

# MISCELLANY

## HBW Alive

I can still vividly recall the delight and admiration I felt when the first volume of the *Handbook of the Birds of the World* landed on my desk back in 1992. It was evident right away that this book heralded a new era in ornithological publishing, an impression which was reinforced with the appearance of each subsequent volume. Initially, the publishers Lynx Edicions envisaged a total of just ten volumes, but the work grew under the impetus of its own success until the final 17th volume crowned the project in 2013. Today, many bird enthusiasts must find it hard to think themselves back into a time when *HBW* did not exist.



From an early stage in the project, the publishers began to describe *HBW* as a ‘living work’, one that would avoid the built-in obsolescence of most works of reference by issuing an indefinite series of supplements, complementing the main volumes in the light of subsequently published ornithological work. The digital revolution of the last

two decades has made it inevitable that such supplements can most usefully be published online, and the launch of *HBW Alive* introduces this new stage in the *Handbook’s* story. The starting point of *HBW Alive* is the printed series, and the website incorporates all its 13,367 pages, 10,200 maps, 20,600 figures and 100,000 bibliographic references – only the original photographs are omitted, for copyright reasons. (There are, though, thousands of links to photos and videos from other internet resources, including the Internet Bird Collection, also run by Lynx Edicions (<http://ibc.lynxeds.com>), which currently hosts some 82,000 videos, 111,000 photos and 12,000 sound recordings covering 94% of the bird species of the world. Full accounts are included of every bird species known to science up to June 2013, and briefer information is given on species that have been described since then (25 up to February 2014). The ‘living work’ aspect of the website means that the contents are constantly being updated by an international team of professional ornithologists, supplemented by moderated contributions from

subscribers. (Updating is an ongoing process and has so far been concentrated on the first two *HBW* volumes.) Numerous ‘digital tools’ facilitate use of the site and allow users to customize it to suit their personal needs – one can, for example, create printable country checklists, with colour illustrations if desired. Users’ own notes may be added to the site (for personal access only).

As a lifelong bibliophile, I am reluctant to admit that *HBW Alive* will ever supersede the printed volumes. The appearance of this site does, though, confirm my belief that the *Handbook of the Birds of the World* is destined to prove not merely the best, but also the *last*, of all the great bird books in the history of publishing. This series has taken the printed book as far as it can go – from now on, the new media take over. The revising and updating of the original text is a process which will inevitably take some time. To sample how far it has gone at present, I compared the entries on one species, the red-throated diver (*Gavia stellata*), in the *Handbook* and *HBW Alive*. (The species is of special interest to me because it nests in the hills above our house in Orkney; and as the divers appear early in Volume 1, they were among the first taxa to be updated.) I had already got down Vol. 1 from the shelf before I discovered that both versions could be viewed side by side online: I found that additions included a note on a possible subspecific variation, a much more detailed distribution account, six times the amount of descriptive notes, and three times as much on the species’ migratory movements. Among other things, *HBW Alive* also supplemented the book’s illustration of a breeding adult with photos including a bird in flight, an adult in non-breeding plumage, a juvenile and chicks. To cap it all, there were features *no* book could provide – videos of the bird’s flight and its ungainly locomotion on land, and a recording of its mournful flight-call. (This is traditionally regarded in Orkney as presaging rain, giving the species the local name ‘rain goose’ – one fact which is *not* to be found on *HBW Alive*!) All in all, this random sample gave a glimpse of the advantages digital publication has over print.

HANDBOOK OF THE  
BIRDS OF THE WORLD  
*Alive*

Providing all these facilities has a cost, so *HBW Alive* does not come free. Annual subscriptions start at €29.95 or equivalent – details are at [www.hbw.com](http://www.hbw.com). (To put

things in perspective, it would take over 90 years at this rate to equal the cost of a complete set of the books – the digital revolution doesn’t always make knowledge *free*, but it certainly makes it a whole lot cheaper!) The relatively low cost, and the provision of an automatic translator from English into 79 other languages, should help to further the goal of bringing the site within reach of every person interested in birds in practically any country in the world. The *Handbook*, and Lynx Edicions’ other printed publications, have already brought many benefits to the cause of conservation: this new project seems certain to have an even greater impact.

*Nicholas Gould*