

HBW Alive

Lynx Edicions, Barcelona. www.hbw.com

[HBW Alive](http://www.hbw.com) is a comprehensive, online reference resource for the birds of the world. The starting point of HBW Alive is the acclaimed 17-Volume [Handbook of the Birds of the World \(HBW\)](#), with its 13,367 pages, 10,200 maps, over 20,600 figures, about 100,000 bibliographic references, and an incredible 15 million words. Apart from the original photographs, all of this has now been made available online through *HBW Alive*. Photos are gradually being uploaded to the species accounts, and there are also thousands of links to photos and videos from other internet resources, including the [Internet Bird Collection](#), also run by Lynx Editions, which currently hosts some 82,000 videos, 111,000 photos and 12,000 sound recordings covering 94% of the bird species of the world.

Unlike a book, however, the contents of [HBW Alive](#), are constantly being updated by an international team of professional ornithologists. Furthermore, subscribers are able to moderate content. The website incorporates an array of digital tools that not only permit instant access to the information but also allow users to customize the entire website to suit their personal preferences. Subscribers to *HBW Alive* also automatically receive relevant recent information from scientific journals worldwide through an [ornithological news](#) service.

At present, the site contains full accounts for every bird species known to science up to June 2013, including distribution maps, colour illustrations, and links to photographs and videos where available. Yet compared to [IOC](#), the taxonomy is out of date in many places. For example, the three species of banded pitta have not yet been recognized. However, HBW and BirdLife International will shortly publish the first volume of the [Illustrated Checklist to the Birds of the World](#), and from that time onwards the taxonomy in *HBW Alive* will be updated to follow the sequence and species taxonomy set out in that comprehensive work.

As new species are described, short accounts and links to the original scientific descriptions and to pictures, where available, are added, with the ultimate intention of creating full species accounts. Since 2013 more than 25 species have already been added to the website. A Voice section, lacking in the first *HBW* volumes, is currently being added to all bird species. Sadly the maps do not yet show the distribution of individual subspecies, even for species in which this would be relatively easy to show (e.g. those with island distributions, such as Black-faced Pitta *Pitta anerythra*), but this will probably be rectified in time.

The website also has extensive chapters for every bird family, treating systematics, morphological aspects, habitat, general habits, voice, food and feeding, breeding, relationships with man, and status and conservation, and each chapter has links to relevant photographs, videos, and selected internet sites, including the BirdLife Data Zone, Arkive, Encyclopedia of Life, and others.

The website is user-friendly, with access to information via a classic key-word search box, a taxonomic tree which permits the user to browse all bird families, species and subspecies, and a geographical tree organized into bio-geographical regions and countries. There is also a menu bar with tabs for species, families and

plates. Not only is it possible to display all the information about a species, but by using the Compare button one can add similar species and view the pictures, distribution, and voice of two species simultaneously, although doing so is not intuitive and it took me some time to determine how to do it. I was unable to make comparisons of three or more species simultaneously. However, even being able to compare two similar species is a very useful feature of the website, and hopefully it will in time allow more extensive comparisons. Furthermore, links to full bibliographic references are included in all of the updated texts, which eventually lead one to the website of the journal concerned, to pdf articles (where legally available), to the abstract, or to Google search and Google Scholar, with no need to type additional reference details. There are also tools to generate and keep personal notes on bird species, as well as to check or bookmark them.

The screenshot displays the HBW Alive website interface. On the left, a 'Species comparison' tool is active, showing a list of bird families and a grid of 16 small bird illustrations. The main content area is a detailed page for the 'Kory-breasted Pitta (Pitta maxima)'. This page includes a taxonomic tree on the left, a central text area with descriptive notes and a distribution map, and a right-hand sidebar with sections for 'ACCOUNT INFORMATION', 'DISTRIBUTION MAP', 'PHOTOS', 'VIDEOS', 'SOUNDS', and 'UPDATE HISTORY'. The 'Descriptive notes' section contains detailed information about the species' appearance and behavior.

HBW Alive also allows the user to create country checklists, with optional color illustrations of every species. These illustrated checklists can be customized in a variety of ways and printed or exported to Excel or Word, and for some countries, such as Mexico and China, they can be split into north and southern lists – though the geographic boundary in such cases is not clearly defined for the user. The bird lists, however, do not go down to the level of subspecies.

Finally, Supporting Members are able to use a personal bird database system - My Birding - that allows users to keep track of their own records or lists. This recording system for the user's bird sightings can be organised by date, location or trips, but it is probably not as sophisticated as other new websites, such as IGoTerra.com a mainly Swedish initiative, which also allows you to plan future

birding trips and share the information directly with other people joining your trip. Like *HBW Alive*, IGoTerra is a website requiring a subscription but you can access country lists and other information without subscribing. This part of the *HBW Alive* website is still being developed, but a stated key goal will be to integrate the content of *HBW Alive* with the user's own data and observations, conveniently showing illustrations, descriptions and distribution maps of a given species whilst he or she is entering their records.

One potentially useful feature of *HBW Alive* is that it can be viewed in about 70 languages, including Spanish, Chinese, Japanese and Indonesian, using a Google Translate button on the actual page you are looking at. This seems to work very well, though naturally the accuracy of the translation depends on the service provided by the Google Translate software.

Both the pace of the updating process and the quantity and quality of digital tools finally incorporated into *HBW Alive* will ultimately depend on the support the international ornithological and birding community accords to this ground-breaking project.

FRANK LAMBERT
Email: flambertemail@yahoo.co.uk