Finally Getting Organized in Lightroom Classic

with Rob Sylvan

Are you ready to take control of your Lightroom Classic catalog? Lightroom's greatest strength (and greatest weakness) is the catalog that lies at the center of everything you do in Lightroom. In this class you'll learn how the catalog relates to your photos, how to avoid and solve common problems that arise, how to create an organizational structure for storing your photos that makes sense to you, and how to maintain it over time. You'll learn how to master the Folders panel, how to create collections to provide faster access to your most important photos, how to rename your photos and folders, as well as leverage metadata so that you can find what you are looking for when you need it. Beyond the basics, you'll also learn how to safely move large amounts of photos to new drives or a new computer, how to move, rename, and backup your catalog, and a whole lot more. Join Rob and finally become the master of your Lightroom life!
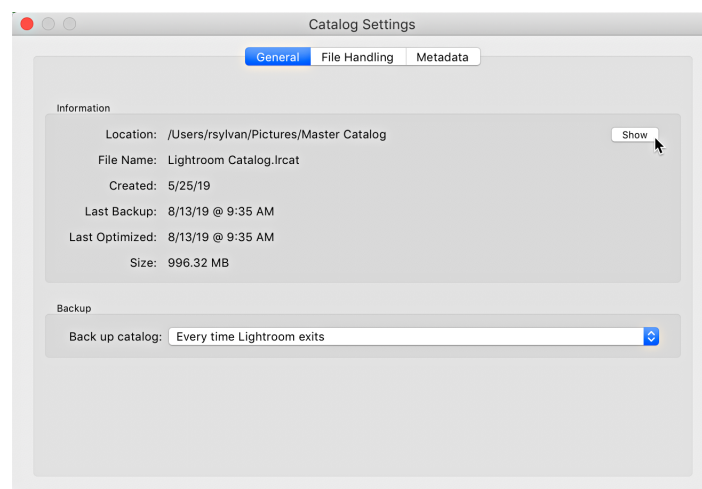
We all want to feel in control of our Lightroom Classic catalog, but some of the tasks just aren't very intuitive or seem fraught with peril. Let's break it down and step through the basics.

Note, this class is all about Lightroom Classic, but it does get tedious to write (read) the full name over and over again, so forgive me if I lapse into just saying "Lightroom" sometimes and understand I mean Lightroom Classic unless I say otherwise.

Catalog Location

The most important thing you need to know before you do anything is where on your hard drive is your Lightroom catalog located. This may seem simple, but I've worked with too many people who weren't sure, or found that the catalog was not where they expected it to be. To find your catalog, simply launch Lightroom Classic. With it open, go to Lightroom Classic > Catalog Settings > General (PC: Edit > Catalog Settings > General), and note the name of the catalog and the path to where it is located. Is it where you expected? If so, great! If not, here's how you can move it to a new location:

STEP ONE: Click the Show button on the General tab of the Catalog Settings to open the folder containing your catalog in your file browser.
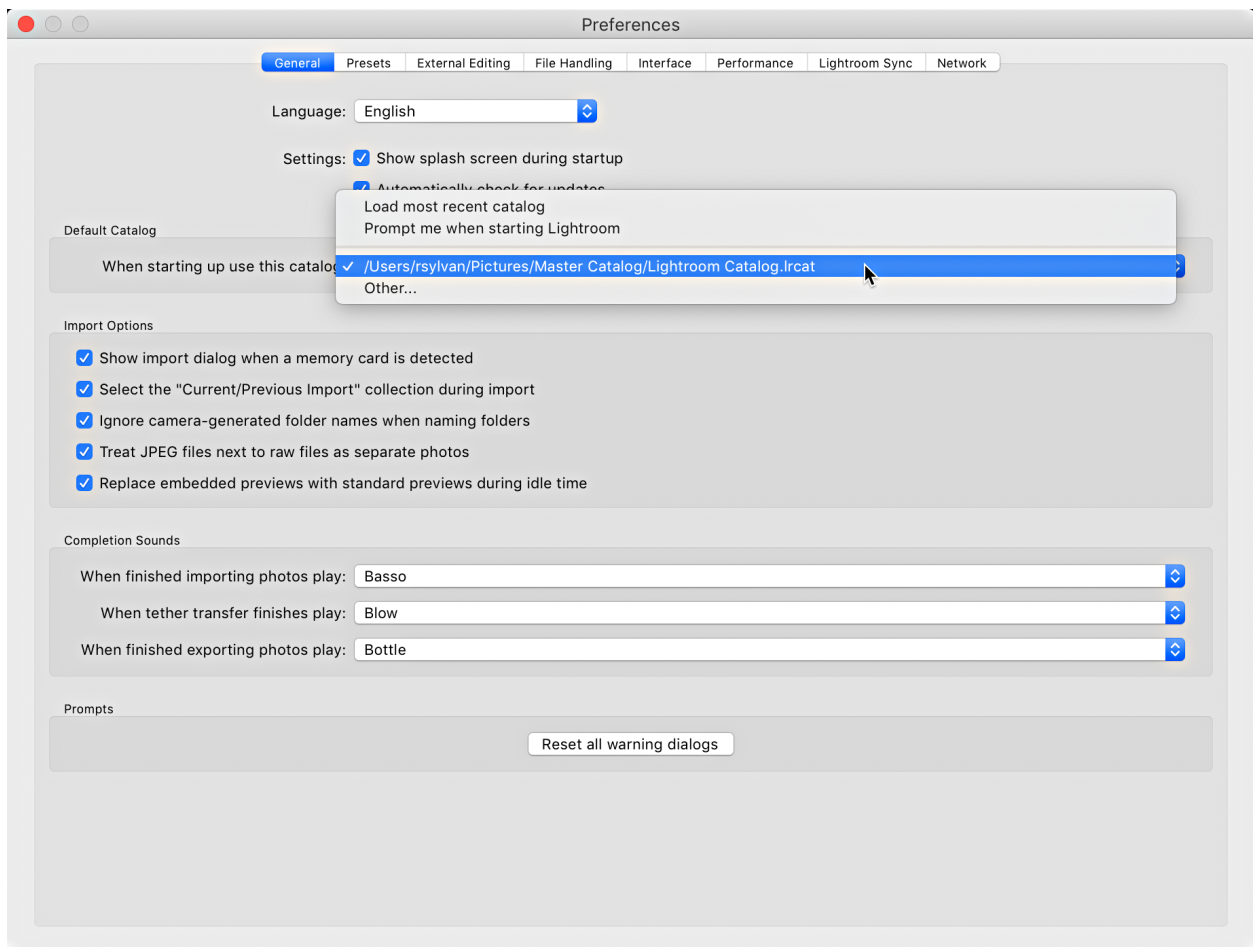
STEP TWO: Quit Lightroom. If prompted to backup, skip for now.

STEP THREE: Copy the folder containing the Lightroom catalog (.LRCAT) and its associated preview cache(s) to the location you want it to be stored.

STEP FOUR: Once the copy operation is complete, double-click the catalog file to open it back into Lightroom.

Default Catalog

Now, whether you moved your catalog or not, this next step is important. I highly recommend that you manually configure this catalog to be the Default catalog (don't use Load most recent catalog). To do this, go to Lightroom Classic > Preferences > General (PC: Edit > Preferences > General), and set the When starting up use this catalog option to the specific catalog you just opened.

Don't forget to go back and remove the original folder containing your catalog if you copied it to a new location. Having a good backup in place is good idea too (we'll cover that in a bit).

Rename a Catalog
When people start taking a closer look at their catalog they often wonder if it is possible to rename a Lightroom catalog, and it is very easy to do this. First quit Lightroom, and open Finder (PC: Explorer), then open the folder containing the catalog. You should see the catalog file with an .LRCAT file extension and its preview cache with the .LRDATA file extension. Using your file browser you can rename the catalog file, but keep the file extension the same (.LRCAT). Then rename the preview cache the same way, but retain the word Previews in the name along with the original file extension. So, for example if your catalog and preview cache was named:

Lightroom 5 Catalog-2-2.lrcat
Lightroom 5 Catalog-2-2 Previews.lrdata

And you wanted to change it to Lightroom Catalog, you would end up with:

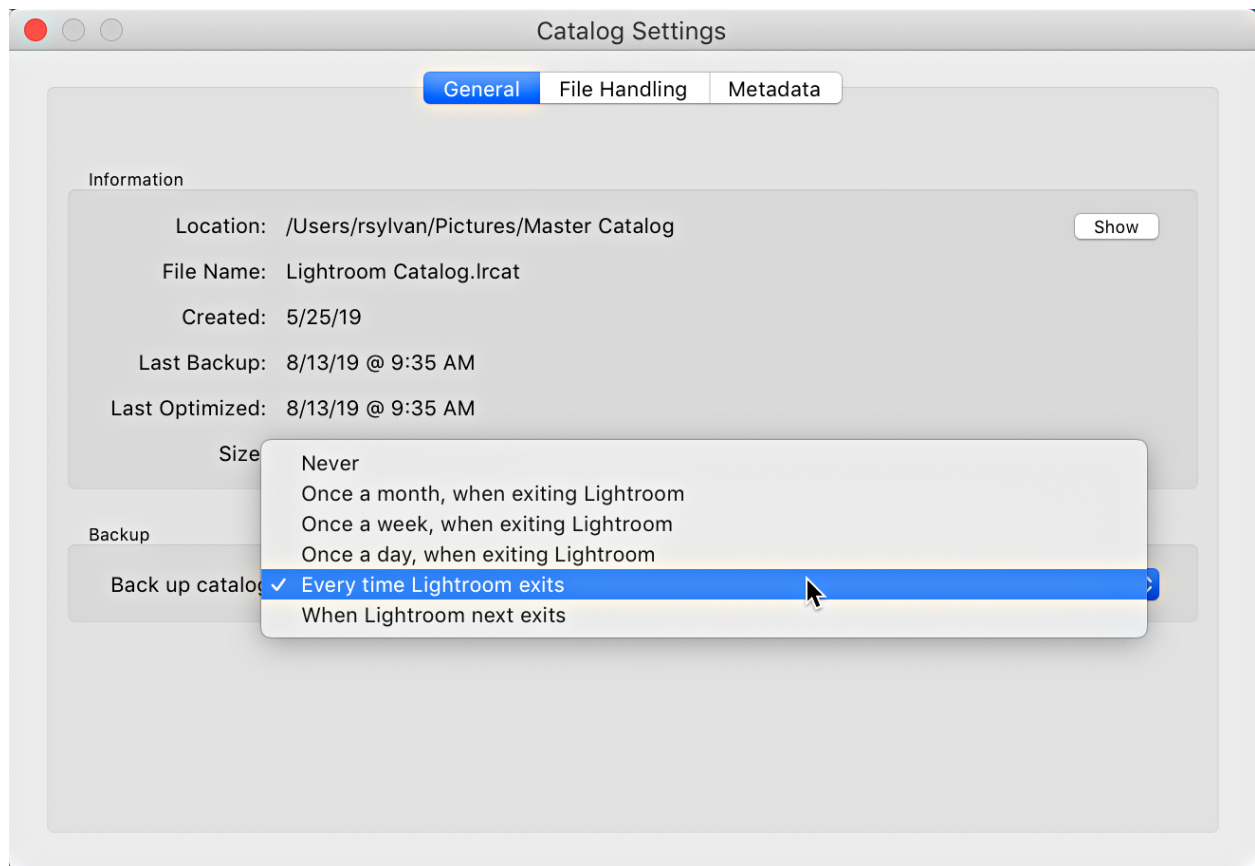Lightroom Catalog.lrcat
Lightroom Catalog Previews.lrdata

Once that is done, double-click the catalog file to open it into Lightroom Classic and set that as the default catalog via Preferences > General. The name you choose only matters to you, so don't feel constrained to keeping the version number of Lightroom in the file name.
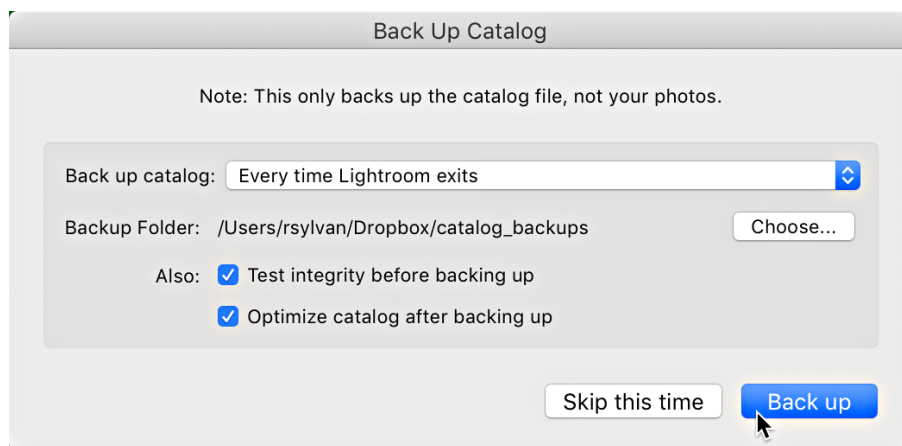
Catalog Backup
OK, you know where your catalog is located, you may have even renamed it to something more meaningful, and it is configured as your default catalog to open every time you launch Lightroom. You're now more in control of your catalog then a lot of other Lightroom users. You may be thinking about that catalog backup function, and how to use it. I urge you to use it no matter what other backup system you have in place. Here's why, it's free, it's built into Lightroom, and it's automatic. You can just set it and forget it, and it may just save your bacon one day because there are some pieces of data that only exist in the Lightroom catalog (virtual copies, collection membership, flags, and individual history steps), and if your catalog ever gets corrupted, lost, stolen, etc. you'll be so relieved that you have an exact copy of the catalog sitting in a safe place. I've even seen it save people who accidentally inflict damage on their own catalogs and were saved by having a recent backup copy of the catalog that they could recover from. Here's how to set it up:

STEP ONE: Go to Lightroom Classic > Catalog Settings > General (PC: Edit > General).

STEP TWO: Click the Back up catalog drop-down menu, and choose the frequency for the back up to run. I chose Every time Lightroom exits because I like to be reminded each time, even if I skip sometimes.
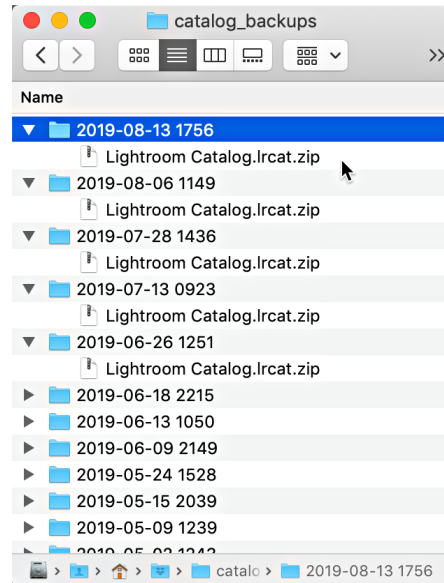
That's it. The next time you exit Lightroom on the chosen schedule you will be prompted to run the backup process. That prompt is the only place you can configure the location of where you want the backup copy to be saved.

Ideally you would choose a separate drive from the one your working catalog is located on to protect against drive failure. I work off my laptop, which usually only has one drive attached, so I direct my backup copies to be saved into my Dropbox folder, which are then synced to my other computers and the cloud. One final note, when this process runs Lightroom creates an
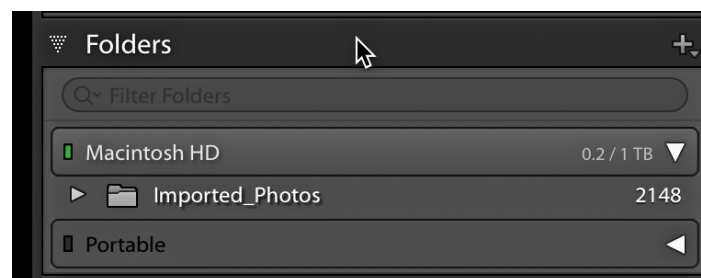
exact copy of the catalog as it is exists at that moment, and then compresses that catalog into a zip file. You will need to periodically go into the folder containing the backup copies and delete the oldest ones. If you ever had to recover from a backup you would only use the most recent, right? I usually only keep the most recent 3 or 4 on hand.

With your catalog under control you can now turn your attention to your photos, which is likely to be where the biggest mess can be found. The key to getting control over your photos is to understand the role of the Folders panel in the Library module.

The Role of the Folders Panel

The Folders panel may be one of the most used panels in all of Lightroom Classic, but it may also be one of the least understood. Questions relating to the Folders panel have been my bread and butter on the KelbyOne Help Desk since the beginning, so my hope is that this will help you get the most out of it, and avoid the most common problems.

There's actually quite a bit of functionality in this little panel, and it puts a lot of data at your fingertips. One of the most important distinctions to make is that the Folders panel is not a file browser. You will only see folders that have actually been through the import process. Just like the photos that reside within them, nothing appears in Lightroom unless it was introduced to the catalog first.

The Folders panel consists of two elements—Folders and the Volume Browser. Folders are exactly that, the folders on your hard drive(s) that you have imported into Lightroom. You can import any number of folders and subfolders, and they will always be sorted alphanumerically. Subfolders will nest under their parent folders, which mirror the structure you see in your file browser (i.e. Finder or Windows Explorer) when looking at your disk because they are one and the same set of folders (assuming you've imported photos from all of the folders you are viewing in your browser).
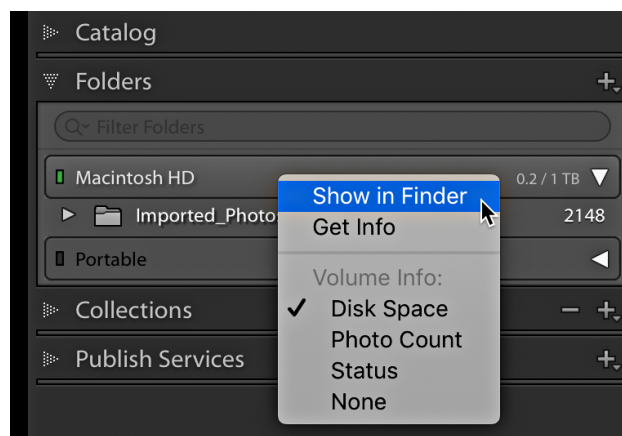
The Volume Browser
I have two Volume Browsers, labeled Macintosh HD and Portable. Macintosh HD is my internal drive and Portable is an external drive. These are the names I gave these drives on my Mac. On Windows, you would see the relevant drive letter.
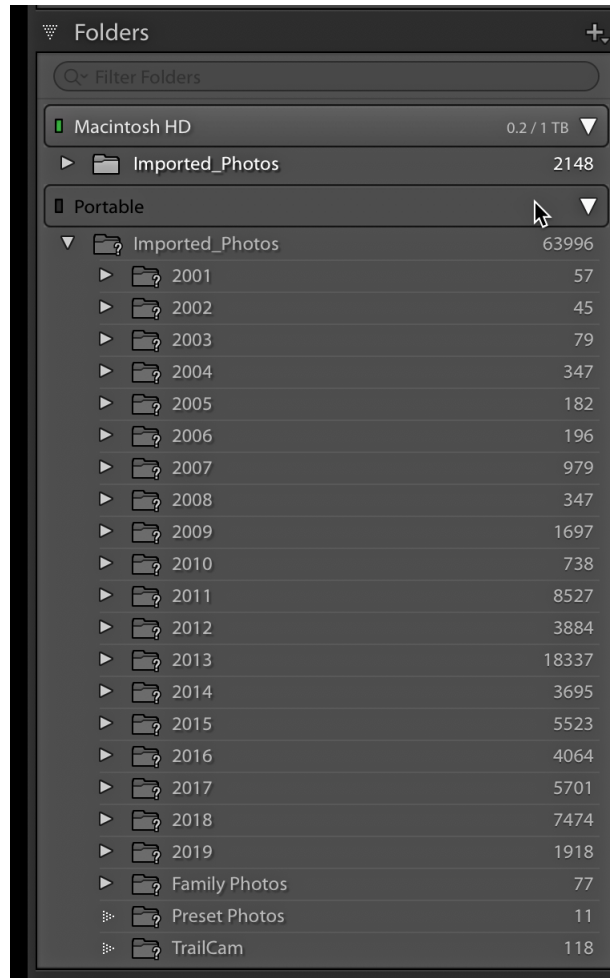
With a glance at the Volume Browser I can tell a few things about my drives. First, the Macintosh HD drive shows a green indicator, which means that the drive has ample free space. In fact, it shows that 300 GB out of 1 TB are free. This value fluctuates a lot for me, as I constantly move data from the internal drive to the external drive as I complete projects.

Second, I can see that Portable is offline since it displays a gray indicator and the name is faded out. Since it's offline Lightroom Classic can't display how much free space it may have. Once that drive is reconnected to my computer and comes online, the Volume Browser will change from gray to green, and any question marks on folders will go away. Just so you know, the color indicator will turn yellow as free space gets down to 10GB, orange as the free space gets down to 5GB, then red when the disk has only 1GB free remaining (hopefully you won't let your drive get that full).

Free space isn't the only information the Volume Browser reveals. If you right-click the Volume Browser, you can choose to display Disk Space, Photo Count, Status, or nothing at all. In addition, you can open that disk in Windows Explorer or Finder and even access information about that disk.
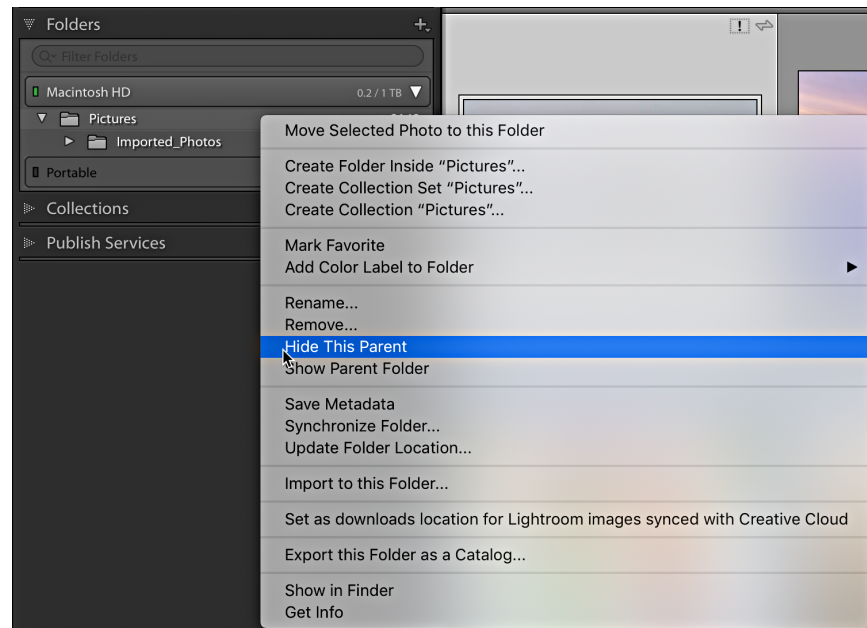
Another nice aspect of the Volume Browser is that it's collapsible, which makes the Folders panel much easier to navigate, especially if you have multiple drives with multiple folders on each. The previous screen captures showed Portable collapsed, but once it is expanded I can see my folder structure underneath.

Remember, you will only see imported folders displayed in the Folders panel. I find it preferable to always import the top-level or parent folder that contains all the subfolders where my photos stored. This provides the benefit of being able to collapse that group of subfolders so the list doesn't run on forever, and it makes it much easier to move that entire tree of folders to a new drive if necessary just by dragging and dropping the top-level folder. Don't worry if you haven't imported the parent folder containing your photo sub-folders because it can be done right from the Folders panel. Just right-click the top-most folder in the panel and choose Show Parent Folder. The parent folder will automatically appear in the folders panel, and all of its subfolders that were showing previously in the Folders panel will be nested underneath. For example, you can see that I have a top-level folder named Imported_Photos, but I know that folder is stored inside my Pictures parent folder. If I right-click the Imported_Photos folder and choose Show Parent Folder it will add the Pictures folder to the panel, and Imported_Photos will appear nested underneath, just like it exists on my drive.

Alternatively, if you have a top-level folder that you don't want to see displayed in Lightroom, you can right-click that folder and choose Hide This Parent to make it go away. I don't want to see the Pictures folder showing at the top of my Folders panel, so I will hide that parent to keep Imported_Photos at the top.
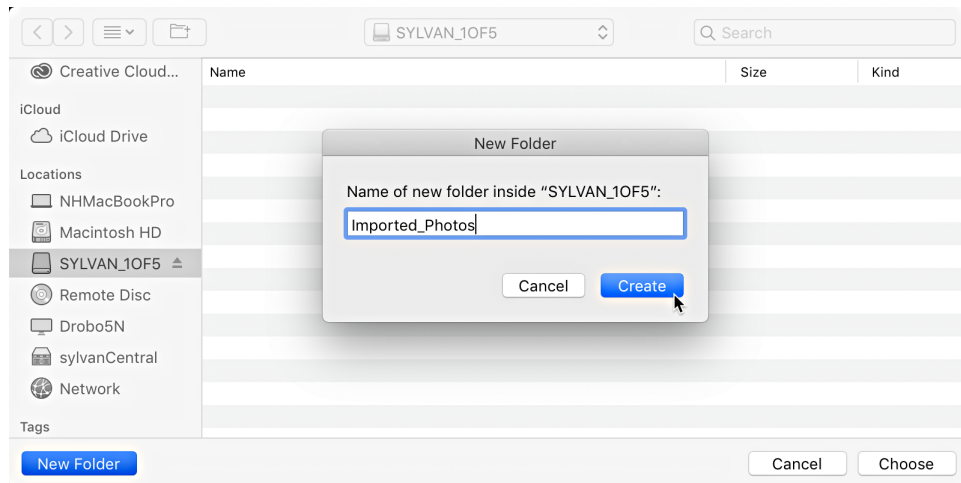

Find Your Folders and Photos on Disk
It is very important for all Lightroom users to know how to find exactly where a given folder or photo resides on your drive from inside Lightroom. There are a few ways to identify where your folders and photos exist on your drive. The easiest is the good old right-click contextual menu. Go ahead and right-click any folder in the Folders panel and choose the Show in Finder (PC: Show in Explorer) menu. This will open your file browser right to that folder and show you where it exists on your drive. Similarly, you can right-click any photo and access that same Show in menu to take you right to that photo in your file browser. You don't have to go that far to find that information though. If you just hover your cursor over a folder you should see its path revealed in a tooltip popup. So take a moment to make sure you know exactly where all of your photos are located on your drive.
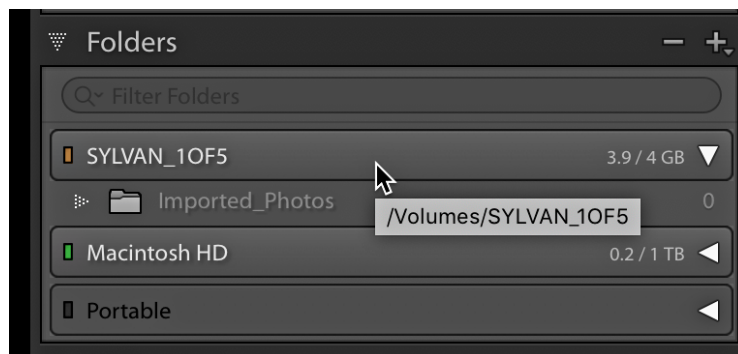
Adding New Folders

In typical Lightroom fashion there are a couple of ways to create new folders. Let's imagine a common scenario where you buy a new external drive with the intention of storing photos on it because your existing drive is filling up. To start, you can go to the Library menu and choose New Folder, or click the plus sign at the top of the Folders panel and choose Add Folder to launch the Choose or Create New Folder dialog.
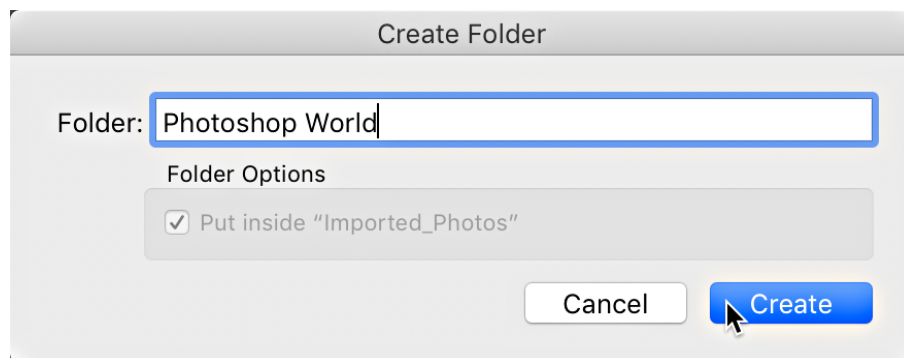

From here you can either choose an existing folder you may have created in your file browser or you can create a brand-new folder. In this example I'll select the drive where I want this folder to exist, click the New Folder button and give the new folder a name. I like to have a parent folder named Imported_Photos on each drive I use to contain photos managed by Lightroom, so I'll use that name to create this folder (you can do what makes sense for your setup). The new folder will be created on that drive, and I can now click the Choose button to return to Lightroom where I'll see I've added a new drive (note the new Volume Browser) and folder to the Folders panel. Now I can use that as a destination during future imports or I can use Lightroom to move photos and folders from other locations to that folder (via drag and drop right in the Folders panel).

Note, that drive is a small 4GB flash drive that I used so you can see the orange color indicating I have less than 5GB of free space.

Another common scenario is the need to create sub-folders within existing folders to help with your organizational needs. This process works in a similar fashion, but you start by selecting the parent folder you want to create the subfolder within. In this case I'll select the new Imported_Photos folder I created on the drive named SYLVAN1OF5 and right-click to open the contextual menu and choose Create Folder Inside "Imported_Photos" (or whatever the name of the folder is that you right-click). This opens a smaller Create Folder dialog box where I can give the subfolder a name and click Create to complete the process. The subfolder will then appear in the Folders panel. These folders are ready for me to add photos and even new folders as my organizational needs demand.

Removing Empty Folders
Knowing how to remove folders is important too. The most common situation for removing a folder is when you've deleted all of the photos out of the folder for some reason or you've moved the photos into a different folder. In either case there's no need to keep an empty and unused folder around. Simply right-click on the empty folder and choose Remove. The folder will be removed from the Folders panel, and if it was empty, Lightroom will also delete the folder from your drive.
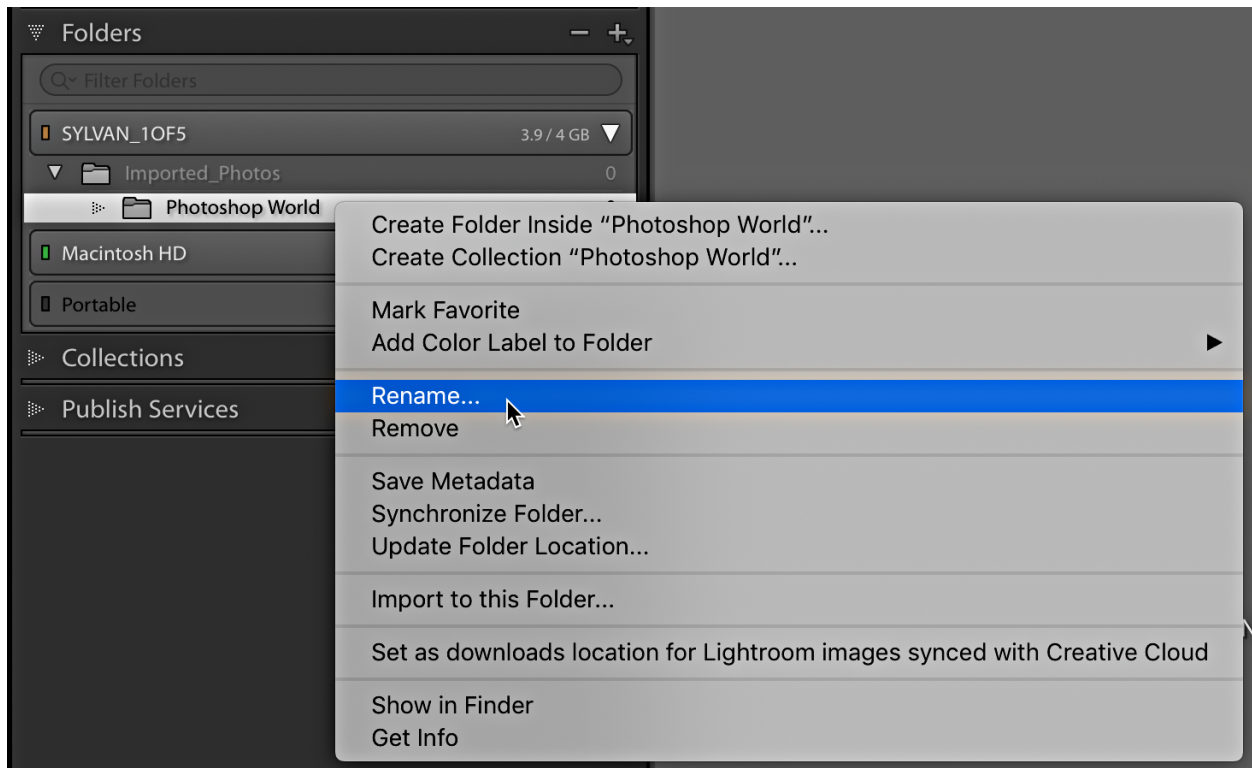
What if the folder isn't empty? Well in the case where you right-click a folder that has some files in it and choose Remove the folder will only be removed from the Folders panel (and the Lightroom catalog). In that situation Lightroom will open a popup warning you that the photos will be removed from the Lightroom catalog, but the folders and files will remain on disk. This is generally not something you'd want to do because you don't want to end up with folders full of photos that aren't being managed by Lightroom and are just taking up disk space. If you want to delete the photos, you need to delete them first using Lightroom, then you can remove the empty folder as described.

Renaming Folders
You will eventually come to a situation where you need to change the name of a folder. This can be accomplished easily by right-clicking the folder and choosing Rename from the

contextual menu. From there simply enter the new name in the Rename Folder dialog box that appears and click Save to commit the change. The folder is renamed on the drive and that change is reflected in the Folders panel.

Migrate Your Photo Library to a new Drive

Another task every Lightroom user should know is how to migrate your entire photo library from one drive to another drive. This is useful if you are wanting to move your photo Library from an internal drive to an external drive, or if you are running out of space and want to move to a new larger drive. The process is the same. Now, you could use Lightroom to move the folders, but I don't recommend doing that when your entire library is at stake. Using a move command is too risky, because if anything goes wrong in the middle of the transfer you could lose data. I prefer a technique that involves copying the folders to the new drive, and then later manually deleting the files from the original location. Here's how:

STEP ONE: Open Finder (PC: Explorer).

STEP TWO: Copy the entire folder structure (as-is without changing the structure) to the other drive.

STEP THREE: Open Lightroom.

STEP FOUR: Once the copy operation is complete, right-click/ctrl-click the top-most-level folder in the Folders panel and choose Update Folder Location.

STEP FIVE: In the resulting dialog box, navigate to and select that same top-most-level folder in the new drive (the one you just copied over there).

Lightroom will update the catalog to point to the folder in the new location (and everything inside of that folder). If you have all your folders/photos in a single parent folder then you are done, but if there are additional folders at the same level as that top folder you just need to repeat steps 4 and 5 with those folders. Give it a test run to make sure everything is as it should be before removing the originals.
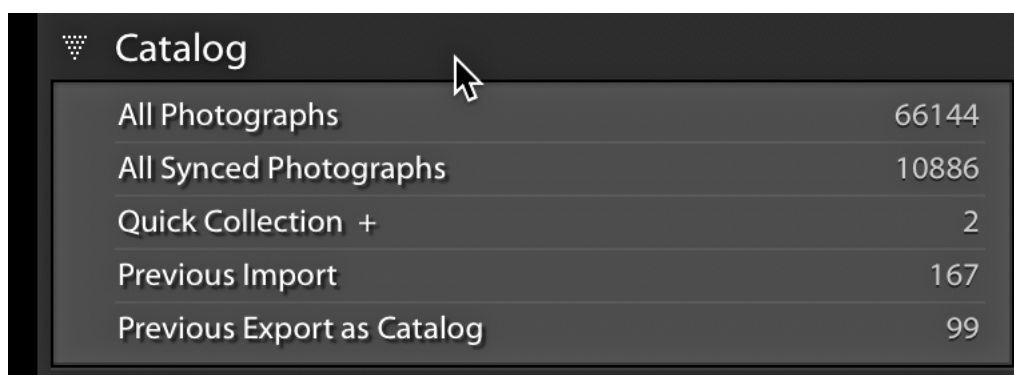
Mastering Collections

To review, a key piece of data stored in the Lightroom Classic catalog is the location of each imported photo on your system, stored as a path, from the volume name (PC: drive letter) to the individual file name and all the folders in between (this is part of what we see in the Folders panel). This allows Lightroom to reference where each photo is stored, and when needed for working in Develop or exporting copies, the program can access the photo in question and do the job at hand. Because Lightroom Classic only references each photo, it can leverage that data to easily group photos together in a variety of ways using these things called collections. Think of collections as virtual folders that only exist within the catalog.

Some people find it easier to think of collections like musical playlists in a music app, where you can create a playlist and add as many songs to it as you wish, and you know that the music app is only referring to each song file without regard to where that song file is stored on your computer. Likewise, you can have an infinite number of playlists and you can even add the same song to every playlist, and at no time does the music app duplicate the actual song file on your computer or move it to a different location. Collections behave exactly the same way. This makes collections an incredibly powerful tool for organizing and accessing your photos beyond the physical storage aspect of folders. Collections can be found in the Catalog panel and in the Collections panel.
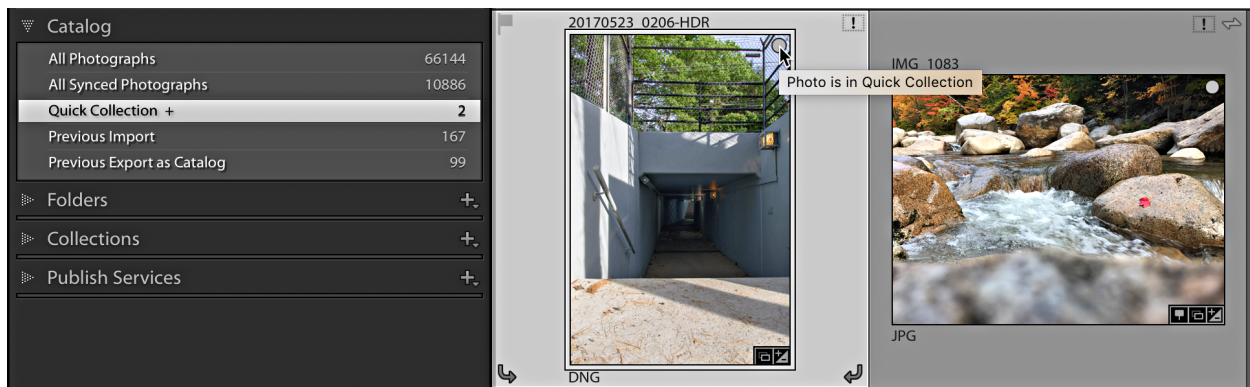
The Catalog Panel

Before we get to the aptly named Collections panel, I want to point out that Lightroom comes pre-loaded with a few useful collections in the Catalog panel.
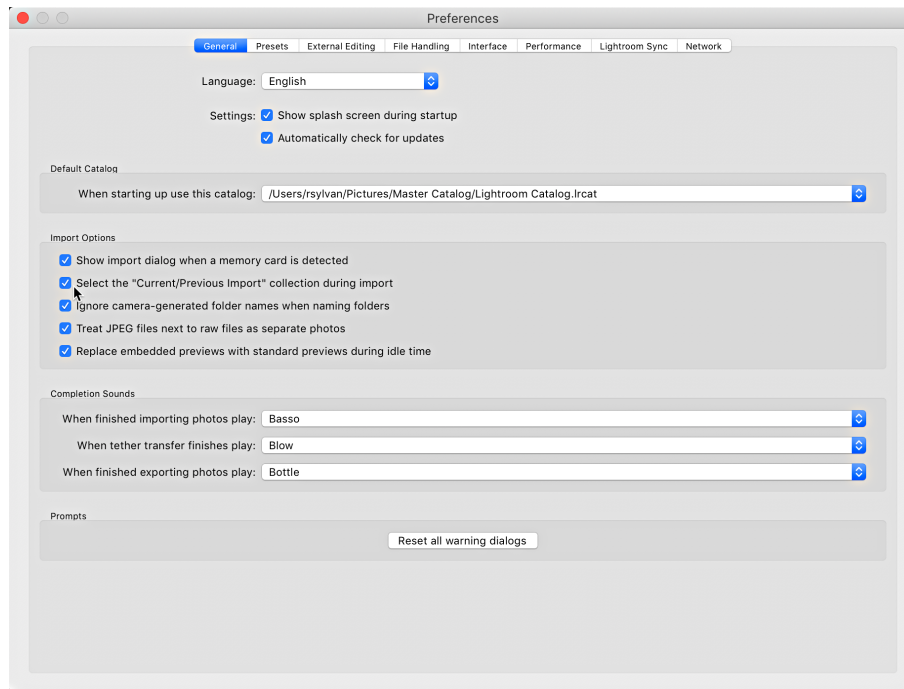
Even if you have a completely empty catalog, you'll find the All Photographs, All Synced Photographs, Quick Collection, and Previous Import collections ready to go. As photos are imported into the catalog you will see the number next to All Photographs increase accordingly, and clicking on that collection will give you access to all imported photos at once. If you are using Lightroom Classic and are syncing with the Cloud-based Lightroom on your mobile devices, the All Synced Photographs collection gives you a running tally on the number of photos synced, and provides similar easy access to them.

The Quick Collection is for when you need to temporarily gather a group of photos together and hold them while you work, which can be useful for pulling together some photos to be printed, exported, or some other purpose. You can add a photo to the Quick Collection by dragging and dropping it onto the Quick Collection, and you can remove a photo by selecting it and pressing the Delete (PC: Return) key. By default, the Quick Collection is also set as the Target Collection, denoted by the small + sign next to it in the Catalog panel. As the Target Collection, you can also add photos to it by selecting them and pressing the B key, or by clicking the small gray circle button that appears in the upper-right corner of the thumbnail.
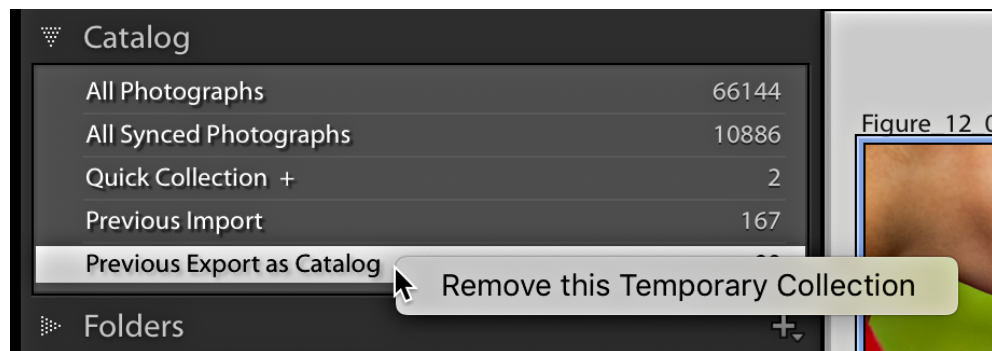

Conversely, you can remove photos from the Target Collection by pressing the B key or clicking that button while viewing the collection. We'll learn how to apply that Target Collection power to other collections further on.

The Previous Import (will say Current during an active import) will always show the last batch of photos to go through the import process (or the current active import). By default, when you start an import the current view will switch to this collection and you'll see the new photos appear in the catalog. If you don't wish to switch to viewing this collection during an import you can go to Preferences > General, and uncheck Select the Current/Previous Import collection during import, and you will remain viewing whichever folder or collection you were in before the import started.

Other collections may also appear in the Catalog panel as you work over time. These can be created when you do things such as export a catalog or use the Find Missing Photos command (found under the Library menu). If you discover one of these collections, such as this Previous Export as Catalog collection, and you want to remove it, just right-click it to access the contextual menu for removal.
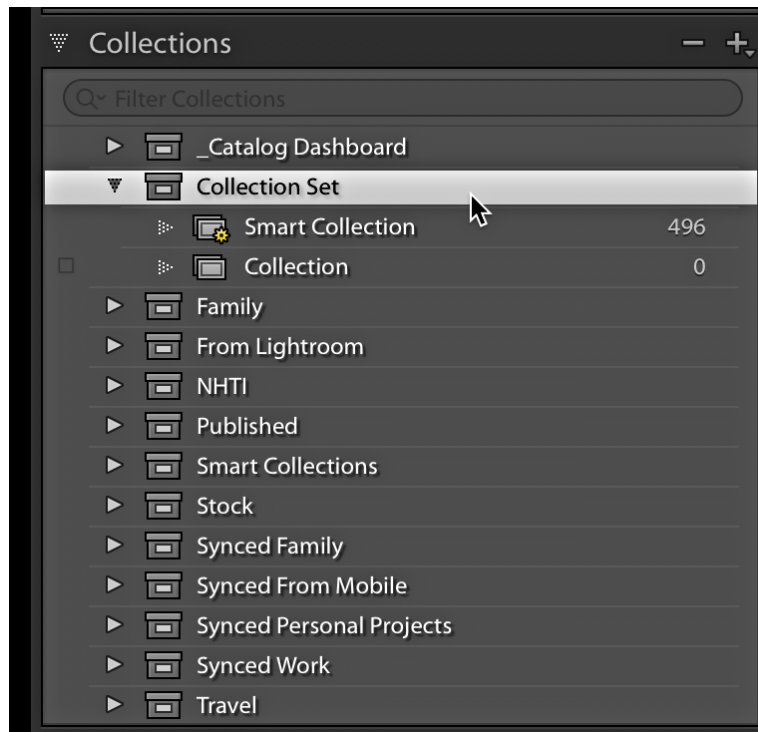

While those pre-built collections in the Catalog panel are all very useful in their own way there is another level of user-driven collections that you can leverage to fit your organizational needs. This is where the Collections panel comes into play.

The Collections Panel
There are three types of collection tools found here:

- Collection Sets – used for providing organizational structure
- Collections – used for manually gathering up photos in various groupings
- Smart Collections – a type of saved search that automatically finds photos matching specific criteria
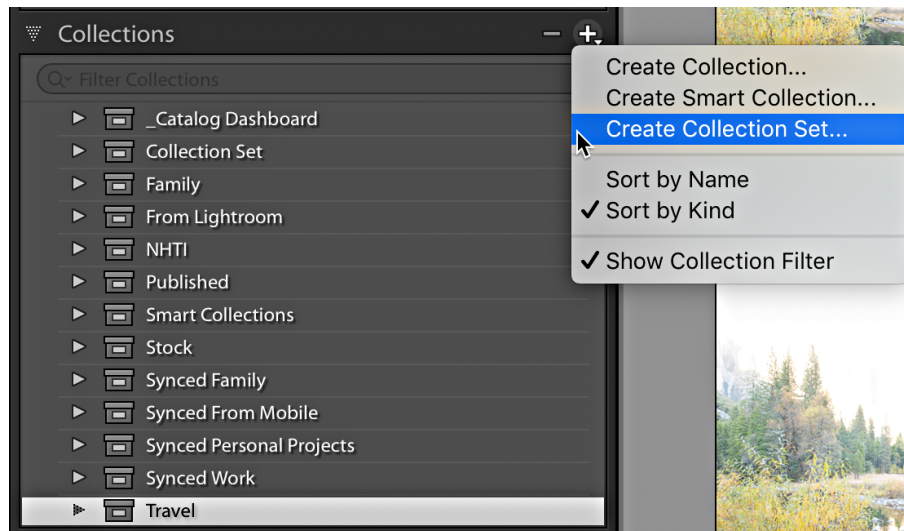

Collection sets can only contain collections, smart collections, or other collection sets, which is why they are good for creating structure within the Collections panel. For example, you might have a collection set called Travel, and then within that collection set you could create a collection set for each location you've traveled to, and then within each location's collection set you'd create collections and/or smart collections to gather up the relevant photos for each location.

Because Lightroom Classic is always referencing the photos, you can continue to add photos to existing collections without worrying about where those photos are stored on your system. This also gives you the ability to add photos to as many collections as you need to without worry of duplicating photos on your drive. So, I can have photos in my All Yosemite Photos collection (and keep adding more each time I visit) as well as those same photos in each respective collection based on a location within the park. In the future, if I need to find a photo from Yosemite, I can just go to this collection set and find them without needing to remember what folder those photos happen to be stored within on my system. I can then use the Library Filter bar to refine the view of any given collection to show photos by date, rating, flag, camera, lens, and so on. This is truly leveraging the power of that catalog (database) for my needs.
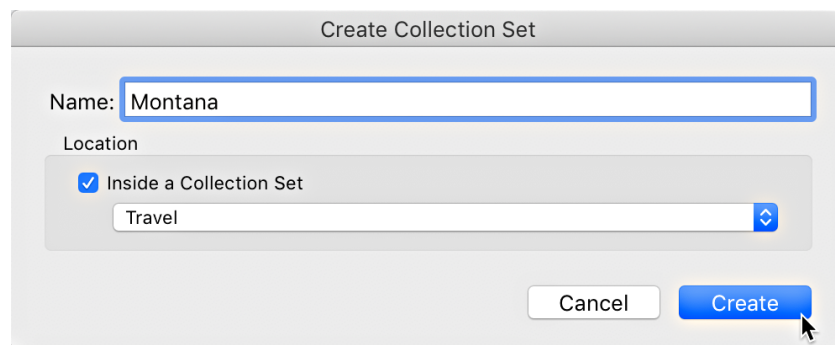
There are a few different ways to create these collection tools, with the most obvious being the + sign at the top of the Collections panel.

From this menu you can choose which tool you need, and then you'll be presented with the dialog box for completing the process. Each tool has different options, so let's look at each one in turn. I'll create a collection set for a trip to Montana, and then create a collection to hold all of the photos from the trip, and then a smart collection to automatically gather up my highest rated photos from that collection. This process can be applied to any combination of collection sets, collections, and smart collections.

STEP ONE: Click the + sign at the top of the Collections panel and choose Collection Set.

STEP TWO: Give the collection set a name, and choose if you want it to be placed within an existing collection set. In my case, I want it to go into my Travel collection set, so that is checked.
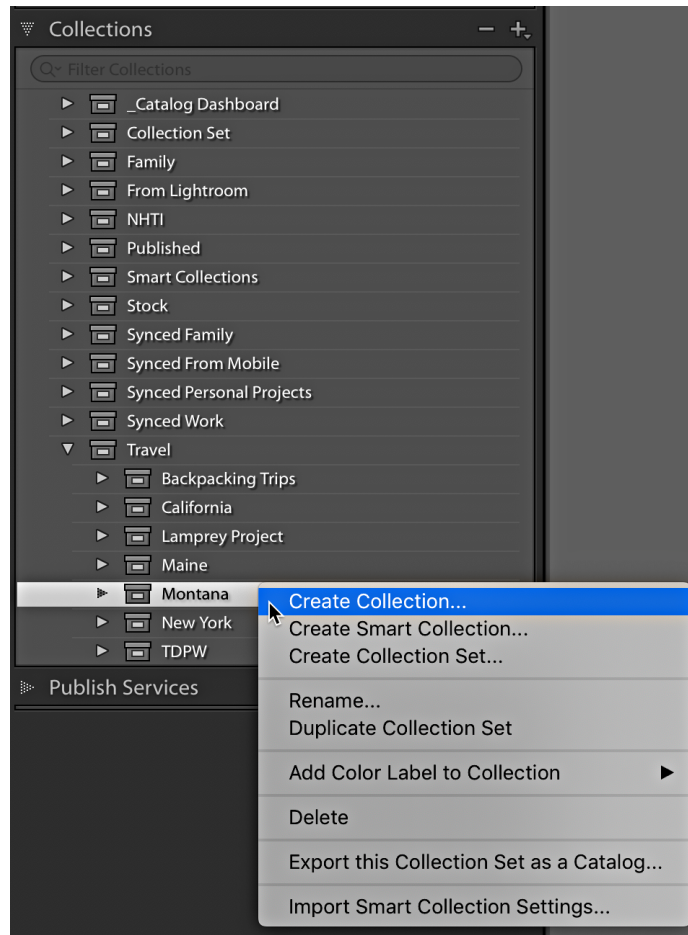

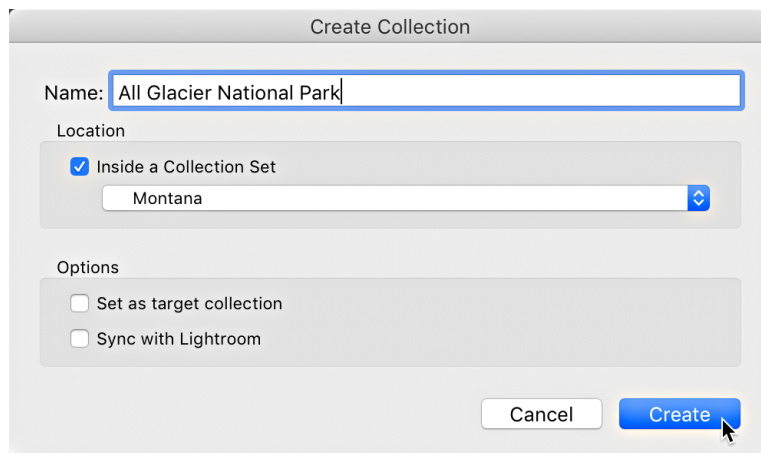Click Create to add it to the Collections panel.

Now that I have my parent collection set I can begin to add collections and smart collections to organize my photos. First I'll add a collection for all photos from the trip to Glacier National Park.

STEP ONE: An alternative to the + sign at the top of the panel is to right-click the parent collection set and choose Create Collection from the contextual menu that appears.

STEP TWO: When the Create Collection dialog appears the Location will already be configured for inside the Montana collection set. I can now give this collection a name and click Create to add it to the panel.

Adding Photos

Now I'm ready to add photos to that collection, and this can be done simply by dragging and dropping the photos from Grid view to the collection.

As an alternative, if you want to create a collection from an entire folder of photos you can drag and drop the folder from the Folders panel to the Collections panel. Either option gives the same result, but when you drag the folder down the resulting collection will have the same name as the folder. To rename a collection, just right-click and choose Rename from the contextual menu that appears.
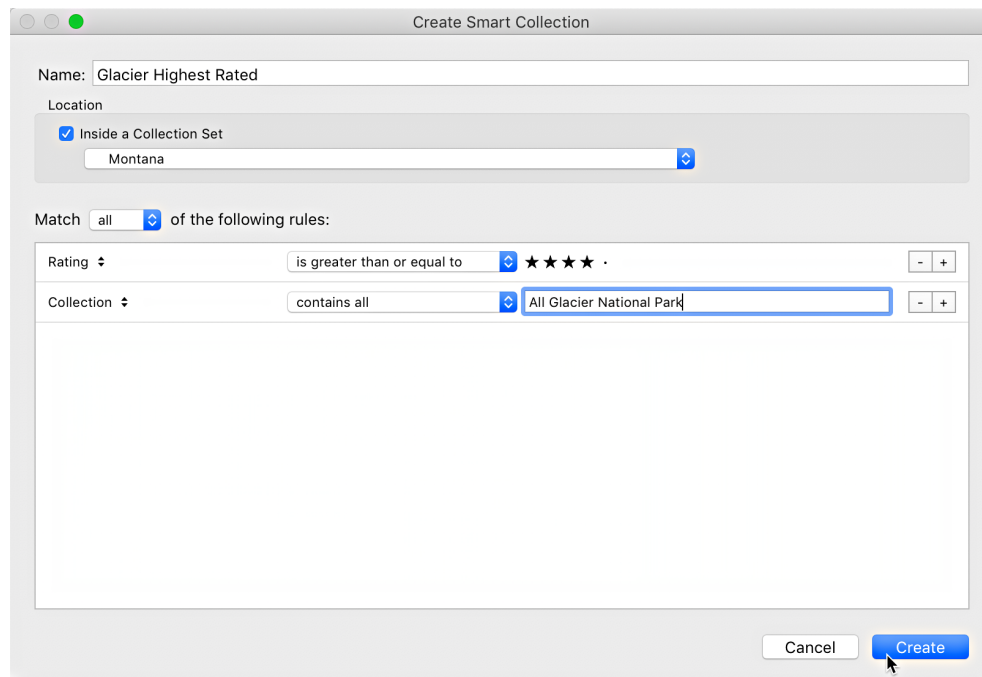
Now that I have a collection set, and my first collection, I can create a smart collection with a few simple rules to automatically find all of the photos I give a high star rating.

STEP ONE: Right-click the Montana collection set and choose Create Smart Collection from the contextual menu.

STEP TWO: In the resulting Create Smart Collection dialog box, give the smart collection a name and note that it is already configured to be created within the parent collection set.

STEP THREE: Define your first rule. For this smart collection I want a rule based on the star rating. By default, the Rating criteria came up as my first rule, so I just need to define the criteria and the number of stars. I chose greater than or equal to 4 stars.

STEP FOUR: Add additional rules as needed. I also want a rule that defines the source of the photos being searched or else the default behavior is to apply the rules to all photos in the catalog. Click the + sign at the end of the first rule to add a second. Then click the rule drop-down menu to choose from the available options. Under Source, I chose Collection, and then entered the name of the collection I had just created. Click Create to put it into action.

With my greater than or equal to 4 stars and All Glacier Photos collection set as the source, as I apply a 4 or 5 star rating to any photos in that collection (even if I am viewing the source folder instead of the collection) they will automatically be gathered into my new smart collection.

This is a basic example of how each type of collection tool can be used, but one that I use frequently. In closing, I want to point out that aside from the benefits I've shown so far, the Collections panel appears in all other modules, while the Folders panel is only found in Library, which makes using collections a very handy way to access your photos no matter where you are working in Lightroom at the time.

Hopefully all of this information will put you in a much more confident place with your Lightroom Classic catalog and put you on the path to taking control of your photo library. Don't hesitate to send your Lightroom questions to the Help Desk by clicking the My Account button on the KelbyOne website, and then choosing Help Desk. Be sure to check out my weekly columns at LightroomKillerTips.com, where you can leave comments and questions on my posts and I'll be sure to follow up. You can also reach me directly through robsylvan.com. Thanks for attending my session, and best of luck as you move forward.