

Safeguard Essential Lightroom Classic Files

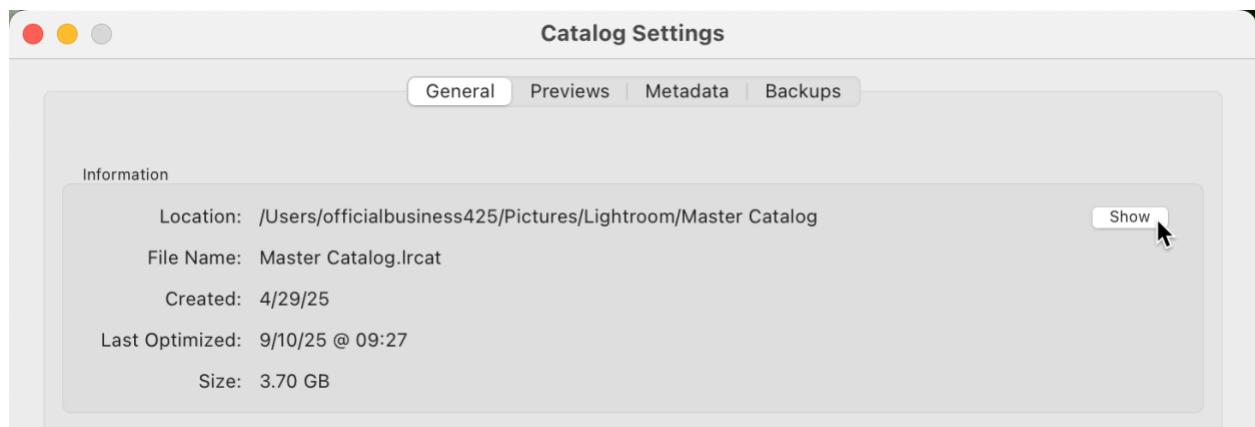
Beyond your photos, there are key files you need to understand, manage, and protect to keep Lightroom Classic running smoothly—not just today, but for years to come. Most users install Lightroom and dive straight into editing, without realizing there are a few critical moving parts under the hood. Knowing how to handle them can make all the difference when it comes to performance, reliability, and recovering from data loss. Want to keep your Lightroom setup solid and stress-free? This class shows you how.

Do You Know Where Your Catalog Is?

One of the most important things a Lightroom Classic (LrC) user should know is the location of where his or her working catalog is stored on his or her system. Now there's no shame if you don't know, because its location is not obvious when you use LrC; however, if you should ever run into a problem, you'll be glad to know where it is. I also regularly encounter people who discover that their working catalog isn't where they thought it was, which can be problematic when a drive fails.

Here's how to find your catalog:

1. Launch LrC.
2. Go to Lightroom Classic (PC: Edit) > Catalog Settings and click on the General tab.



Once the Catalog Settings dialog opens, you'll see the location of the open catalog displayed at the top, as well as its file name, date created, date of last optimization, and its file size on disk. If that location is where you expected, then great. Gold star for you! If not, you might want to consider putting it in a location you prefer. Note that Show button for opening that location in your file browser.

You can keep your catalog on any locally connected drive (you can't open a catalog over a network), so whether it's an internal drive or an external drive is entirely up to you. There are pros and cons to both options. Storing a catalog locally means you can always open the

catalog without having to connect an external drive. Storing a catalog on an external drive gives you the flexibility to open that catalog from any computer (running LrC) on which that drive is mounted. I've used both options at different times over the years, and all things being equal, performance is usually at least a little better when stored on an internal drive.

Should you need to relocate your catalog to a different drive, or just a different folder on the same drive, here's how:

1. Close LrC.
2. Open your operating system's file browser (Finder or Windows Explorer), and navigate to the folder containing the catalog (.lrcat) and its associated preview caches (.lrdata). You can click the Show button in the Catalog Settings dialog (before closing Lightroom) to open your file browser to that folder.
3. **Copy** the **folder** containing the catalog to your desired location.
4. When the copy operation is complete, double-click the catalog file (.lrcat) to open it into LrC.
5. Take a look around and make sure all is well (and it should be).
6. Set that catalog in its new location as the Default Catalog.

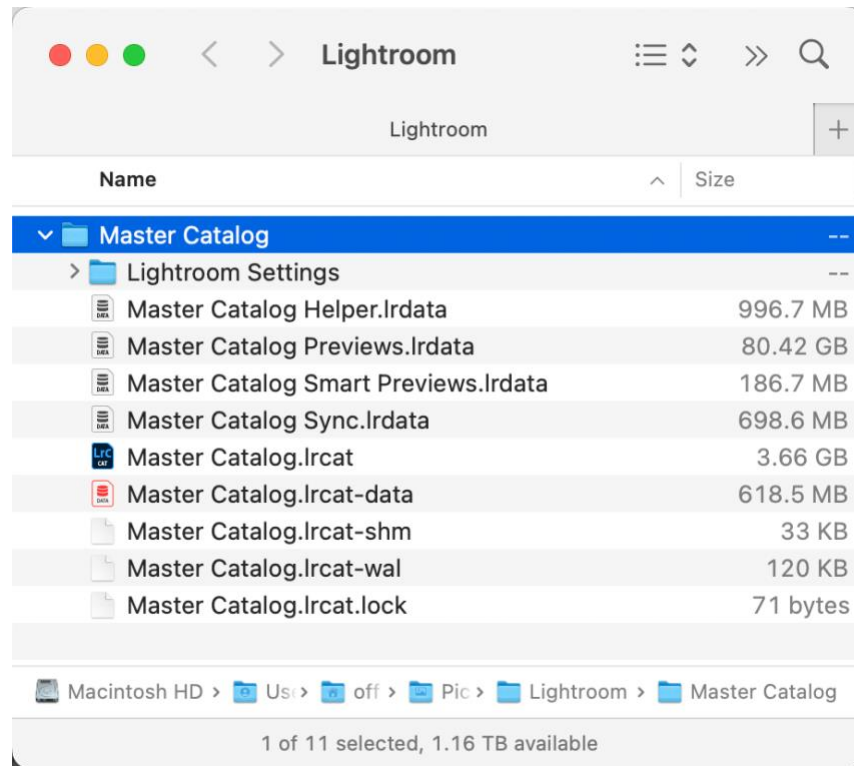
By setting that catalog as the Default Catalog (more on that in a little bit), the next time you launch Lightroom it will open that catalog. Once you're satisfied all is well, and you have a good backup (we'll cover the steps for that too) in place, you can remove the original catalog from its previous (unwanted) location.

Over time, it is easy for files to build up in the folder where your catalog is stored, and it can be overwhelming for a lot of people to sort through them all to separate the wheat from chaff. I have a good example of what this can look like, so I thought it would be helpful to others if we took a closer look. (Names and places have been changed to protect the innocent).

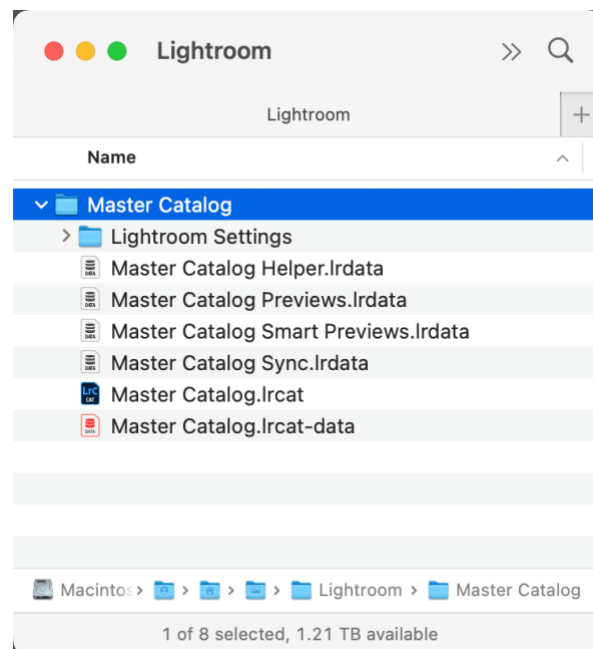
Under Normal Circumstances

Before we get into that, I wanted to share what files are typically found in the folder where your Lightroom Classic catalog is located. Now, this screen capture shows what it looks like when the catalog is open. Just click the Show button in Catalog Settings to see this on your system.

Safeguard Essential Lightroom Classic Files



Here's that same folder after Lightroom Classic has been shut down.



When Lightroom Classic is closed the .lock, -wal, and -shm files are removed under normal operation. However, if LrC crashed or the computer crashed, those files can be left behind, which can get in the way of opening the catalog again. If that ever happens to you, you can simply delete the .lock file and LrC should open normally.

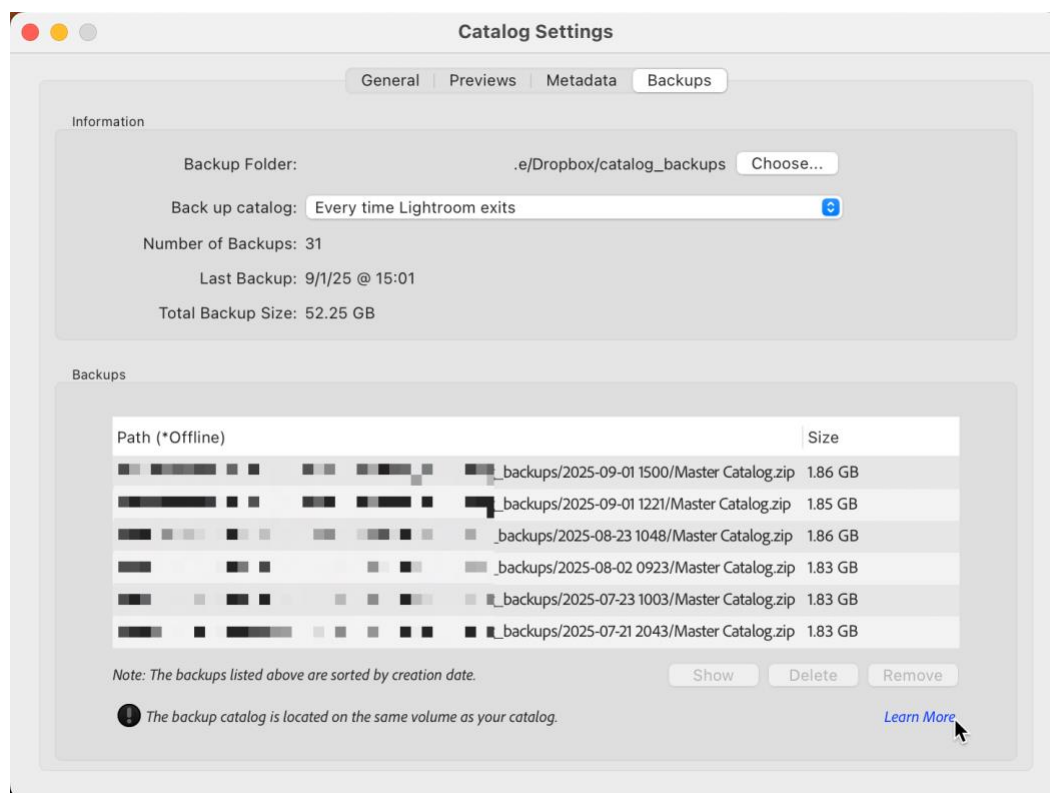
Safeguard Essential Lightroom Classic Files

The .lrcat file is your catalog, and the .lrdata files are preview caches that contain the previews used by Lightroom to represent your photos. If you've never created smart previews then you would only have one preview cache. The Helper.Lrdata serves as a cache for the Folder panel search. If you've synced your Lightroom Classic catalog to Lightroom cloud and you have not configured [a custom destination for photos downloaded from the cloud](#) then you might also see a Mobile Downloads.Lrdata file, which is where those photos are stored.

Of those files, only the catalog (.lrcat) and the .lrcat-data file are important enough to be backed up on a regular basis, so let's look at how to setup LrC to automatically back up those two files.

Catalog Backups

While LrC doesn't have a function to back up your photos it does have an automated mechanism for creating backup copies of the catalog file on a regular basis. If you go to (the relatively new tab) Catalog Settings > Backup, you can configure LrC to periodically create an exact copy of the catalog file on a schedule of your choosing. The next time you exit Lightroom on that schedule you will be prompted to run the catalog backup process (ideally, you'd choose a different drive than the one used for your working catalog).



Safeguard Essential Lightroom Classic Files

Each time this process runs an exact copy of your catalog (the .lrcat file) at that moment in time is created in the backup location, and then the backup copy is compressed into a zip file as a way to reduce disk space (and to keep people from opening a backup copy of the catalog by mistake).

Using this backup feature can help protect you against data loss through drive failure (if they are being saved to a different drive) or catalog corruption (which is rare, but can happen and is not always obvious at first), and I highly recommend using it, but even though the backup copies are now compressed, LrC will continue to keep creating them until the chosen destination drive is full. Each time the process runs a new (compressed) copy of the catalog is created and there it will remain until the user (you) removes them. This is easy to do, but I've encountered many people who have never given it a second thought and have every backup copy of the catalog ever created still sitting in that folder.

I periodically go to the folder where they are created using my file browser and delete all but the most recent few. If you think about it, should you ever need to restore a backup catalog you would choose the most recent one, right? But what if the data you were hoping to retrieve wasn't in the most recent catalog copy, wouldn't it be nice to have a few iterative versions on hand to go back through? Yes, this is more redundant redundancy, but I personally enjoy the peace of mind of having them around. The important part is that you need to be in control and not let automated tasks run unchecked. You may just have gigabytes of drive space waiting to be reclaimed.

This schedule setting used to be part of the General tab, but when Adobe added the dedicated Backups tab it also added some much-needed management functionality. First, if you notice right below the option for choosing where to save your backup it tells you how many backup copies are already in the selected folder for backup, when the last one was made, and how much space they are taking up. I normally stay on top of this, but I let them build up for a while for demonstration purposes, which is why I now have 31 backup copies taking up 52.25GB of space! You'll also see all catalogs in that selected folder sorted with the most recent up top, its location, name, and file size. Below that list are some buttons for managing those files.

Safeguard Essential Lightroom Classic Files

Back up catalog: Every time Lightroom exits

Number of Backups: 31
Last Backup: 9/1/25 @ 15:01
Total Backup Size: 52.25 GB

Backups

Path (*Offline)	Size
backups/2025-09-01 1500/Master Catalog.zip	1.86 GB
backups/2025-09-01 1221/Master Catalog.zip	1.85 GB
backups/2025-08-23 1048/Master Catalog.zip	1.86 GB
backups/2025-08-02 0923/Master Catalog.zip	1.83 GB
backups/2025-07-21 1003/Master Catalog.zip	1.83 GB
backups/2025-07-21 2043/Master Catalog.zip	1.83 GB

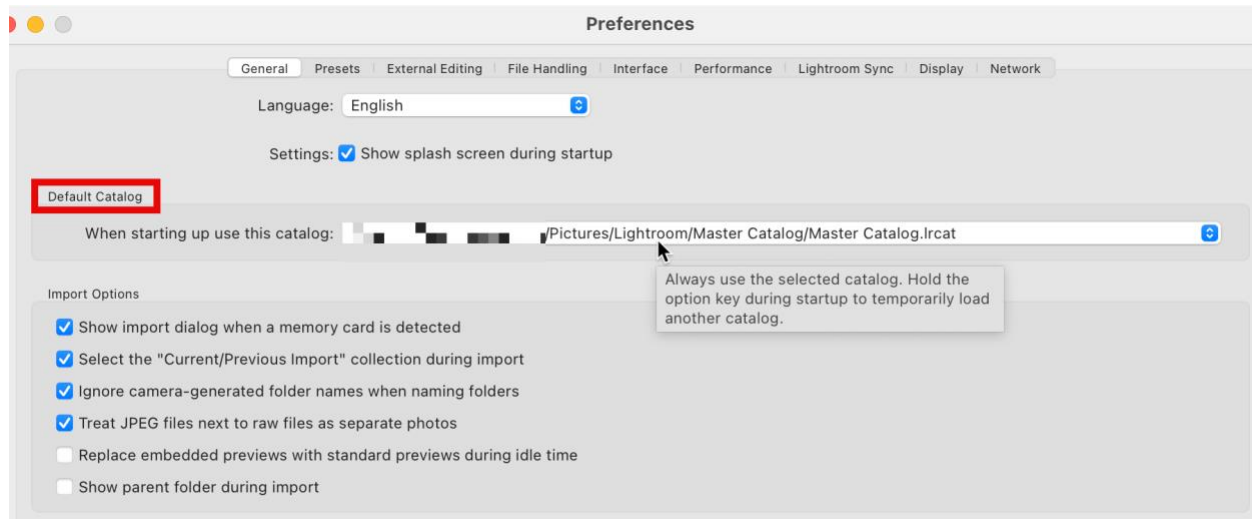
Note: The backups listed above are sorted by creation date.

Show Delete Remove

Important public service announcement, before you go deleting all your old backup copies make sure you know where your working catalog is located first (this is shown on that Catalog Settings panel we saw earlier) and that it is not somehow located among your backups. You'd be surprised how many people I've encountered who only discovered their catalog was among their backups after they deleted it by mistake.

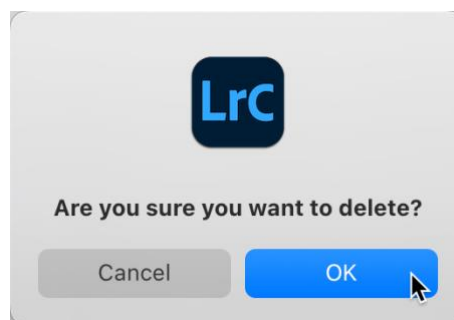
How could this happen? The Default Catalog setting found in Preferences > General is usually to blame. By default, it is set to Load most recent catalog, so all it takes is a curious user opening an old backup copy of a catalog, then closing LrC to set that old backup copy as the "most recent" and the next time that person launches LrC that backup copy opens. Please take a moment to change your Default Catalog preference to anything other than Load most recent, but my preference is to set it to the specific catalog I want to open each time.

Safeguard Essential Lightroom Classic Files



Wait, what if you happen to be one of the people who discovers their working catalog is located among the backup copies? First, I'm glad you caught it now. Second, my suggestion would be to move it out of the backups and into a permanent home, like in your Pictures folder. Refer back to the beginning of these notes to see the steps for moving your catalog to a new location.

Ok, assuming your catalog is not in your backups, let's move on to managing those old backup copies. Prior to this new tab being added we had to manually go to the folder where the backup copies were located and delete any old ones we no longer wanted. You can still do that, and the next time you launch LrC that list should update. However, you can now also choose to select and delete old backup copies from right within this tab. To delete an old backup, just select it in the list (you can select one, hold Shift, and select another further down the list to select more than one), and then click the Delete button. You will get prompted to make sure you do want to delete, and if so, click OK.



Selecting an old backup and clicking the Show button will open your file browser with that file selected. The Remove button is for rare situations where you may have an old backup that was removed manually outside of LrC but is still showing in the list or maybe is inaccessible (offline) but you know it no longer exists. Just know that clicking Remove will

Safeguard Essential Lightroom Classic Files

only remove it from this list and not delete it from the drive. I try to keep the most recent 3 or 4 backup copies on hand and delete anything older.

Bookmark this tutorial should you ever [need to restore from a backup copy of the catalog](#).

What Can Happen

Now, if you have not been as diligent as I have in keeping that folder under control over the years, you might end up with a situation that looks something like this (this is a screenshot of someone else's system from a few years ago when I was helping them get things under control).

Name	Date Modified	Size	Kind
▼ LRCC_Master_Catalog	Yesterday at 10:43 PM	256.49 GB	Folder
▶ Lightroom Settings	Jan 22, 2016 at 5:09 PM	40 KB	Folder
LRCC_Master_Catalog Previews.lrdata	Aug 13, 2018 at 7:50 PM	8.2 MB	Adobe...om Data
LRCC_Master_Catalog-2 Previews.lrdata	Nov 12, 2017 at 7:58 PM	48.98 GB	Adobe...om Data
LRCC_Master_Catalog-2 Smart Previews.lrdata	Nov 12, 2017 at 11:36 AM	443 KB	Adobe...om Data
LRCC_Master_Catalog-2-3.lrcat	Apr 12, 2018 at 1:04 AM	1.09 GB	Adobe...Library
LRCC_Master_Catalog-2-4 Helper.lrdata	Oct 19, 2019 at 10:05 PM	15.6 MB	Adobe...om Data
LRCC_Master_Catalog-2-4 Previews.lrdata	Yesterday at 10:47 PM	89.35 GB	Adobe...om Data
LRCC_Master_Catalog-2-4 Smart Previews.lrdata	Feb 26, 2019 at 5:27 PM	113.19 GB	Adobe...om Data
LRCC_Master_Catalog-2-4.lrcat	Yesterday at 10:03 PM	1.65 GB	Adobe...Library
LRCC_Master_Catalog-2-4.lrcat-wal	Yesterday at 10:44 PM	4.8 MB	Document
LRCC_Master_Catalog-2-4.lrcat.lock	Oct 19, 2019 at 10:05 PM	72 bytes	Document
LRCC_Master_Catalog-2-5-2 Previews.lrdata	Nov 28, 2017 at 7:57 AM	152 KB	Adobe...om Data
LRCC_Master_Catalog.lrcat	Aug 13, 2018 at 7:50 PM	2.18 GB	Adobe...Library
LRCC_Master_Catalog.lrcat-journal	Aug 13, 2018 at 7:50 PM	29 KB	Document
LRCC_Master_Catalog.lrcat.lock	Aug 13, 2018 at 7:50 PM	55 bytes	Document
Temporary Import Data-2.db	Aug 21, 2018 at 7:37 AM	4 KB	Document
Temporary Import Data-2.db-wal	Aug 21, 2018 at 7:39 AM	2.2 MB	Document
Temporary Import Data-3.db	Oct 5, 2018 at 5:30 PM	4 KB	Document
Temporary Import Data-3.db-wal	Oct 5, 2018 at 5:31 PM	206 KB	Document
Temporary Import Data-4.db	Oct 5, 2018 at 9:23 PM	4 KB	Document
Temporary Import Data-4.db-wal	Oct 5, 2018 at 9:23 PM	181 KB	Document
Temporary Import Data-5.db	Jul 31, 2019 at 10:03 PM	Zero bytes	Document
Temporary Import Data-5.db-wal	Jul 31, 2019 at 10:03 PM	Zero bytes	Document
Temporary Import Data-6.db	Aug 16, 2019 at 11:57 AM	4 KB	Document
Temporary Import Data-6.db-wal	Aug 16, 2019 at 11:58 AM	420 KB	Document
Temporary Import Data-7.db	Aug 31, 2019 at 5:04 PM	4 KB	Document
Temporary Import Data-7.db-wal	Aug 31, 2019 at 5:05 PM	305 KB	Document
Temporary Import Data-8.db	Sep 13, 2019 at 9:30 AM	Zero bytes	Document
Temporary Import Data-8.db-wal	Sep 13, 2019 at 9:31 AM	181 KB	Document
Temporary Import Data-9.db	Sep 19, 2019 at 8:47 PM	6.2 MB	Document
Temporary Import Data-9.db-wal	Sep 19, 2019 at 8:47 PM	6.4 MB	Document
Temporary Import Data-10.db	Sep 19, 2019 at 8:48 PM	4 KB	Document
Temporary Import Data-10.db-wal	Sep 19, 2019 at 8:48 PM	181 KB	Document
Temporary Import Data-11.db	Sep 20, 2019 at 9:19 PM	Zero bytes	Document
Temporary Import Data-11.db-wal	Sep 20, 2019 at 9:19 PM	Zero bytes	Document
Temporary Import Data.db	Jul 18, 2019 at 2:02 PM	4 KB	Document
Temporary Import Data.db-wal	Jul 18, 2019 at 2:03 PM	330 KB	Document

Now, not meaning any judgement here as we all have our own messes to clean up from time to time. And to be fair, no one should just start deleting files unless you are sure about

Safeguard Essential Lightroom Classic Files

what you are deleting, so it is easy to see how this kind of thing can build up. Let's try to sort out what is important to keep. I've highlighted the keepers in red.

Name	Date Modified	Size	Kind
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Lightroom Settings	Jan 22, 2016 at 5:09 PM	40 KB	Folder
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LRCC_Master_Catalog-2-4 Previews.lrdata	Yesterday at 10:47 PM	89.35 GB	Adobe...om Data
LRCC_Master_Catalog-2-4 Smart Previews.lrdata	Feb 26, 2019 at 5:27 PM	113.19 GB	Adobe...om Data
LRCC_Master_Catalog-2-4.lrcat	Yesterday at 10:03 PM	1.65 GB	Adobe...Library
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Temporary Import Data.db	Jul 18, 2019 at 2:02 PM	4 KB	Document
Temporary Import Data.db-wal	Jul 18, 2019 at 2:03 PM	330 KB	Document

By the presence of the .lock and -wal files we can tell that the Lightroom catalog in question was open when this screen capture was made. That also helped me to determine that was the keeper catalog. The second clue was the modified dates on that catalog file was recent compared to the much older dates on all the others.

So, here's what you'd want to do to clean up a similar situation.

1. Quit Lightroom Classic (make sure you have a good backup in place for good measure). Closing Lightroom will remove the .lock and -wal files automatically. We'd also want to see if that cleared out any of the temp files too.

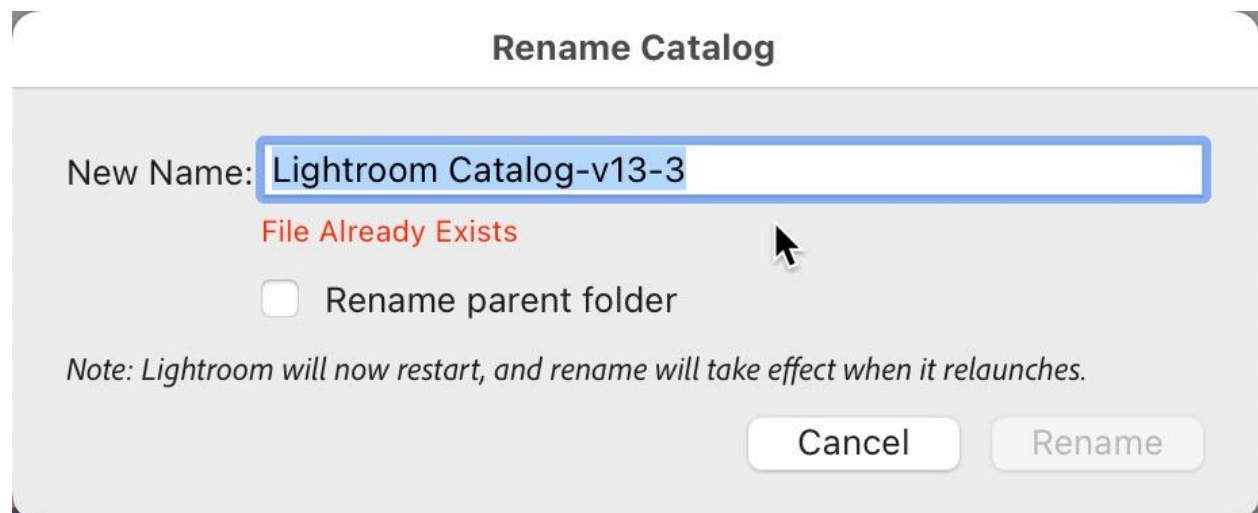
Safeguard Essential Lightroom Classic Files

2. Delete all of the other .lrcat (and associated .lrdata) files you no longer want. Based on the file names of the catalogs it looks as though those are older catalogs from earlier versions of Lightroom Classic where a copy was upgraded and the old one was left behind. This is the normal process when you upgrade a copy of the catalog, so it's a good bet that there are a lot of us with old unused catalog files just hanging around. Just make sure you are 100% sure about which catalog file is which before you delete (and if you're not sure you can move all those files to another folder until you are sure, then delete).
3. Delete all the files with the word "Temporary" in them. Those are intended to be removed under normal operations, but if there was a problem or a crash they can get left behind. Looking at the modified dates there aren't any very recent, so I think it is safe to nix them all.
4. (Optional) For good measure, you might consider renaming your catalog file to something more meaningful (we'll cover that shortly).

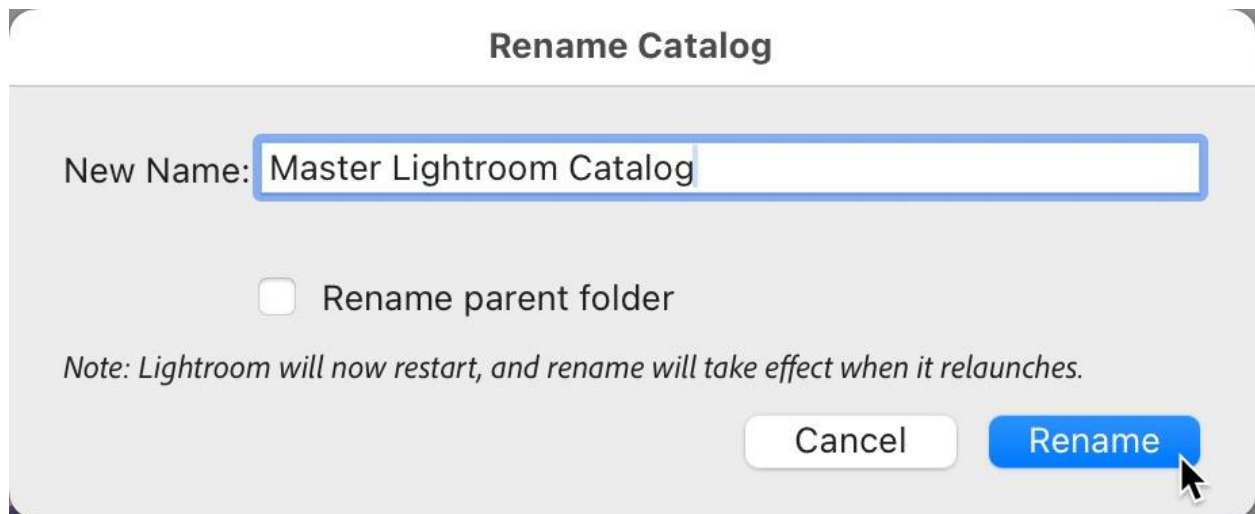
When all of that is done your Lightroom Classic catalog folder should be pared down to just the essential bits you need and nothing else. Hope that helps!

Renaming a Catalog

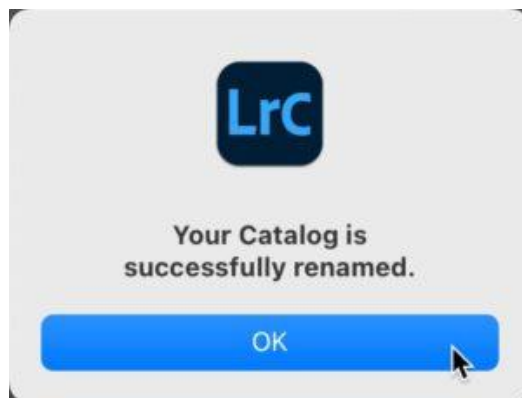
If you wish to rename your LrC catalog file (which is entirely optional and only for your benefit), head over to the File menu and look for the (newish) Rename Catalog option there. Clicking that will open the Rename Catalog dialog box, which will auto-populate with the current name of the catalog.



Enter in your new name and click the Rename button, which causes LrC to quit and restart with the new name. Optionally, you can check the box to rename the parent folder too.



Before relaunching it will confirm the catalog has been renamed, then click OK to have the program launch.



Thankfully, the process is also smart enough to update the preferences to use the renamed catalog if you have changed the Default Catalog setting (Preferences > General) to open the specific catalog instead of Most recent.

Exporting and Importing a Keyword List

I once got a question from someone who had exported a catalog to bring on a trip, and only later realized that the exported catalog did not contain all of the keywords from the master catalog. This is normal behavior. When you export a catalog from another catalog only data about the photos included in the catalog export will appear in the new catalog. I can understand the assumption that if you export a catalog, then the entire keyword list would go along for the ride, but it just doesn't work that way. However, once you know this, it is easy to resolve.

All you must do is export the keyword list itself and then import that into the other catalog. If you do a lot of keywording, and have invested some time in your keyword list, it is not a

Safeguard Essential Lightroom Classic Files

bad idea to export your keyword list out to save it just in case you need it for some reason down the road. Here's how it works:

Step One: In the Library module, go to Metadata > Export Keywords. This will open a dialog box for saving out the keyword list as a text file. There's also an option to export as a .csv file, and the only difference is that the .csv file would also contain settings for any keywords you configured to NOT be included on export, otherwise they are the same.

Step Two: Choose where you want that text file to be saved and give it a meaningful name.

Step Three: Click the Save button to complete the export process.

You now have your entire keyword list saved as a text file on your computer. Put a copy of that someplace for safekeeping. When you are ready, you can open up the other catalog that you want to have this keyword list in and we'll bring it in.

Step One: Open the other catalog that you want to have this keyword list.

Step Two: Go to Metadata > Import Keywords.

Step Three: When the dialog box opens, navigate to the location of your saved keyword list and select it.

Step Four: Click the Choose button to import the list into that catalog.

All that does is bring in the entire list of keywords into the catalog. You still need to go through the process of applying the keywords, but you'll be ready to go. When/if you ever import that catalog back into your master catalog, then all the applied keywords will be included in the process, and they will show up in the right location on your keyword list in the master catalog.

OK, one of the most important reasons to know how to safeguard all these files is when you want to transfer everything to a new computer. Please bookmark this detailed step-by-step [article on how to migrate all these important files](#) the next time you upgrade your system.

In Closing

I hope you've found this session and these notes helpful. Thanks for being a part of Photoshop World! Please don't hesitate to reach out to me with any questions. You can find me at any of the following locations:

Twitter: @Lightroomers

Facebook: @Sylvanworks

Instagram: @Sylvanworks

Web: Lightroomers.com or RobSylvan.com

I've also just updated my book, *Lightroom Classic for Dummies* if you want dig even deeper, which you can find anywhere books are sold.

