



Digital Image Storage And Backup - How Safe Are You?

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Hurricane, tornado, fire, theft. Sounds like the evening news, right? It may be something you think only happens to other people, but it can happen to you too. Ask all those folks from New Orleans after Katrina or Galveston after Ike. Ask someone in the Midwest after a tornado or California after a forest fire. Bad things beyond your control can unfortunately happen to you. Any one of these unfortunate events can not only cripple your ability take new pictures, they could also wipe out every image you have ever taken.

What Are You Doing To Protect Yourself?

As more of us photographers are using digital than ever before, more are creating and storing data. In the days of film, you sought out archival storage methods. Digital is no different. You still need a way to archive and protect your work.

First off, do not store your images solely on the hard drive of your computer. It is far too easy to have a crash destroy all your data and images. What you need is a system that offers you redundant backup and multiple locations to prevent data loss from a disaster.

Some folks might consider DVDs or an online network storage as an option. My thought is that DVDs do not hold enough data and the disks can quickly add up to a logistical nightmare. Online storage is a newer option but privacy and the ongoing cost makes me think that it is more of a future option.

I believe the best solution today is the use of multiple external portable hard drives.

My plan involves three portable 1 TB hard drives. I keep two units at home and one in a remote offsite location. I never keep all three together. It is keeping a copy in a remote location that is the vital element and vastly increases your data safety. Just use your favorite trio to name them and to tell them apart. Let's call them Red, White, and Blue.

Red always stays right next to my computer. When I take images, I always download to Red first. After downloading to Red, I get the White hard drive and copy the images to it. White is at my house but hidden. I figure this might help protect data if I am ever robbed. About once a month (or after a major trip), I'll take White to my remote location. For me that remote location is locked in my desk at work (but it could easily be a bank safe deposit box) and swap him out with Blue. After leaving White at work I'll bring home Blue and back up my images to that drive. About a month later, I swap out White and Blue again.

My images are now stored on three drives in two locations. If we have a disaster at one location, I have my images stored at another (hopefully) safe location.

This plan is a far more secure method to store your images than just your computer hard drive or your home. It gives you multiple copies to help avoid a single point of failure. It is also easy to grab. Need to evacuate because of a hurricane? A portable HD is about the size of a paperback and very easy to grab and go.

Note that by using three 1 TB drives I am still only storing 1 TB of data, since they are copies of each other. Also note the price of storage drops by the month and that the size of digital files get bigger with every new camera model. Buy the biggest drive you can afford (I think the 1 TB are about the sweet spot of price). And yes, buying three decent drives is likely to set you back around \$300, but that is the price of digital. The "film" may be free, but the storage will cost. While that may sound like a lot now, it will sound cheap if you lose all your images.

In the Field

Being on a trip is no reason to get sloppy. I keep at least two copies of my images always (and usually three). When I travel I carry my laptop and two portable HD units. These are the small pocket sized ones that run everything off USB (no power cord needed). These units also run about \$99 for 500GB or so at this writing.

When I am in the field I back up the images to my laptop, then copy to both HD units. This gives me three copies in the field. One HD unit stays with the laptop and the other stays in my camera bag. I always keep one of the HD units with me, and not all three together, just in case my laptop bag gets stolen from my SUV or motel.

This helps keep my data safe and well protected both in the field and at home. That protection is piece of mind.

So make a plan and start a consistent process now to store, back up, and set up a remote location to protect your data. Start today! One day you may be glad you did.

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Darren Huski is a landscape photographer from Fort Worth, Texas. He photographs the far reaches of the Lone Star State and throughout the American West and Midwest. He works with a 4x5 view camera and a modern digital SLR. His work and travels can be seen at www.WildernessPhotographer.net.

Darren also maintains the [Wilderness Photography Blog](#), where he documents his travels throughout the West and Midwest with both pictures and words.



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