

The best cloud photo management solution

Google Photos

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While Apple's iCloud Photos is really well-done and built right into macOS and iOS, I prefer Google Photos for my photo management solution. It allows me to keep my photos organized in the Finder, but gives me the flexibility of *also* having everything in a powerful cloud service.

While the free version does include slight compression, I don't mind this since these aren't the only copies of my images. Google's iOS and web apps offer some fun extras like turning photos into GIFs and creating "stories" around specific events.

In short, Google Photos offers the best of both worlds: local organization plus a great cross-platform viewing experience.

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History

This is a subject that I'm probably known for when people think about my writing. In fact, if you Google my name, you'll usually find articles I've written about photo management. I even wrote a [book](#) about the topic. So, it's no surprise that I'm passionate about photo management and the tools around it.

My original darling was [Everpix](#), but it shut down a few years back. I moved onto [Loom](#), but it was bought by Dropbox and shut down (eventually rebranded as [Carousel](#)). [PictureLife](#) is a popular option, but it was purchased by [StreamNation](#) earlier this year. It remains to be seen as to what happens with the product going forward.

At this point, I was so fed up with my solutions going away or being sold that I just stuck with the [Unbound](#) apps for viewing my photos, which are all stored in Dropbox.

All the while, Apple had no solution outside of shared Photo Streams. There was no way to manage your entire library from iOS or a secondary Mac. Updates to iOS 8 (in late 2014) and macOS Yosemite (early in 2015) brought a new solution from Apple called *iCloud Photos* that aimed to sync your entire library over iCloud.

Apple wasn't the only company to make moves in 2014, though. The original online photo storage king — Flickr — released version 4.0 to go along with its free terabyte of storage a few months ago. Google also announced its new Photos product at [Google I/O in May](#), which includes *free unlimited storage* with a slight compression applied to photos.

We are finally at a place where we have four major technology companies who have fully developed their photo products. Now we aren't having to rely on small startups that we hope won't go out of business in a few months. The question we aim to answer is which product offers *the best photo management solution?*

What do we want?

The modern problem of photo management stems from the fact that we are taking *a lot of* pictures. We have incredible cameras in our pocket that are usually connected to the internet. While previous generations took pictures of events and made printed albums (Christmas, Birthdays, etc), the current generation is taking numerous photos every day. Part of the problem is that people just generally have no idea what to do with all these photos.

A good photo management solution should be able to sort through a large library and make it easy to discover the hidden gems. It should be simple to use, cheap, and trustworthy with our most precious photos.

Criteria

Easy uploading

Uploading photos to a photo management solution should be automatic and easy. It shouldn't have to be done manually. While it should typically only be done on Wi-Fi, it's also nice to have the option of uploading over cellular data. I'm also a fan of services that can clear the local photo storage in order to free up space. 16 GB iPhones come with about 13 GB of free space, so getting this media off your local storage is imperative to keep things running smoothly.

Easy discovery and sharing

As I mentioned earlier, we are taking a lot photos and videos, so discovery is extremely important. Everpix offered a neat featured called Flashback that worked similar to [TimeHop](#) where it found photos taken on the current date in prior years. A great solution will assist in similar ways to help rediscover old memories. Native share sheets on iOS is also extremely important as it makes sharing to other apps a breeze.

Unified library

I know that not everyone is married or has someone they want to share an entire library with, but I think it's a key feature of a modern platform. My wife and I both have laptops and iOS devices, and we want to be able to have *one library to rule them all* without needing separate accounts or separate storage options.

Competitive pricing

The difference between cloud photos and cloud music storage is that a lot of the music files are the same, whereas every photo is different. If a thousand people have the same song in their library, a company can only store one copy. This makes it costly to store photos since every file is unique. Before Everpix shut down, it was facing a \$35,000 Amazon S3 bill for storage.

Here at *The Sweet Setup*, we believe in developers and companies making a fair living. With that being said, we want *competitive pricing*. We don't mind paying, but we want the pricing to be comparable to other products on the market.

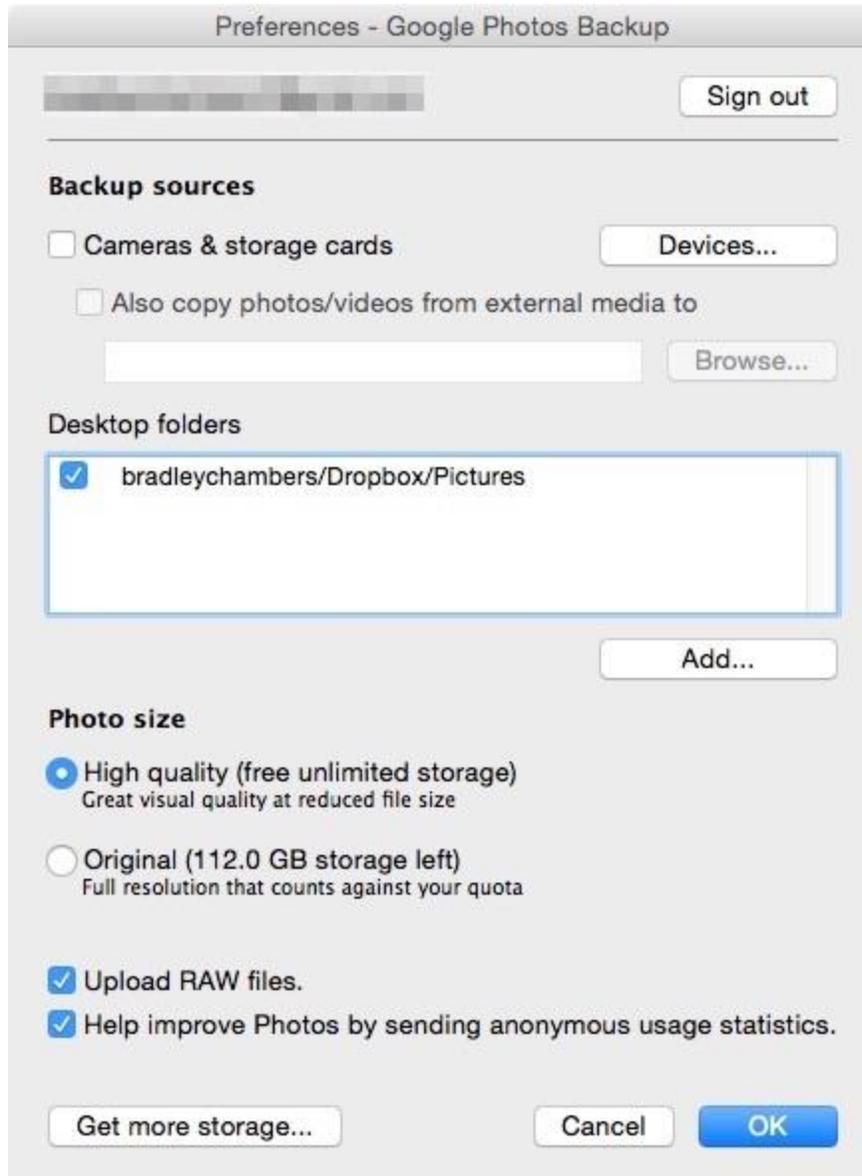
Rock solid syncing

We are long past the days of people having a single device. We want our media to be on whatever device we are using and wherever we are using it. A great solution shouldn't require a user to toggle things on and off to get it to work. It should just work.

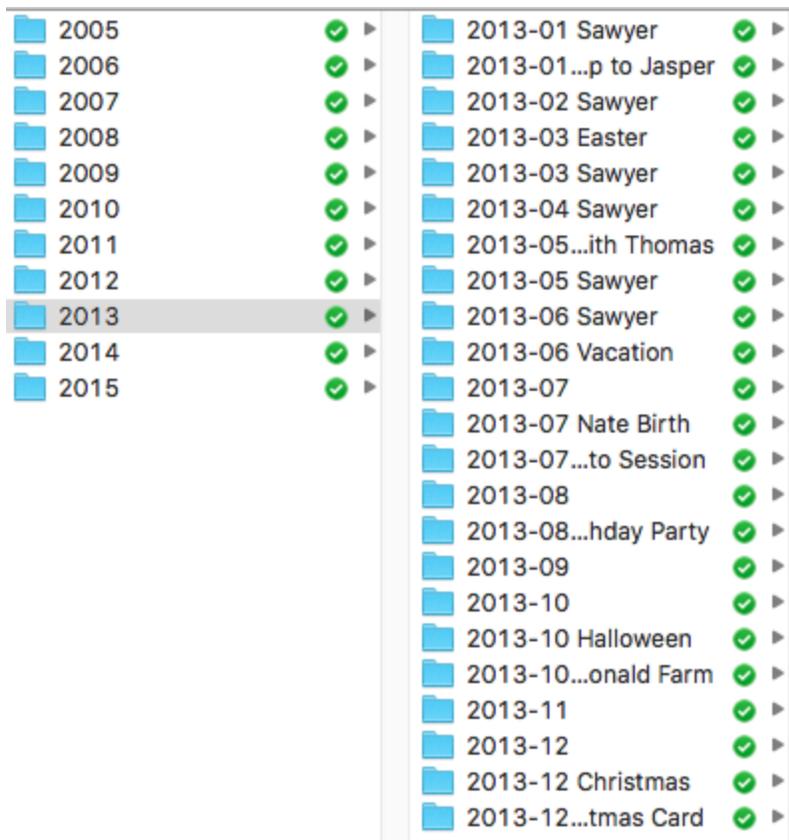
Our favorite photo management solution is Google Photos

Google Photos is the newest entry into the photo management game. While a lot of people love iCloud Photos due to the seamless integration with iOS and macOS, Google Photos offers some compelling features that make it my photo management solution of choice. It really knocks all of our criteria out of the park, and if you choose the compressed file plan, it's free!

Uploading is dead simple. You can do automatic uploads on iOS, or you can use the Mac app to watch a folder (or set of folders) to upload. This lets me keep my photos on my local Mac the way I want them; Google Photos does its own sorting and organization separate from my folder system.



I keep local copies of all my photos organized in folders (example: *2017* folder with a *2017-02* folder inside of it), and I want to keep that long term.



While the initial upload isn't as fast as I would have hoped, subsequent uploads have been extremely fast. I'm personally using the Mac app to upload because I take a lot of random photos (grocery items, etc.) that I don't want to end up in Google Photos. I like having the ability to cull through my camera roll before any uploads happen.

Discovery on Google Photos is downright incredible. Go to the website or open the iOS app and search for water and you'll find all of your photos that are at the pool, beach, lake, etc. Search for snow, and you'll find all your photos in the snow.

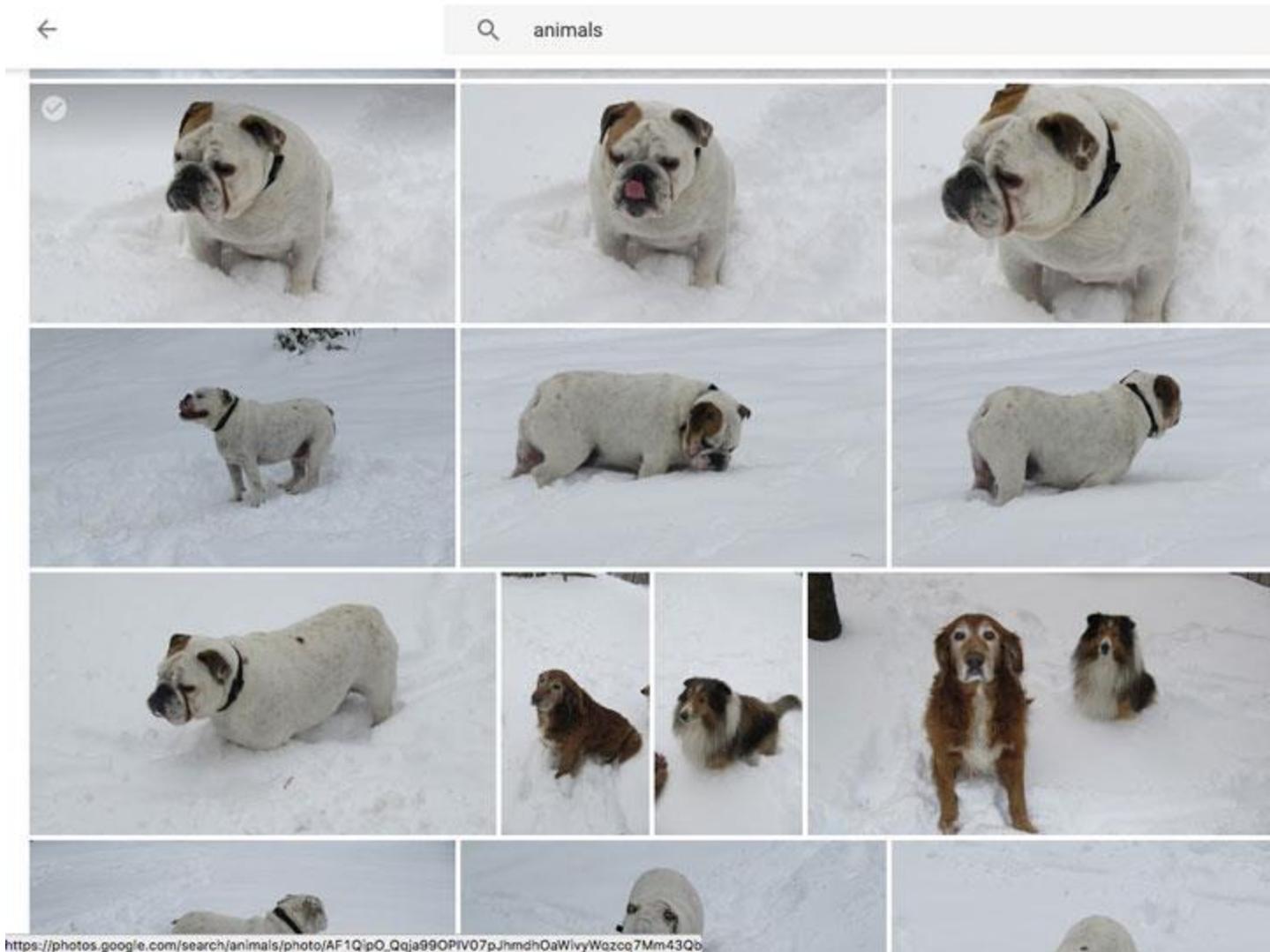


🔍 elephant

✔ Feb 5, 2013



In the image above, we searched for “elephant,” and these are the results.



In this example, we searched for “animals.”

It can automatically group places and faces as well. I’ve found Google’s face scanning to be the best of all the solutions I’ve tried. It syncs to all your other apps, and it’s really accurate. I have photos of my kids at various ages, and it somehow was able to group them together even as they aged. It recognized that my 6-year old is the same person as a photo of him when he was 2.

Sharing is also easy. You can share multiple photos or even an entire day right from the iOS apps. If you are concerned about privacy and sharing, you might want to read this [article](#) on URL security in Google Photos.

So why is that public URL more secure than it looks? The short answer is that the URL is working as a password. Photos URLs are typically around 40 characters long, so if you wanted to scan all the possible combinations, you'd have to work through 10^{70} different combinations to get the right one, a problem on an astronomical scale. "There are enough combinations that it's considered unguessable," says Aravind Krishnaswamy, an engineering lead on Google Photos. "It's much harder to guess than your password." Because web traffic for Photos is encrypted with SSL, it's also kept secret from anyone on the network who might be listening in.

Google has two pricing options for its photo solution: free with unlimited storage, or the normal Google Drive pricing (\$1.99/mo or \$19.99/year for 100 GB, \$9.99/mo or \$99/year for TB, etc). The free solution is recommend for phones or point-and-shoot cameras that are 16 megapixels or less. The free solution does apply a slight compression to your media in order to save storage space.

[The compression](#) appears to be incredible. Since I keep local copies on my Mac — I recommend that you keep at least one local copy that is backed up to [Backblaze](#) — I don't mind the compression, as it allows me to use the free version. It's important to note that Google Photos — on both plans — has full support for Apple's Live Photos. Upload a Live Photo, and the animation will be retained if viewed later via their iOS app.

I'd need the \$9.99/month plan if I wanted to store at full resolution. It's important to note that if you change your mind later and want full resolution, you have to re-upload your entire library.

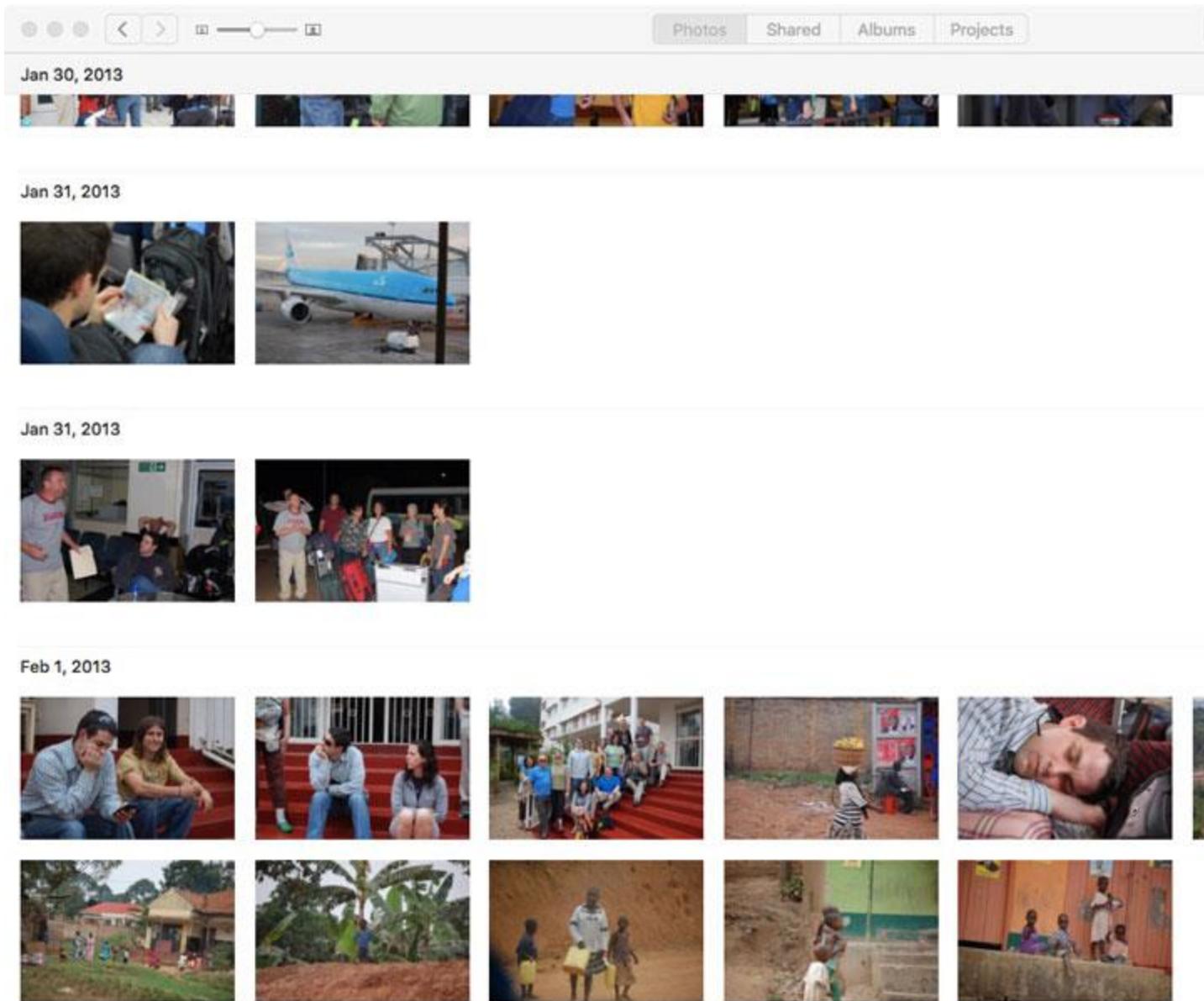
There has been [some concern](#) relating to the license language, though. Google uses a single license across all of their products, but you'll have to make that decision for yourself. I already use Google for tons of other services, so Photos is a natural addition for me. It doesn't worry me.

In the fall of 2016, Google launched an add-on to Google Photos called [PhotoScan](#) that is aimed at helping you digitize your old photos from "pre-digital". While it's not as good as actually scanning them individually on a high-quality scanner, I did spend a few hours digitizing my old albums. Pretty good is better than nothing, considering that was what I was doing about those albums before. Our friends at [MacStories](#) have a more detailed look. This is another example of how Google is letting up on the lead with cloud photo management.

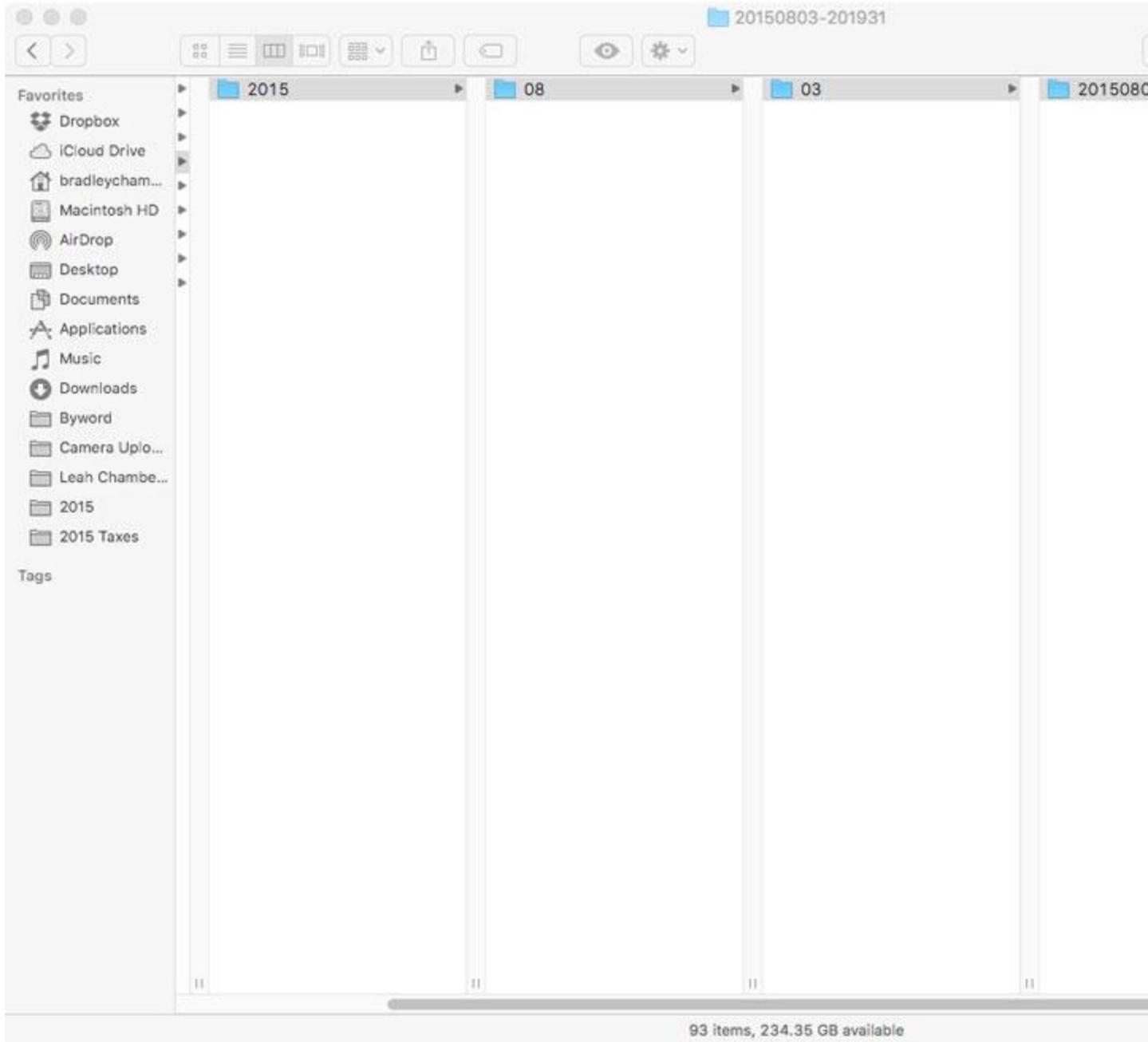
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Runner up: iCloud Photos

Photos.app has a lot to offer for Apple customers. The first is that it's built into macOS and iOS, so there isn't an app to download or a website to login to. When configured, taking a photo on one device means it is accessible on all your other devices. You import photos on your Mac, and they appear on your iPhone. You edit photos on your iPad, and those edits appear everywhere. *There is a lot to like here.* Apple has done what a lot of companies wouldn't do: burn an application to the ground and rebuild it. Photos.app is meant to be less of a Photo editing app, but more of a single place to keep all of your photos without having to manage storage locally. Do you have a 16 GB iPhone? You can still view 500 GB of photos. Do you have a 256 GB MacBook Air, but your library grows to 300 GB? Photos.app on the Mac can remove local copies and keep them in iCloud. Photos.app is a single place for all of your library on iOS and Mac macOS.



My question is will Photos.app and iCloud Photos scale for the next 20 years? Just as some people are fanatics about keeping their documents in plain text, I am a fanatic about being able to easily control my photos in a traditional file interface. I don't want them sucked into a database with its own organizational system.



In that regard, Photos.app on the Mac is no better than iPhoto that preceded it. Will Photos.app and iCloud Photos even be developed that long? I know it might sound crazy to be thinking of file formats in 20 years, but I am tired of changing programs and systems every few years. I know I can export files out of Photos.app, and I know that I can right-click on the database file and view its contents, but I'm still not sold that I want my photos to live inside of this long term. My system right now is extremely portable. If I decide I want to try an Android phone, my system works. If I decide to get a Chromebook for home use, my system still works.

One issue that I think iCloud Photos has that affects a lot of its users is there is no way for two people to have a single library. With Google Photos, my wife and I can both use the app using my Google Login. On iOS, this isn't possible because the data is tied to your iCloud account. We use separate accounts since we want to keep our contacts and calendars separate. This seems like a feature that Family Sharing will solve in the future, but there has been no word from Apple on this. One person has to be the "master" library holder, and the other users will only be able to see things that are specifically shared.

Another small issue I had with iPhoto and now Photos.app is that If I need to upload photos to a website (for printing, etc), I have to export it out first. Keeping my files in plain folders and allowing Google to upload them provides me with the best of both worlds.

Another complaint I have with iCloud Photos Library is that the Faces data is stored on the device only. This means I have to tag people on *all* of my devices. If I get an iPhone replaced under warranty, I have to do it over again. While I appreciate Apple's commitment to privacy, there has to be a way to do this securely.

iCloud's pricing is comparable to other companies. You get 5 GB for free, 50 GB for \$.99/month, 200 GB for \$2.99/month, 1 TB for \$9.99/month. This isn't just for photos, though. This storage bucket has to encompass your iOS backups and other data that you sync.

Amazon Photos

Amazon Prime members might want to take a look at Amazon Photos.

You get unlimited photo storage included with your \$99 Prime membership, and you can add storage for videos for only \$60/year.

Amazon has a Mac app that works similar to Dropbox, it scans faces, and has a built in [Families feature](#).

In practice, it just wasn't as good as Google nor as integrated as iCloud Photo library. The faces scanning mixed up my kids, where Google Photos was able to match my kids even as they got older throughout years of imaged.

You can download the Prime Photos app for free on [The App Store](#).

Flickr

Flickr has been around for a *long* time. I still remember using it before Yahoo purchased it. It suffered years without steady enhancements, but Marissa Mayer's Yahoo seems to really care about it. The iPhone app is really well done (with automatic upload support), and the service offers a terabyte of storage for free.

Flickr has a great Mac uploader that can watch a folder similar to Google Photos as well, if you pay for [Flickr's \\$5.99/mo Pro plan](#). My only complaint with the Mac uploader is that it doesn't upload videos. It does create "sets" based on your folder structure, though.

It's a really great service, and it's matured into a really nice solution. However, it doesn't really do anything better than Google Photos. Although it's part a social network, all of your uploads from their Mac and iOS apps are private by default.

You can download Flickr for free on [The App Store](#).

Dropbox

While Dropbox is at the heart of my photo management solution for storage, it's not my primary system for viewing or interacting with my images. My pictures folder is in Dropbox because I have the free space in my premium account, and it's another way to have additional copies backed up.

Dropbox's photo features are really weak. They used to have a dedicated app call Carousel, but they shut it down a few years ago. While it has a tab showing you all your photos, that is about it as far as features go. There is no faces features. There is no fancy photo search. You'd really have to rely on something like [Unbound](#) to make it feasible. Dropbox's focus seems to be on business plans, so I wouldn't expect this to change any time soon.

Dropbox is less expensive than iCloud, but similar to Google on the paid plan, minus the compression issue.

You can download Dropbox for free on [The App Store](#).

Conclusion

The five major services we like are all backed by companies that have been around for years, so we don't feel like they are going away. I feel like anyone that chooses Google Photos, iCloud Photos,

Amazon, Flickr, or Dropbox for photo management is making a great decision. Storing them *somewhere* is better than just keeping only local copies on your Mac or iPhone. After spending tons of time with each service over the past few months, Google Photos is where I settled and it's where I'll stay for the foreseeable future.