



HBW Alive

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When the 17th and final volume of the *Handbook of the Birds of the World* (HBW) was published last year, it marked a milestone in world ornithology—a summary of everything known about every species of bird in the world. If you can't afford the extension required to build shelving to hold the entire set, here's some good news: there's now an online version—*HBW Alive*.

Using digital technology, *HBW Alive* has several significant advantages over printed handbooks. The information in *HBW Alive* is quickly and easily accessed using a key-word search box, taxonomic tree or geographical tree; even Neo-Luddites can manage it. Importantly, its information can be updated regularly, even adding new species; by comparison, printed books are out of date as soon as they're published. Being electronic, *HBW Alive* is able to include videos of behaviour and vocalisations and links to relevant websites. Users can customise it to suit their personal preferences, and you can even use it to generate personal notes on birds, maintain your bird lists, or print checklists for individual countries, with optional colour illustrations of each species.

Enough about the benefits of the format—let's look at *HBW Alive* in more detail (of course, many of these comments are also applicable to the printed books). Like the print version, chapters provide general information about the ecology, taxonomy and conservation of every family. Each species also has its own text, divided into sections: Taxonomy, Descriptive notes, Voice, Habitat, Food and feeding, Breeding, Movements, and Status and conservation. All provide neat summaries, though a species' distribution is restricted to a map, giving only a general impression of the range.

Species accounts are much less detailed than in the *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds*, for example, with some additional information included in the Family accounts. If you're after a particular aspect of a species' ecology, sometimes it's necessary to trawl through the family chapter as well as the species

account—potentially an arduous task in large families, such as the parrots or pigeons, and, being a general overview, specific detail is often not there at all. And behaviour is only dealt with in the Family accounts—seldom in much detail, though some is brought to life on video links.

Each account also includes an expanded bibliography, though references aren't listed in the body of the text, making following up individual points potentially problematic, but on the plus side, there are direct links to some of the references.

For some people, images are the most important feature. You can select paintings of a single species, or all species within a genus (allowing comparison of similar species) or a family; they're crisp and clear, and, importantly, accurate. For those who prefer photos, there are links to images of each species on external websites.

Any resource that so easily provides a general overview of birds as diverse as the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Berlepsch's Tinamou, Western Striolated-Puffbird and Rufous Bristlebird is highly recommended. It's an excellent summary—quick, easy-to-use, innovative and up-to-date, and if you require more detail, it's a stepping stone to other resources.

By John Peter