

If you were sent to a desert island and were allowed to take just one bird book with you, which one would you choose? In my case it would have to be the *Handbook of the Birds of the World* (HBW). OK, so that is cheating a little as this is, of course, a 17-volume book. If you possess the full set, then you'll know that it takes up almost a metre of your bookshelves. But now the online version of *HBW* is available. While I love the pleasure of dipping into a well-illustrated book, would I enjoy doing the same on my computer?

For those who are not familiar with *HBW* in traditional format, it contains 13,367 pages written by 277 experts, 10,200 maps, over 20,600 figures, and about 100,000 bibliographic references. We are talking about 15 million words of text. However,

with improved DNA analysis the changes in our understanding of taxonomy are occurring more frequently than they did when the first volume of *HBW* appeared. It is a sad fact that those beautiful volumes are, in reality, a static statement of expert opinion at the time of publication – and they will become outdated more rapidly than we ever imagined.

So what do you get with the online version, *HBW Alive*? It contains the full accounts for every bird species that was included in the 17 volumes, although not the 15 species for which original scientific descriptions were published in Vol. 17. The accounts appear in normal-size text (not the tiny font that was used in the books). Each description includes the distribution map and the



colour illustrations from the book – all of which can be enlarged on your page. The maps have been updated with colour to indicate seasonal changes. A section describing ‘Voice’, which was lacking in the early *HBW* volumes, is currently being added to all bird species accounts. In addition, there are links to photographs and videos submitted to the *HBW* free site – Internet Bird Collection (<http://ibc.lynxeds.com>), which hosts some 82,000 videos, 111,000 photographs and 12,000 sound recordings covering 94% of the bird species of the world. An interesting facility is the ability to compare different species side by side – comparing any aspect that interests you.

I particularly enjoyed reading the family chapters, which are often up to 50,000 words or more in length. These are all included – although, for copyright reasons, without the colour photographs that graced the book. These chapters cover systematics, morphological aspects, habitat, general habits, voice, food and feeding, breeding, relationships with man, and status and conservation. Within these texts are hyperlinks to photographs and videos, which add value – particularly when showing certain aspects of behaviour or display. Each species account has a list of bibliographic references, and in some cases there are hyperlinks to a PDF of the original paper or the journal website. New references are being added each month and almost 7,000 extra bibliographic references have already been added to those used in the printed version.

For those who want to follow the *HBW* taxonomy, a tool is provided to generate and keep personal notes on each bird species. In addition,

for travelling birders, printable country checklists can be generated, with the option of including colour illustrations of every species. These customised checklists can be printed or exported to Excel or Word. Tutorials are provided that explain how everything works; these are essential reading, without which you will definitely miss out on some of the more interesting facilities.

What I have described so far is what you can do with a basic-level membership. If, however, you upgrade to become a Supporting Member, then you can access a bird database called ‘My Birding’. This enables you to keep track of your own records. Exactly how you are able to follow any future splits recognised by *HBW* and move your sightings accordingly remains to be seen. While this is an attractive option, it does require a leap of faith on your part that *HBW Alive* will always be there in the future, and that their cyber security is sufficient to ensure that there is no catastrophic loss of your data.

Having used *HBW Alive* for nine months now, I can thoroughly recommend it. The proof of how good this facility is must be that I have not touched any of the 17 hard-copy volumes during that time. They have remained on the bookshelf gathering dust. In a way that is a shame – but it is the way of the future. That said, I have actually accessed far more *HBW* information in the last nine months than in the previous nine years. So, on a personal level, *HBW Alive* has brought me closer to the information that I need – and surely that is what publishing is all about.

*Keith Betton*

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