Impostor Files: How to find every file in a core folder that core never shipped

Joomla 5.4.7 ships exactly one file directly in /administrator/. Impostor Files lists everything else sitting in folders the CMS itself owns.

Phil E. Taylor | 28 August 2026

Introducing a new mySites.guru audit feature: Impostor Files Check

Impostor Files is a new check in the mySites.guru audit, listed as *Check Core Folders For Impostor Files*.

It reports every file sitting in a folder the CMS itself owns that the CMS never shipped. Only the folders core is responsible for, rather than every non-core file on your site.

A backdoor that survives is one that looks like it belongs. Nobody plants `hacked.php` in the web root any more. They plant `session.php` among the libraries, or a second `index.php` in a folder that already holds forty of them, nineteen levels down in a directory nobody has opened since the site was built.

Grep is no help, because the file looks like everything around it, and a signature scan only helps once somebody has seen that dropper before.

There is one thing the attacker cannot fake. Every release of Joomla and WordPress ships a known, fixed set of files. Joomla 5.4.7 puts exactly one file directly in `/administrator/`, and that file is `index.php`. Anything else sitting there arrived some other way, and that is the whole check.

The old check returns 13,653 files on a median site

We already had a check for this, sort of. *Check Files That Are Not Core Files* reports every file anywhere on your site that is not part of the CMS distribution, using the same

hashing pass the rest of the audit runs on. It works exactly as designed, and almost nobody can use it.

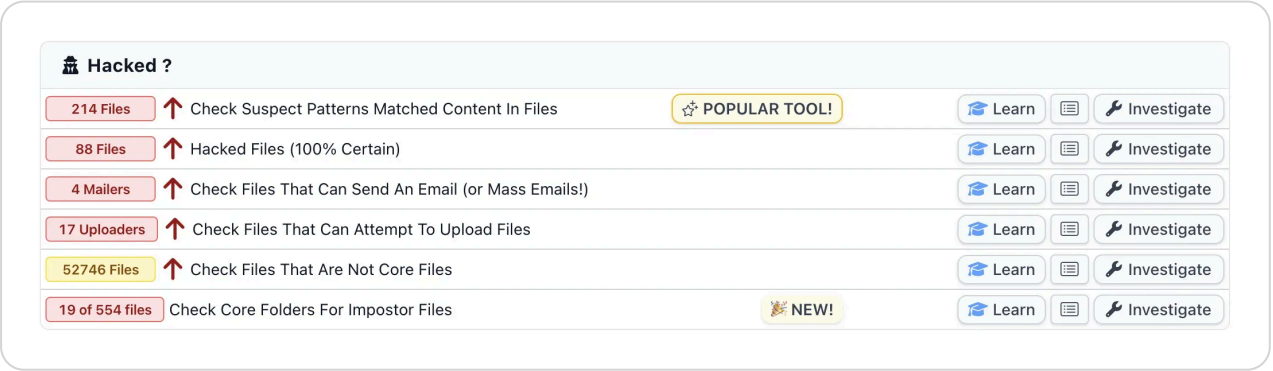
On 2026-08-27 we took the most recent completed audit of every site with a snapshot in the last thirty days and looked at what that check returns.

Result	Sites
More than 1,000 non-core files	99.8%
More than 10,000 non-core files	68.3%
More than 50,000 non-core files	5.9%

The median site returns **13,653** files. The mean is higher still at 21,095, because the tail runs a long way: the ninety-ninth percentile is 135,192 and one site returns over 1.5 million.

Nothing is broken. Every extension, plugin, theme and template you install adds files, and none of them are core files, so the count grows with ordinary use. The problem is that the answer looks identical on a clean site and on a hacked one. A list of thirteen thousand filenames is a haystack, and a webshell in `/wp-includes/` sits somewhere in the middle of it looking like everything else.

Here are both checks on the same site, one row above the other:



The site in that screenshot is a deliberately hacked test install of Phil's, so treat the numbers as a demonstration rather than a typical result. The shape is the point. The old

check hands you **52,746 rows** to read. The new one hands you 554, and tells you that 19 of them are executables.

Joomla ships one file in /administrator/, and it is index.php

Core is a tightly specified layout, and the numbers show how tight.

Joomla 5.4.7 ships **10,095 files across 2,877 folders**. Of those folders, **1,589 hold exactly one file**, and 2,259 of them hold three or fewer. WordPress 6.8.2 ships 3,230 files across 325 folders. Every other release is just as fixed: Joomla 4.4.13 is 9,576 files, Joomla 3.9.23 is 6,410, Joomla 6.1.3 is 9,916 across 2,900 folders.

The one-file rule is not a quirk of a single release, either. Joomla 6.1.3, the current version, also ships exactly one file directly in `/administrator/`, and it is still `index.php`.

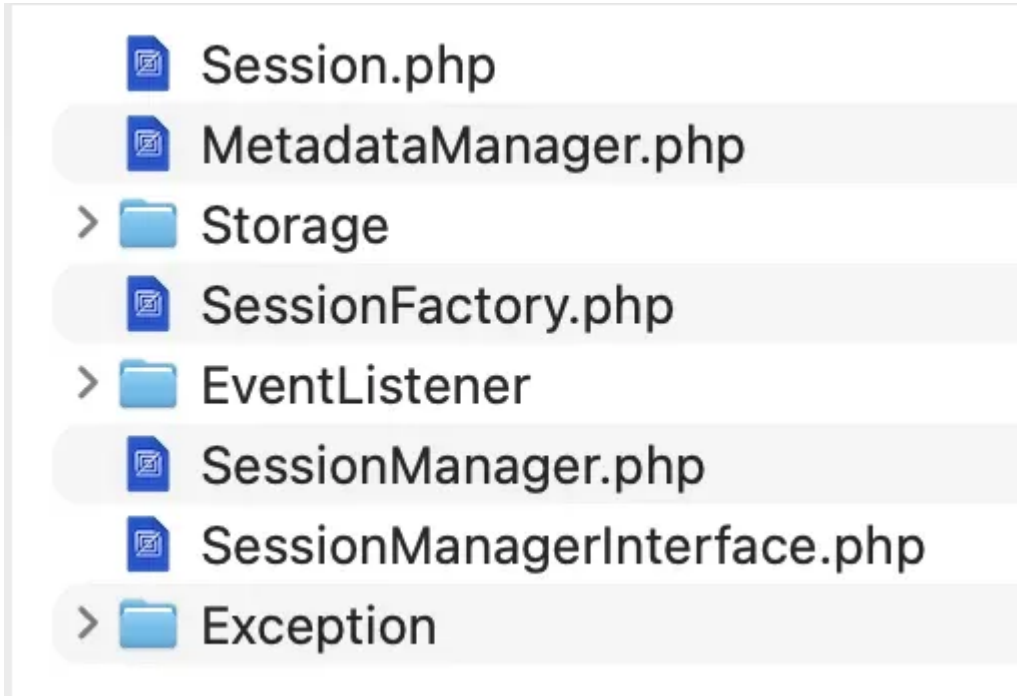
More than half of Joomla's core folders contain a single file. That is the whole idea behind the check. If a folder is meant to hold one file and it holds two, the second one is worth thirty seconds of your attention, and there is no version of "normal use" that put it there.

So Impostor Files asks a much narrower question than the old check. A file qualifies when its **folder** appears in the official release and the **file** does not. `/administrator/` is a core folder, so a second file in it is reported. `/administrator/components/com_yourextension/` is not a core folder, so nothing in it is reported and your extensions stay out of the way.

Spot the impostor in /libraries/src/Session/

`/administrator/` is the easy example, because one file is small enough to hold in your head. The check works identically nineteen levels down, in the folders where you have no idea what is supposed to be there.

So here is a game. Below is `/libraries/src/Session/` on a Joomla 5 site. Eight entries. Joomla ships seven of them.



Take thirty seconds. Every name is plausible, the file sizes are unremarkable, and every PHP file in that folder shares one modification time, so sorting by date tells you nothing at all.

▼ Show me the answer

It is `SessionManagerInterface.php`.

Joomla 5.4.7 ships `Session.php`, `MetadataManager.php`, `SessionFactory.php` and `SessionManager.php` into that folder, plus the `Storage`, `EventListener` and `Exception` subfolders. It ships no interface beside `SessionManager.php`, and it never has. `SessionManagerInterface.php` appears in no Joomla manifest, not in 5.4.7 and not in the current 6.1.3.

Which is a horrible thing to have to know. A PHP codebase full of `SomethingInterface.php` files makes one more look like housekeeping, and this one is 1.7 KB, exactly the size of the real `SessionManager.php` sitting directly above it, with the same modification time as every other file in the folder. There is nothing to notice.

Nothing except the release manifest, which says Joomla put seven things there and something else put the eighth. That is the entire check.

For the record, that one is planted. It is a file on a test site we control, written to be as convincing as we could make it, because a screenshot of a real customer's backdoor is not ours to publish.

How does mySites.guru know what Joomla or WordPress actually shipped?

We hold the file list for the exact version your site is running, generated from the official release package. Every path, with its hash:

```
administrator/index.php                                  8f1c...
administrator/cache/index.html                           8ca096fda23d564fe62bc65e
administrator/components/com_actionlogs/config.xml   0ea0080554fbea75f601
libraries/loader.php                                     b96deb0e0d737e2a6a14082f
```

That list is what the audit already compares your files against to spot modified core files. Impostor Files reuses it from the other direction: instead of asking which core files changed, it asks which files are in core's folders without being in core's list.

This is manifest-driven, never a hardcoded list of folder names. Between Joomla 5.4.7 and 6.0.1, **61 core folders disappear and 50 new ones appear**. A static list written against Joomla 5 would flag legitimate Joomla 6 files and miss real ones. Your site's own version manifest is always right for your site.

It also costs nothing extra to run. The audit has already walked your webspace, hashed every file and imported the release list. The check is a database question over work that has already happened, so it does not add a second scan or another few minutes to your audit.

> **Note**
>
> Files at the very top of your site are included, not skipped. Joomla 5.4.7 ships six files in the web root, so a seventh one there is reported the same as one buried nineteen levels down.

The executables count is the number to react to

You get two counts back, and they are not two versions of the same answer.

The executables count is the signal. It counts program files only: `.php`, `.phtml`, `.php3` through `.php8`, `.phar`, `.inc`, `.pht` and `.phps`. The match is deliberately case-insensitive, because `.pHp5` and `.PHTML` are exactly the sort of thing a dropper uses to slip past a case-sensitive filter. Measured across twelve real customer sites, this number was **zero on all twelve**. That is what a healthy site looks like, and it is why this number drives the status badge rather than the total.

The total is noisy on purpose. Across the same twelve sites it averaged 615 files, with a worst case of 1,626. Almost all of it is ordinary:

What it is	Hits across 12 sites
Your own uploads under `/images/`	2,102
Extension language files under `/administrator/language/`	1,174
Leftover `index.html` guards from older Joomla versions	1,153
Extension and vendor assets under `/media/`	~335
`.DS_Store`	222

`/images/` and `/media/` are core folders, which is why their contents appear at all. Joomla ships `/images/banners/` with sample banners in it, so every photo you have uploaded since sits in a folder core owns.

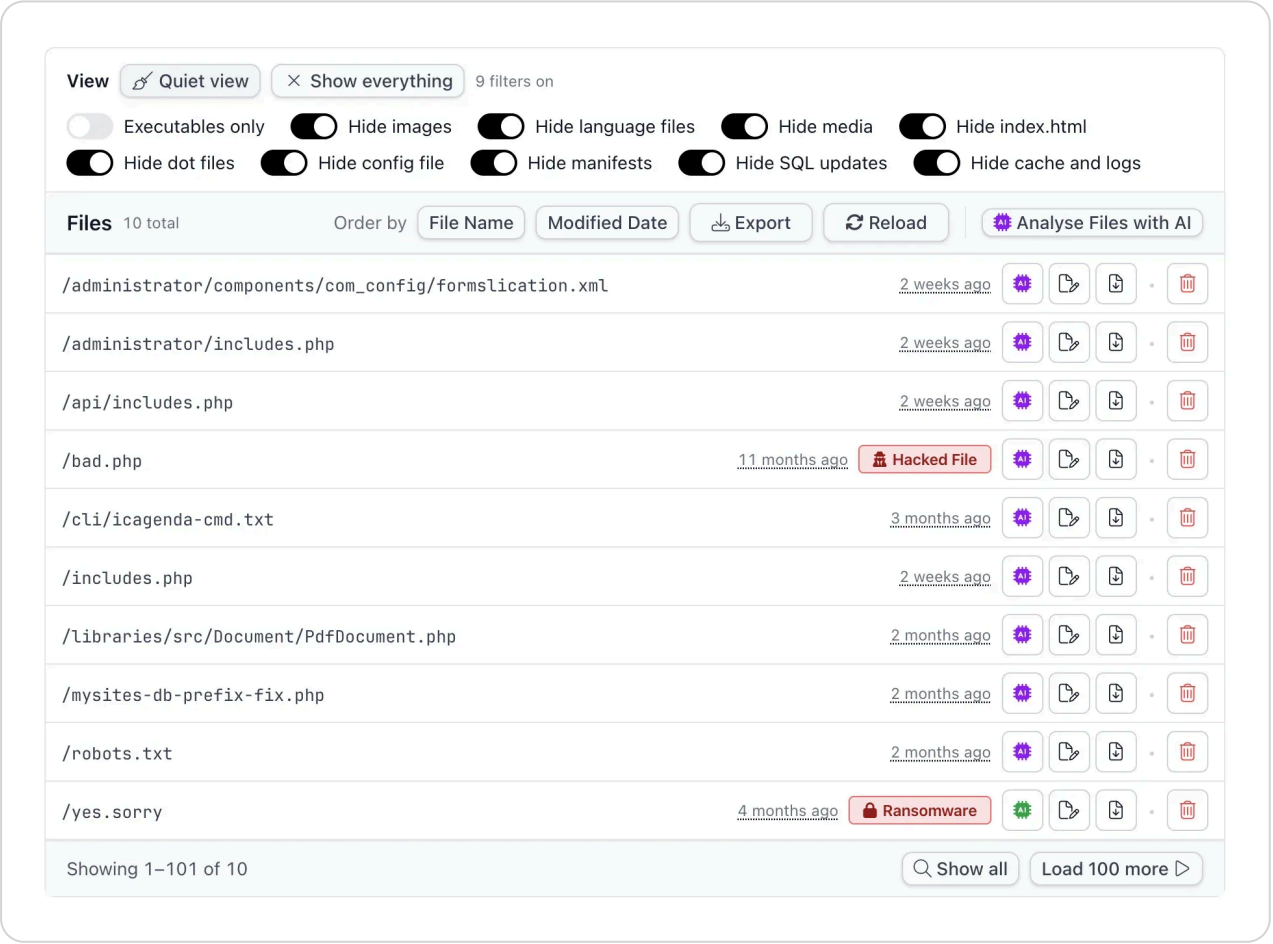
A site with 615 files in that list and zero executables is healthy, and shows green. A site with one executable and a much shorter list is the one to open.

Nothing is hidden at source, because a dropper can sit in /images/ too

The obvious way to make the total useful is to exclude `/images/` at source. We deliberately do not, because that hides real findings along with the noise. Attackers put PHP files in image folders constantly. It is one of the oldest tricks there is, and a check that refuses to look there without telling you is worse than one that shows you too much.

So the filtering happens in the view, and you control it. Toggles are provided for images, language files, media, manifests, `index.html` guards, dot files, SQL update scripts, cache and logs, and the site configuration file. There is an *Executables only* toggle, a **Quiet view** preset that switches on everything ordinary in one click while still showing executables, and a **Show everything** button to put it back.

Every filter defaults to off. The first view you get shows you everything, and hiding is your decision rather than ours. The filters are applied on your site in the query itself rather than on the page afterwards, so the count at the top always describes the same set of rows you are looking at.



That is the same hacked test site with Quiet view switched on. Nine toggles take it from 554 rows down to ten, and now look at what is left.

Joomla has an `/administrator/includes/` folder, an `/api/includes/` folder and an `/includes/` folder. It ships no `includes.php` file next to any of them. All three are in that list. Someone picked a filename that reads as the folder beside it, three times, and on a directory listing it slides straight past you.

`/libraries/src/Document/PdfDocument.php` is the same move done more carefully. That folder genuinely holds 33 core classes and most of them are named `SomethingDocument.php`. A thirty-fourth one looks like it belongs, right up until you check it against the release and find Joomla never shipped it.

Not everything left is sinister. `/robots.txt` is there because Joomla ships `robots.txt.dist` and expects you to rename it, so your own copy is a file core never shipped and the check reports it honestly. That is the trade for not hiding things at source.

Each row exports to CSV if you would rather work through the list somewhere else. Files already matched by the other checks keep their badges here too, so a file the audit has independently called out as hacked is labelled as such in this list rather than looking like one more unexplained row.

Why does the list include my own .htaccess?

Because you put it there, and we would rather show it to you than guess.

Without the executables restriction, `/administrator/` flags on every site we measured. On all thirteen it was `.DS_Store`, uploaded by somebody's Mac. On three of them it was `.htaccess` and `.htpasswd`, which is Admin Tools password-protecting the administrator folder. That is a hardening measure we actively recommend, and it produces two files core never shipped, in a folder core owns.

Which is why **Impostor Files does not set the hacked flag and does not send you an email.** It reports. It never accuses. A check that shouts about your own hardening is a

check you will switch off, and then it protects nothing.

WordPress gets a stronger rule than Joomla

WordPress earns a wider rule, because its core folders are stricter about who writes into them.

Core WordPress 6.8.2 ships 93 files directly in `/wp-admin/` and 572 across that whole tree, plus 244 directly in `/wp-includes/` and 2,210 beneath it. WordPress 7.1 is bigger at 593 and 2,729, and just as exactly specified. Plugins do not write into either tree. Themes do not write into either tree. Core owns both outright, so we check them recursively: any file under `/wp-admin/` or `/wp-includes/` that core did not ship is reported, however deep it sits and whatever folder it is in.

That matters because it catches a shell in a directory the attacker created themselves. A backdoor written into `/wp-includes/` is a well worn move and one of the first things to check if you think a WordPress site is hacked, precisely because it is the last place an owner thinks to look and it survives a theme or plugin being replaced. On Joomla a folder like that is out of scope, for the reason set out below. On WordPress there is nowhere under those two trees to sit that we are not already looking.

Two things get conflated here. The AccessPress backdoor wrote its webshell into `wp-includes/vars.php`, a file WordPress genuinely ships, which makes it a modified core file rather than an impostor one. The audit's core file integrity check is what catches that, by hash, and reverts it to the original in one click. Impostor Files answers the other half of the question: which files are sitting in core's folders without being core's.

WP-CLI already does part of this, on one site, over SSH

Credit where it is due. `wp core verify-checksums` diffs your on-disk files against the WordPress.org checksums manifest and reports `File should not exist` for anything extra in `wp-admin/`, `wp-includes/` or the web root. If you have shell access to a

WordPress site, that command answers a good chunk of this question today and has done for years.

```
wp core verify-checksums
Warning: File should not exist: wp-includes/class-wp-cache-init.php
```

We built this anyway, for three reasons.

It covers **Joomla**, which has no equivalent. WordPress.org publishes a checksums API; the Joomla project publishes no per-file manifest at all, which is why we generate ours from the release packages ourselves. On Joomla there is no command to point you at.

It runs **remotely, across every site at once**, with no SSH access, no WP-CLI installed and nothing to run by hand. That is the difference between a command you could run on a site you are already worried about and an answer that arrives for all of your sites on every audit, including the ones you were not worried about. Backdoors are found on the sites nobody was thinking about.

And it produces something you can work through. A shell command gives you a wall of text. The check gives you the file list with sizes and modification times, filters to cut the ordinary out of it, and a CSV export.

What this check cannot see on Joomla

We would rather tell you the limits of a check than let you assume it covers more than it does.

On Joomla, this check cannot go recursive. `/administrator/components/` is where your extensions legitimately live, so flagging everything under `/administrator/` would flag every component you have ever installed and the check would be as useless as the one it replaces.

Which means, plainly: **on Joomla, a file at `/administrator/private/shell.php` is not reported by this check**, because `/administrator/private/` is not a folder core ships

into, so it is not a folder we consider ours to police. A file dropped straight into `/administrator/` is caught. A file dropped into a folder the attacker made is not.

One tool with one job will never show you everything

That file is not invisible. It is invisible **to this check**, which is a different thing, and it is the reason the audit runs more than two dozen separate file and folder checks rather than one clever one.

Impostor Files asks a single narrow question: is this file in a folder core owns, when core never shipped it? Ask a narrow question and you get a short answer, which is the entire point. But a narrow question also has a wrong side, and `/administrator/private/shell.php` is on it.

So other checks ask other questions about the same file:

- ***Check Files That Are Not Core Files*** lists it, because it lists everything that is not core, anywhere. That is the noisy 13,653-row check from the top of this post, and this is the trade it exists for: it sees the file that Impostor Files cannot, and it buries the answer among thousands of rows. Neither check replaces the other, and running both is the only reason you get the file *and* a list short enough to read.
- ***Check Suspect Patterns Matched Content In Files*** reads what is inside it, against roughly 1,500 patterns. It does not care where the file sits.
- ***Hacked Files (100% Certain)*** matches its hash against confirmed hacked files, so a known shell is named as one wherever somebody put it. Which of those two to believe, and in what order, is its own subject.
- ***Check Files That Can Attempt To Upload Files*** and ***Check Files That Can Send An Email (or Mass Emails!)*** find it by what it is able to do, which is how you catch a dropper and a spam relay that are not in any pattern list yet.
- ***Files Modified Between Audits*** catches it the moment it appears, under any name, in any folder, which is how you spot a site being re-hacked days after you cleaned it.

- ***PHP Files Should Not Be In These Certain Folders*** finds PHP under `/images/`, where PHP has no business being.
- ***Locate And Review Double Extension Files*** finds `name.php.xxx`, and ***Review Renamed Files*** finds the `.old`, `.bak` and `.orig` copies people leave behind.
- ***Locate And Review Hidden Files*** and ***Paths With Hidden Folders In Them*** find dot-prefixed files and folders: the `.tools` and `.bak` directories a listing does not show you by default.
- ***Identify Missing Core Joomla Files*** covers the opposite failure, where something core shipped is no longer there.

None of those is the whole answer either. `/administrator/private/shell.php` is found by several of them and missed by this one, and a differently shaped backdoor flips which is which. That is not a gap to apologise for, it is how the audit is built: many narrow checks, each with a job it does exactly, rather than one tool claiming to see everything and quietly seeing less.

No manifest means no answer, not a clean bill of health

If we could not download the file list for your CMS version, Impostor Files shows no result at all, rather than a zero or a green tick.

A zero says we looked and found nothing. That is a specific claim, and it would be a lie in the one situation where you most need us to be straight with you. The core file list is emptied and re-imported at the start of every audit, so a failed download leaves the check with nothing to compare against rather than an answer from a fortnight ago. The status shows as no data, and the reason is on the page.

The same applies to sites running a connector that predates the check. No data is not a passing grade, and we do not display it as one.

Where do I find Impostor Files?

It is in the **Hacked ?** section of each site's audit, listed as *Check Core Folders For Impostor Files* on Joomla and *Check Core WordPress Folders For Impostor Files* on WordPress. Press Cmd+K and type part of the name to jump straight there.

To answer it across everything at once rather than site by site, the all-sites view for the check is at manage.mysites.guru/en/tools/allsites/joomla/hacked/foreigncorefolderfiles, which lists every connected Joomla site with its executables count beside it. Change `joomla` to `wordpress` in that address for the WordPress equivalent. Sort by the executables column and the sites worth your morning are at the top.

The check is Joomla and WordPress only. A generic site has no CMS, so there is no official release to compare against and nothing that can honestly be called a core folder. So the check does not appear on those sites at all, rather than sitting there reporting nothing forever.

WHY THIS ONE TOOK A WHILE

> This has been on my own wish list for years and I am pleased I finally had the month to build it. Earlier in this post I called the old check a haystack. This is another magnifying glass for finding the needle in it, and it is the one I have wanted for a very long time.

Phil Taylor who built it

Check one site right now

The check runs on the next audit, with no setting to enable and nothing to configure.

Connect a site

Not a subscriber? Run a free audit and see what is sitting in your core folders.

Start with the executables count. It should be zero, it was zero on every site we measured, and the day it is not is the day you want to have been looking. If it is not zero, work through the triage order for a hacked Joomla site or a hacked WordPress site rather than deleting things at random. Connect your sites to mySites.guru and it runs on the next audit.

Further Reading

- Find Hacks and Backdoors in WordPress & Joomla - how the audit hashes and classifies every file on your site.
- Clean a Hacked Site with Suspect Content and Hacked Files - the triage order once something does show up.
- The hidden files lurking on your site that you don't know about - the dot-folder blind spot this check deliberately does not cover.
- Suspect Content vs Hacked Files - which of the audit's file checks answers which question.
- MITRE ATT&CK T1505.003: Web Shell - the technique, and why persistence outlives the vulnerability that allowed it.
- wp core verify-checksums - the WP-CLI command that answers part of this question on a single WordPress site.
- Joomla release downloads and WordPress releases - the official packages the file lists are generated from.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is an impostor file?

It is a file sitting in a folder that Joomla or WordPress core owns, which the official release of that exact version never shipped. The folder is core, the file is not. A webshell dropped into /administrator/ or /wp-includes/ is the case the check exists for, because those folders have a known, fixed set of files and anything extra arrived some other way.

How is this different from the Files That Are Not Core Files check?

That check reports every non-core file anywhere on the site, which on a real site means a median of 13,653 rows because every extension you install adds files. It is accurate and unreadable. Impostor Files only looks in the folders the CMS itself owns, where core is the legitimate occupant and there is far less reason for anything unexpected to be there.

Which number should I react to?

The executables count. Measured across twelve real customer sites, it was zero on all twelve, so anything above zero is worth opening. The total count is much larger and mostly harmless: uploaded images, extension language files and leftover index.html guards. Use the view filters or the Quiet view preset to hide the ordinary things and see what is left.

Does it flag my site as hacked or email me?

No, and that is deliberate. The list legitimately includes files you put there on purpose, including the .htaccess and .htpasswd that Admin Tools writes when you password-protect your administrator folder. Calling that a break-in would be wrong, so the check reports and never accuses.

Does it catch a backdoor in a folder the attacker created?

On WordPress, yes. /wp-admin/ and /wp-includes/ are checked recursively because core owns both trees outright and plugins never write there, so a file buried in a directory an attacker made is still reported. On Joomla, no. Extensions legitimately install into /administrator/components/, so a blanket recursive rule there would flag every extension you own. That file is still found by other checks in the audit, including Check Files That Are Not Core Files, the suspect content patterns, and Files Modified Between Audits. No single check sees everything, which is why the audit runs more than two dozen of them.

What happens if you cannot get the file list for my CMS version?

The check shows no result at all rather than a zero. A zero would tell you we looked and found nothing, which is not the same as being unable to look. The core file list is wiped and re-imported at the start of every audit, so a failed download leaves nothing behind rather than an out-of-date answer.

Does this work on non-CMS sites?

No. It is Joomla and WordPress only. A generic site has no CMS, so there is no official release to compare against and no set of folders that anyone can say core owns. The check does not appear at all on those sites rather than appearing and reporting nothing.

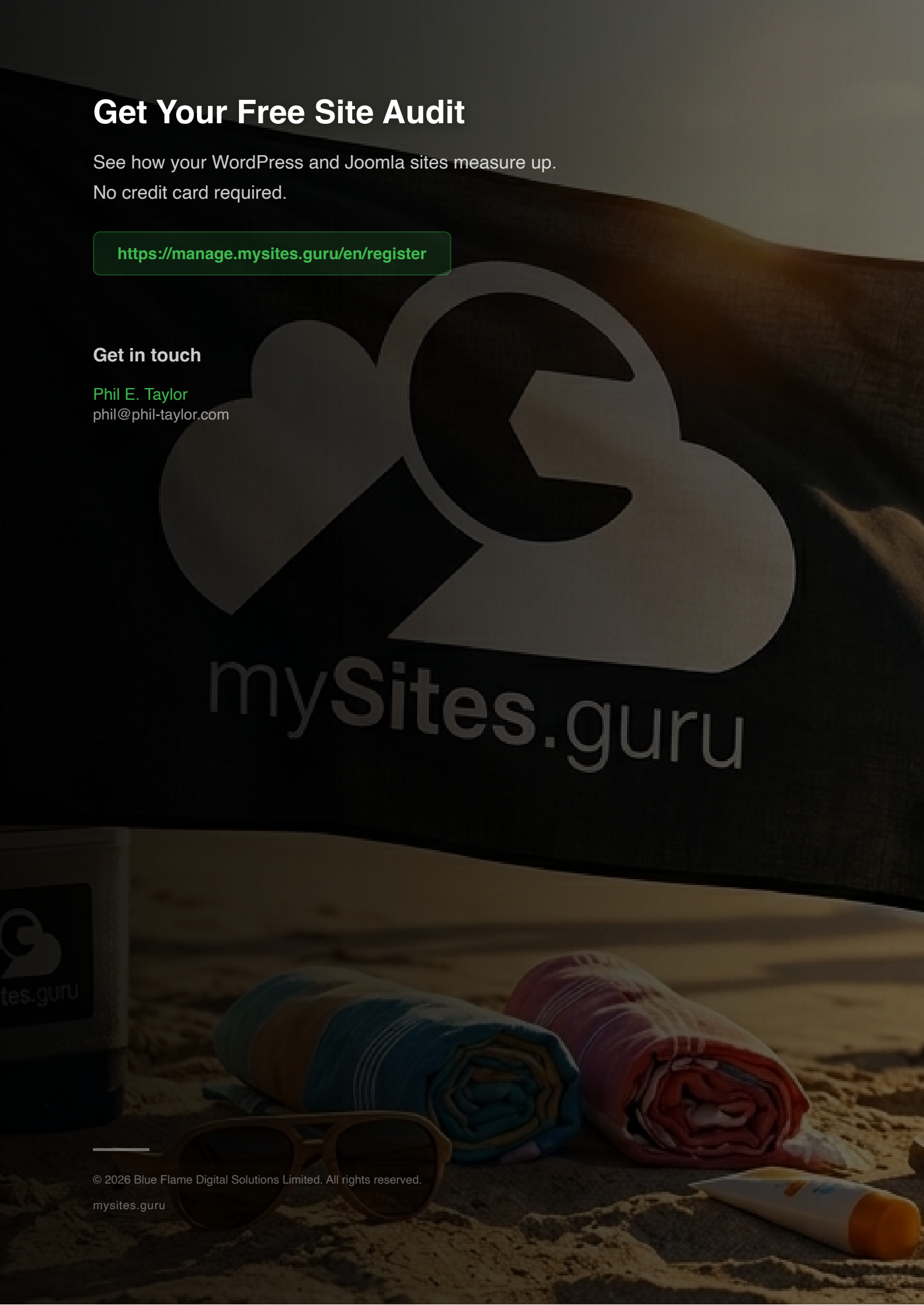
Written and edited by a human, with AI assistance. Our approach to AI

Get Your Free Site Audit

See how your WordPress and Joomla sites measure up.

No credit card required.

https://manage.mysites.guru/en/register



Get in touch

Phil E. Taylor
phil@phil-taylor.com