even three) places.

When you return from a day of photography, the first thing is to copy all the images from your memory cards onto your computer. There are now two copies of each image. However, sooner or later you'll want to use that memory card so it is a good idea to make a backup of the computer's internal hard drive onto an external hard drive. This is especially important because computer hard drives have been known to fail (just ask me) and users have been known to accidently erase photos. Backing up the photos to an external hard drive is good insurance and has saved me more than once.

Back up the hard drives often. Both Windows and Macintosh operating systems come with automatic backup applications. A lot of external hard disks ship with automatic backup applications that can be scheduled to update their backups regularly. Additionally there are many third-party cloud based back up tools that can automate the process as well.

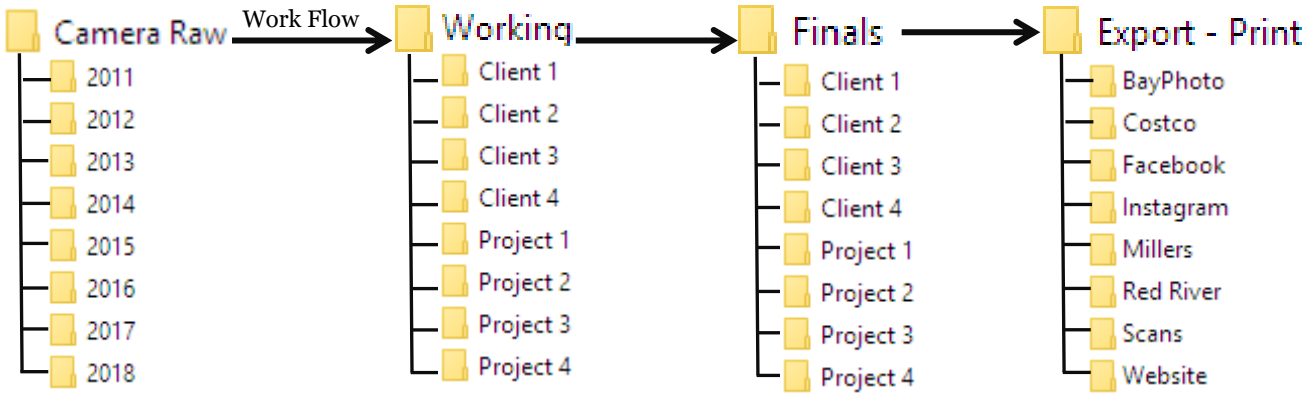
File Structure

It starts with where. Where do you store the photos to accommodate workflow? Below is a typical solution to this question. The file structure below is an example of how to organize folders assuming you are tagging the photos with keywords. If you track your individual photos with filenames and/or file folders, I highly recommend you look into keyword tagging. (see my reasoning below)

Typical File Structure for Photo File Storage

Folder	What goes in the folder	File types typically stored here
Pictures		
Camera Raw	Original Camera Files (Digital Negatives)	.NEF .CR2 .AWZ)
Export - Print	Copies formatted for a specific purpose	.TIF .JPG
Finals	Final version of the image for a given client	.TIF .JPG .PNG
Working	Project folders and files – work in progress	.PSD

Expanded view of the File Structure



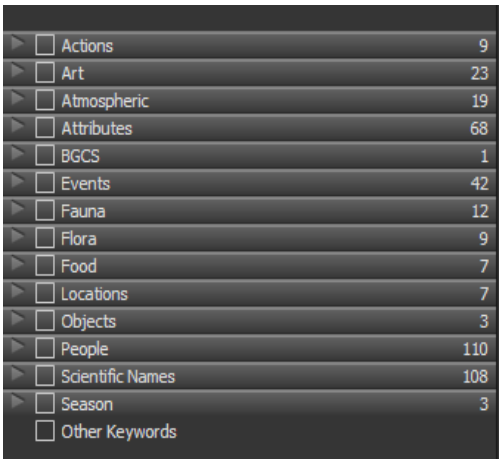
Comments:

- Original files from the camera are stored by year. Each photo is tagged using keywords for future retrieval. Never work directly on the originals.
- Photos that are being edited are in the Working folder. Saved in the PhotoShopDocument (PSD) format
- Once completed the photo is saved in the Finals folder in the .TIF or .JPG file format.
- Images are resized for a particular destination. For example, pictures to be posted on Instagram are resized into a square format and lower resolution, and then stored in the Instagram Folder, or, images that are to be printed at Costco are resized and assigned a printer profile, and then store in their respective folder.
- The entire file structure is backed up on an external hard drive.

Organizing the files for retrieval

There are two ways to organize photo files for future retrieval. For smaller collections you can track photos by sorting and storing them in uniquely named folders and/or giving them a file name by subject, location or theme. When you have a many thousand images, however, naming each of them individually is tedious. If you lack a game plan, finding one specific image is like trying to find a needle in a haystack. Sorting them into directories based on subject can only really work if you have only one subject per photo or if you store multiple copies of each photo. Even broader categorization, folders for locations, people, events, types, and so on, fall apart when individual photos have multiple possible categories. Do you name by location, or event? By content, theme or client? When you have thousands of photos taken over a long time, you need another system.

The second way, and the method I prefer, is to tag each photo with keywords. It requires that each photo be tagged with as many relevant keywords as necessary to help you find that particular image in the future. If you have thousands of photos acquired before you start tagging, it can be a big job. However, the job gets easier as you go through your photos, especially if you use a good image management application such as Adobe Bridge.



Example of a Keyword List in Adobe

Rather than grouping the actual files into relevant categories in file folders, Adobe Bridge creates collections of images by indexing on the keywords you've assigned, regardless of where the file resides on the hard drive. The original files remain where they are stored.

For example, a landscape photographer may have thousands of images of Yosemite National Park scattered across dozens of folders. If each image is tagged with the keyword *Yosemite*, then Bridge will find all photos with that keyword and display them.

Adobe Bridge allows you to build a keyword structure with several layers of sub-keywords. This is particularly useful for keeping the keyword structure manageable.

If you have Photoshop (CS, CC or Elements) Adobe Bridge is included.

A Comparison of the Two Methods

Method	*Pros*	*Cons*
File/Folder Name	• No other software is needed to implement. • Easy to use on smaller collections.	• Each picture is assigned only to one folder. (Unless you want to copy the image in multiple folders) • It takes some time and effort to develop a consistent naming convention for your folders. • There is a real risk of many duplicate photos unless the user is very organized and disciplined.
Keyword tagging	• You can assign multiple keywords to a single photo, allowing it to belong to multiple categories and locations, without having to copy the same image to multiple folders. • The keywords follow the file wherever it goes. • Can be used on any size collection of photos. • Large batches of photos can be tagged simultaneously with multiple keywords.	• Unless you start with this system the biggest con is the time it takes to tag previous images. • Requires a file management application such as Bridge or Lightroom.

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