# Organizing Your Digital Photographs

by Photographer Raymond Klass

Digital cameras have changed the very way we approach photography. They have freed us from the cost of film and processing, and allow us to experiment with the benefit of instant feedback. I also sense that while for many the idea of seeing the image as soon as it is taken is a pleasure, the notion of editing, storing, archiving, and processing can be a source of anxiety.

This article will address some of the various options and methods for organizing your images in a logical and efficient order. Having a simple organization scheme affects more than just the time you spend looking for a specific image, it trickles down into every aspect of your image management – from backing up images to putting together your next project.

During the past few years, there have been several buzzwords flying around in the digital photography world. Authors have advocated for DAM (Digital Asset Management), photographers have introduced Adobe Bridge and then moved promptly to Adobe Lightroom, Apple Aperture, or one of the dozen other programs like Photo Mechanic.

The first concept of any good management system is SIMPLICITY. If you can't understand your own management system, than how can you effectively use it? If your system is simple and straightforward, it will be easier to execute, and for those of us with limited time, we'll be more likely do get it all finished. One of the biggest challenges is staying "up-to-date" with image management. A simple, easily executed system is the first step.
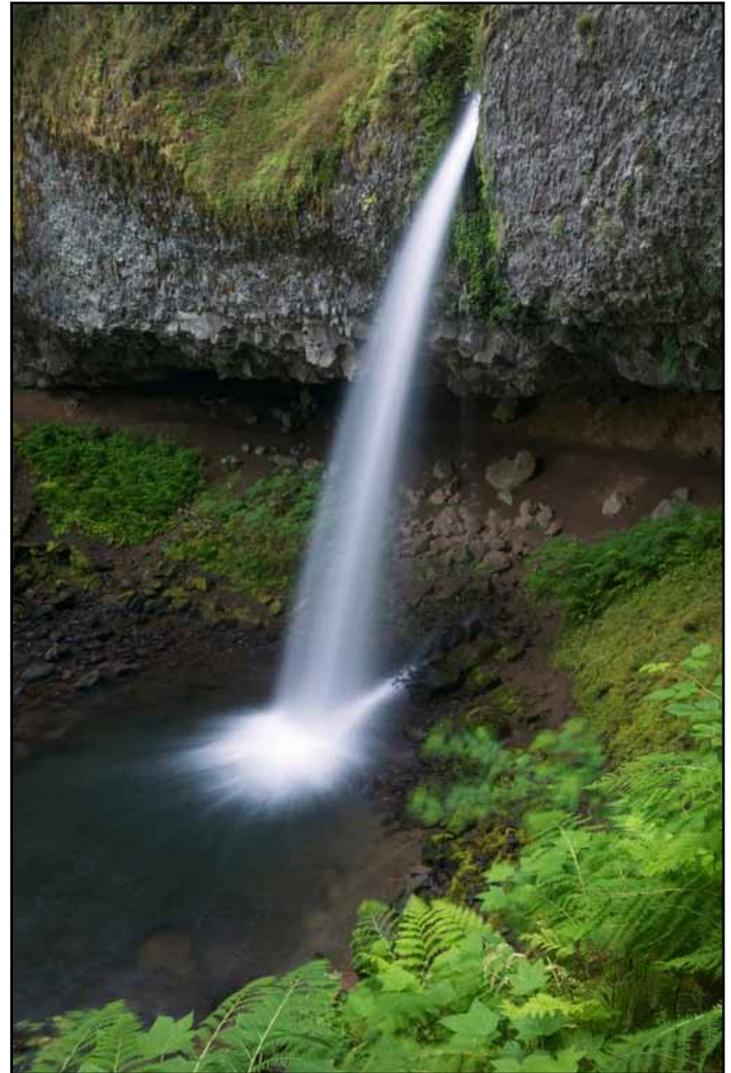
The second concept in managing your images is using folders in a logical manner to separate subjects, locations, or shoots. I would start this process with a pen and paper – write down the subjects you typically photograph. From here, ask yourself, "Are my images best organized by location (such as in a specific National Park or State), or by subject (as in a specific species, or group of animals), or by the date of the shoot?"

Of the three, I least prefer the shoot date as a method for organizing images. It seems to me that I might remember the date of a specific shoot for perhaps a couple months, maybe even a year, while I would remember the location for a lot longer. I organize my images by location, because this is often how I end up searching for the images. F someone asks me for an image from Mammoth Cave National Park, it's just easier to go to the National Parks folder, then scroll down to Mammoth Cave, and look for images there. On the other hand, it is also logical to make a folder for "Caves" and put my images there. The difference between these two methods is really a matter of personal preference.

The trick with either organization scheme is to use subfolders to further organize your images. When I first began ordering my images, I had no idea that I would make a career out of photographing, and so I didn't anticipate the number of images I would end up having to deal with. I made very general folders, "Macro, Landscape, Sunrise / Sunset, and Wildlife". After only a few months this scheme developed major cracks – I realized that very soon I would end up with hundreds, and perhaps thousands of images in each folder. This reality brought me to use subfolders to further refine broad categories. For instance, I now have a folder for all the "National Parks", and inside that folder I have individual folders for each park I've visited – such as "Acadia NP, Arches NP etc.". This has helped me to keep the images inside any folder to anywhere between a few dozen and a few hundred. For some of the parks that I have a particularly large amount of images, I have even further refined these folders by separating seasons or general locations within the park.

The basic concept here is that if any folder has too many images, you'll still be spending a lot of time looking for a specific image. I try to limit individual

folders to no more than 500 images – when folders grow larger than this, I look to separate the images into logical subfolders.

In this process of managing files, I also find it helpful to separate RAW images from those you've worked on. Inside the folders for specific locations, I utilize two folders, one labeled "RAW", and the other "FINAL". I put my RAW images into the "RAW" folder, and as I process the images, I save the final version of the file into the "FINAL" folder. This way when I'm looking for the finished version of an image, I only need to look in the "FINAL" folder. I find that this cuts down on the small mistakes like printing the wrong version of a file, or worse-yet, send that unfinished version to an editor or client.

You might still be wondering, why I haven't mentioned software yet. The main reason is that is doesn't really matter. Adobe Bridge, Lightroom, Apple's Aperture, and many other software packages offer acceptable tools for managing your images. I personally use Adobe Bridge, though at one time or another I've tried half a dozen others, returning each time to Bridge because it was just simpler. Many like Lightroom, and I don't have any problems with the program, it is widely used, and works well for organizing your images into virtual folders.

The main difference between Adobe Bridge and Adobe Lightroom (and Aperture for that matter), is that Bridge is a file browsing program, while Lightroom and Aperture are both file database programs. This means that Lightroom and Aperture keep a record of what you have in a specific folder, and then show you the contents of that record when you load the program. Bridge on the other hand, shows the actual contents of the folder when you select the folder to view.

Lightroom has the advantage of being able to preview images on CDs, DVDs, or Hard Drives that aren't attached because it pulls thumbnails of the content from its memory. This allows you to search

through hard drives that aren't attached, and attach them only if you want to use the contents.

Adobe Bridge has the advantage for being a bit clearer in the way it stores your images. It shows you the actual contents of specific folders located on your computer's Hard Drive, or external Hard Drives and CDs / DVDs if they are connected. In a database storage scheme like Lightroom, virtual folders can be used to group images together. The good here is that images do not need to be moved from one location to the other, but this comes along with the risk of losing the organization should the database file be corrupted. Should this happen, the images will still be fine, but the virtual folders will need to be rebuilt. Database programs also require large database files to run effectively, and these take up space in addition to your actual images.

There are advantages to both the image browser type organization, and the database organization method. The key concept here is that whichever you use, creating a scaleable, logical order for your folders will save you time and frustration as your digital image library grows. Remember above all to keep it simple, and you'll have a system that will remove much of the anxiety of dealing with digital photographs.