Google is ending the integration between Drive and Photos

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Google Drive is a place to store all your files, and Google Photos is a place to store all your photos. On the surface, having these two Google services integrate somewhat makes sense, and today, all your Google Photos end up in Drive and all your Drive photos end up in Google Photos. But this week Google has announced that this integration will be ending soon, citing user feedback that the integration is "confusing." Starting in July, the two services will be separate with photos in one service no longer moving over to the other.

Google Drive's "Backup and Sync" desktop app is Google's equivalent of Dropbox. Install it to your desktop computer, and it will download all your Drive files into a folder and keep that folder synced and up to date. Usually this involved a ton of office files generated by Google Docs and the like, and the Google Photos integration meant that, by default, Drive also tried to download your entire photo collection to every computer you own. While it's hard to fill up a hard drive with office files, the Google Photos folder could be tens or even hundreds of gigabytes depending on how much of a shutterbug you are.

Enlarge / The pop-up notification from the Drive desktop app.
Some users might want to have a local backup of all their photos on all their computers, but others might want to treat Google Photos as just an archival cloud storage service, allowing it to store all their photos in the cloud so they don’t have to worry about them. Previously, users that installed Drive to suddenly find their computer filling up with every photo they’ve ever taken might have been tempted to open a file manager, click on the Google Drive “Photos” folder, and hit “Delete.” That was a terrible idea, though. Thanks to the Drive and Photos integration, deleting the Drive “Photos” folder would also wipe out your entire photo collection in Google Photos.

At no point was this connection clearly communicated to users, and Google seems to agree that this is a major problem. The new announcement blog post puts it plainly: “This change is designed to help prevent accidental deletion of items across products.”

Google has a support page up detailing how the transition will work. The Drive and Photos integration will be turned off July 10, at which point the Drive “Google Photos” folder will no longer represent your Google Photos collection. Your files will be left alone, but uploads, changes, and file deletions will stop being synced across the two services.

The Google Drive “Backup and Sync” app for Windows and Mac will still be able to upload to both Google Drive and Google Photos, but the ability to have a synced local copy of your Google Photos will be going away. Google still offers a full photo download via Google Takeout, but that is a giant brick of all your photos, not a syncing service.

On the mobile side of things, this change also means the Google Photos app will no longer automatically sync your smartphone pictures to Drive, where they can be automatically downloaded to your computer. If you’re on Android and need to have your smartphone photos downloaded to a computer automatically, for now the third-party app “AutoSync for Google Drive” is a good solution. There’s also always Dropbox.

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