

Lost Your Digital Photos? Stay Calm

New software can recover images from your camera's memory card. **BY LARRY ARMSTRONG**

YOU'VE MADE IT through the holidays, and you have a digital camera full of pictures to prove it. Or so you think. When you finally start to transfer them to your computer to print out the highlights, your camera responds with an error message. Or it simply acts as if there's nothing on the memory card.

It's every shutterbug's nightmare, discovering that the priceless Kodak moment is nothing more than a fleeting memory. Maybe you accidentally pressed "delete all" when you meant to erase a single dud. Or you reformatted the card, erasing all the images and index data, thinking that you'd already saved the snapshots of last summer's vacation to your computer. Maybe you corrupted the memory card by shooting with low batteries, or by ejecting a card while the camera was still saving an image to it, or by continuing to shoot and delete without ever reformatting the card.

I've been looking at some of the ways to recover those seemingly lost pictures. Sometimes it's as easy as hooking up a \$20 card reader to your computer and using it to transfer your pictures instead of copying them directly from the camera itself. If that doesn't work, you can buy software that will recover the images from a damaged or reformatted card or even snapshots you've deleted. (Some Sony, Olympus, and Fujifilm cameras permanently erase images when the card is reformatted, so the software can't recover those.)

You can also send your card to a lab that specializes in extracting images from damaged cards, such as FlashFixers (flashfixers.com) or LC Technology (lc-tech.com.) The price ranges from \$50



to \$200, depending on the size of the card, and you don't pay if they can't retrieve your pictures.

Both those companies also sell image-recovery software, or you can buy it directly from card manufacturers such as Lexar and SanDisk. Lexar's Image Rescue (lexar.com) is \$29.95; SanDisk's RescuePRO (sandisk.com), made by LC Technology, is \$40. Both will work with any brand of card. Lexar and SanDisk include the software with their professional or high-speed cards that cost 10% to 20% more than standard cards. Other programs include MediaRecover (mediarecover.com) for \$29.95 and PhotoRescue from DataRescue (datarescue.com) for \$29.

Before you purchase any software, download and try out the free trial version. If the demo recovers an image,

chances are the software you buy will work, too. The difference? In most cases, the trial version will give you thumbnails of your pictures, watermark the images with text, or recover only a limited number of images.

SEND IN THE CARD

TWO OF THE PROGRAMS are pretty much risk free. LC Technology will refund the \$39.95 price of its Photorecovery software if the free demo works and the paid version doesn't. If FlashFixer's ImageRecall can't save your pictures, you can send your memory card to the company, which will try to find them using more advanced techniques. It credits the \$39.95 you paid for the software toward its lab fees.

I loaded three of the programs—RescuePRO, Image Rescue, and ImageRecall—onto my computer and used them to recover my pictures from a CompactFlash card. I was unable to deliberately damage the card, but I "lost" individual images by opening the card access door on my camera while it was still writing the image and index data to the card. Neither the camera nor my computer could see the pictures, but all three programs could find them and write them to the computer's hard drive. I also reformatted the card: The software still found pictures, including a hundred or so that I'd deleted months ago.

The best way to ensure that you actually get all the pictures in your camera is to take a few precautions. Don't yank out the card when the camera is on, and don't shut off the camera immediately after taking a picture. Always reformat the card after you've transferred the pictures to your computer, and reformat it in the camera, not on the computer. If you accidentally run a card through the washing machine, let it dry for a few days; chances are it will still work. If you have more than one digital camera, don't swap cards between them without reformatting.

So you have no need to despair. Even if your card develops a glitch, you should be able to save your snapshots—and, with them, the ephemeral memories of that special holiday or vacation. ■