

Portrait of a Catalan Book-lover

– Mammals of the World; next challenge for Josep del Hoyo

After nineteen years of hard work, the Spaniard Josep del Hoyo is moving towards the fulfilment of a dream, viz. the creation of a complete and fully illustrated encyclopaedia of all the c. 10,000 bird species of the world. "Handbook of the Birds of the World" – HBW – has been unanimously praised by the critics since the publication of the first volume in 1992. In three years time the sixteenth volume of HBW will complete the encyclopaedia. But, far from relaxing, the editor in chief, Josep del Hoyo and his fellow editors at Lynx Edicions publishers will undauntedly go straight ahead with the next mammoth project: an encyclopaedia of the c. 5,000 mammals of the world.

TEXT & PHOTOS: TOMAS CARLBERG

A *aficionado* is the Spanish word that comes to my mind during the conversation with Josep del Hoyo. There is no mistaking that this Catalan enthusiast is passionate about his work, almost to the point of becoming one with it. He is an ornithological connoisseur who knows how to manage seemingly impossible giant projects. It takes a man with the stamina, fighting spirit and hot blood of a purebred Spanish bull – working for hours and hours on end, year after year – to make sure that everyone involved in such a large-scale effort plays by the rules.

Josep del Hoyo's gaze is warm and open. "Would you like me to take off my glasses when you take the picture", he asks me. His manners and his dress are plain and unpretentious and he is generous both with his vast knowledge and his time, despite the latter being the commodity an editor finds it hardest to spare.

Over the years it has become clear to Josep del Hoyo which authors and illustrators are best, and most reliable. "We tend to do more now, with fewer people involved", he says. He is holding a colour plate depicting Honeyeaters from an upcoming volume of "Handbook of the Birds of the World".

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Josep del Hoyo: Formerly a medical doctor with a passion for birds. Today editor-in-chief of the encyclopaedia 'Handbook of the Birds of the World' and part-owner of the publishing firm Lynx Edicions.

Lynx Edicions: Publishing firm outside Barcelona specialising in natural history books with a staff of c. 25 people. Founded in 1988 by Josep del Hoyo, together with the Catalan Jordi Sagatal and the Scotsman Andrew Elliott. The name of the company refers to the Iberian Lynx, one of the world's most endangered feline species.

Handbook of the Birds of the World, HBW: Fully illustrated encyclopaedia describing the c. 10,000 known bird species of the world. A total of 16 volumes to be published during 1992–2011. 12 volumes are out already, the 13th is due this autumn. The first chapter of each

volume treats a certain topic (in the case of volume 12, the fossil record of birds), followed by detailed descriptions of the bird families treated, and relatively full descriptions of the individual species.

Facts about HBW, Volume 12: 816 pp, 56 colour plates, 436 photographs, 638 distribution maps and a list of c. 4,000 literature references. Format 310 x 240 mm.

HBW editions: The first 3,000 copies of volume 1 were sold out within the year of publication (1992). So far, volume 12 has been sold in 19,000 copies, and the estimated figure for volume 16 is 22,000 copies. Many new subscribers also buy previous HBW volumes.

Price: 1,890 SEK per volume.

Web-site: www.hbw.com



– I'll make up for it tonight, after you have left, he says, but not in a way intended to make me feel guilty.

He seems a bit surprised that I have come all the way from Stockholm for this interview. As for himself, he spends three months per year travelling: five weeks together with his wife and two grown-up daughters and the rest of the time as a globetrotting birder. His plans for 2008 include bird-watching journeys to Vietnam, Japan and the province of Irian Jaya in Indonesia. Not many ornithologists are able to rival his observation list, comprising nearly 7,000 bird species.

– But this business of lists and figures are unimportant to me, says Josep.

There is no mistaking his love of birds. In a bird-rich area where the average, restless birder would spend a day or two, Josep stays a week before moving on. He leaves nothing to chance, no stones unturned.

When the HBW project was launched in the late 1980ies he initially worked without salary. His driving force was not money but the dream of creating the ultimate bird encyclopaedia, and his greatest concern was that the British would get there first. Now Lynx Edicions, where Josep is part-owner, has developed into a thriving publishing firm, but the profit is continuously

being re-invested. Josep lives next door to the well-guarded, walled-in editorial building (formerly a small hotel) in Bellaterra, a little village some 30 minutes (by train) SW of Barcelona. His home and his office share the same bird-rich garden. The surroundings are stunningly beautiful; a peaceful, hilly Mediterranean landscape where the air is spicy and where macchia, stone pines, picturesque houses and fincas cling to the slopes like beautiful dreams. At the time of my visit in late February the mimosa was in bloom, the Sardinian Warblers were calling from the thickets and a long train of Pine Processionary larvae were crawling across the front stairs.

– They spoil the conifers, says Josep, so I usually squash them. But I hate to do it, he adds, leaving them to crawl on.

We sit down a while in the impressive Lynx library, comprising some 5,000 volumes of ornithological literature. Not many titles of any importance are missing. And in the room next door complete issues of some 100 ornithological periodicals cover the walls. As previously remarked, nothing is left to chance...



Samples of colour plates from a dummy of the 8 volume encyclopaedia Handbook of the Mammals of the World, due for publication during 2009–2017. Volume 1, covering the carnivores, will appear in 2009 and Volume 2, comprising the ungulates, in 2011. Starting with Volume 3, there will be one new volume per year. From top to bottom, the plates depict: various Cheetah sub-species (NB: the silvery gloss of the King Cheetah's spots (top-left) is due to the flashlight), Bay Cat and two subspecies each of Caracal and Asian Golden Cat, respectively. Lynx Edicions hopes to sell over 11,000 copies of the first volume (c. 60% of the current figure for HBW volumes).

There are, of course, many factors behind the remarkable success of HBW, but without Josep as the clear-sighted, single-minded and industrious engineer the giant publication machine would soon grind to a halt. There would be endless delays. Josep works harder than most people, usually more than 12 hours per day, seven days per week.

– The weekends are best, he says. Then I can work undisturbed.

It is Josep himself who brings up the obvious joke: – 'I'm from Barcelona!' We both laugh heartily, and exchange a few words about Basil (John Cleese) and his hopeless Catalan waiter Manuel from the TV-series Fawlty Towers. Josep is, however, anything but incapable. The crucial point is how on earth he manages to make everyone involved – authors, artists, photographers, fellow editors, PR consultants, economists, IT consultants and all the rest – to co-operate smoothly,

not only delivering top-class material, but delivering it *on time*.

There is no cut-and-dried method, no magic spell. But Josep has managed to create an atmosphere where almost everyone involved does his very best. There is a great sense of pride, a sense of making ornithological history. And with time it has become clear which authors and artists come up to the mark. Nowadays Lynx hardly employs any illustrators except the seven best bird painters of the world.

– Hilary Burn, Ian Lewington and Chris Rose are among my favourites, says Josep.

There are always considerable safety margins in the time schedule, and a reliable substitute to step in, should one of the authors fail to deliver his/her text on time. But nobody wants to fail, everyone really wants to be in HBW. Photographers compete over who has the greatest number of pictures in each volume. The

extensive, first-class photo material largely explains why the encyclopaedia has swelled from the ten volumes of the original plan to 16 volumes. A Gallup among the HBW subscribers showed that over 90 % of those answering were in favour of increasing the number of volumes. Josep states, with great satisfaction, that many leading bird photographers have started to take pictures specially intended for publication in HBW.

The photo material of HBW is a matter of particular interest to Josep, and he selects much of it himself. Only this year he has sifted through more than 17,000 bird photos.

All editors know that books tend to become dated, at least in some respects. Josep envisages a future Internet version of HBW which is continuously updated.

– I hope that will enable HBW to live on also when I'm gone, says Josep.

Video clips of some 5,000 bird species (more than 3,000 of which recorded by Josep himself!) are already available, free of charge, at www.hbw.com. The site has c. 2,800 visits per day.

We then take a stroll through the editorial building, saying hallo to most of the 25 people working there. The staff includes, among others, bookkeepers, secretaries, salespersons, IT and logistics experts, designers, illustration and text editors. Josep opens one of the drawers of a filing cabinet, showing me illustrations from upcoming HBW volumes. They are incredibly beautiful. He proceeds to show me samples from the future 'Handbook of the Mammals of the World' (HMW). They were only dummies, yet I must admit that they made my mouth water. Don Wilson is editor in chief of HMW, where all illustrations will be made by the Catalan artist Toni Llobet! As far as I could judge, the species illustrations looked very promising. HMW intends to cover all the c. 5,000 mammal species in eight volumes, the first of which is due in 2009.

The editorial building of Lynx Edicions, situated in Bellaterra outside Barcelona, was formerly a small hotel. More than a hundred bird species have been sighted in its walled-in garden!

As, according to Josep, there is no generally accepted phylogeny of the mammals, there is no systematic foundation on which to base the division into volumes. Within each family the species will be presented alphabetically.

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The HBW project is moving towards completion. In 2011 the publication of volume 16 will complete the encyclopaedia. But Josep del Hoyo has undoubtedly already planned what shunts to pull in order to steer his Catalan steam engine safely towards new challenges, among them an Internet version of HBW and an encyclopaedia of the world's mammals.

As most accidental visitors of Barcelona I took the opportunity to see the Catalan architect Antoni Gaudí's most famous creation: the impressive cathedral Sagrada Família, still unfinished despite the fact that the foundation was laid already in the 1880-ies. Part of the roof is still open, like an eye turned up towards Heaven. I know that the two projects are too different to compare. Yet, I can't help thinking that the man I met in Bellaterra has a divine gift of completing his task. □

Tomas Carlberg

