

Avibase

the world bird database

By Mike Burrell

The internet is full of interesting and useful websites for birders, and in what we hope may become a regular feature, we would like to highlight sites that may be of interest to many of our members. This issue's featured website is Avibase; it can be accessed online at: <http://avibase.bsc-eoc.org/>. If you have ideas for other featured websites please contact any of the editors.

Avibase is the work of Bird Studies Canada senior scientist Denis Lepage and is hosted by Bird Studies Canada. Already a very popular source of information for birders, with about 10,000 visitors each week, it is an online Avian database that includes bird names, checklists, trip reports, links and more.

Searchable taxonomy and more

Denis began the Avibase project as a personal tool to keep track of regional checklists of birds and to track nomenclature changes according to various authorities. This is still the main focus of Avibase. Currently, you can go to the website and type in a scientific or common (in many different languages) bird name and instantly have the most up-to-date taxonomic information about that species. Personally, I think this is especially handy for the travelling birder, who may not keep up on decisions of lumping and splitting away from their home territory. As an example, this winter I visited Costa Rica; my field guide had been printed in 1990, and I knew several species had been split since then. Instead of sifting through checklists and supplements, a quick search on Avibase revealed what the "old" species were split into, and helped clarify that I had seen Cocoa Woodcreeper and Long-billed Hermit – two species that didn't even "exist" 20 years ago.

Keeping track of all of these taxonomic changes involves a lot of hard work, especially to create and maintain a system of identifying species and subspecies around the world. Denis has taken the information from about 137 different authorities, representing some 627,000 species entries, plus another 514,000 subspecies entries. Obviously, there aren't 627,000 different species on earth so this number



includes a lot of duplicate entries, but for good reason, Avibase has 262 names in 106 languages for Barn Swallow, for example.

While maintaining a searchable database of bird names is the core function of Avibase its usefulness by no means stops there – this is in fact just the framework for much of the rest of the website. Not only will searching for a species (or subspecies) show you the current classification, it brings you to the second aspect of Avibase, a part I like to call a "super database". Here the site brings together the species-specific information many other websites have already gathered. This includes links to range maps, photos, sound recordings, Wikipedia articles, and Google web and scholar searches. The range maps include detailed maps by Natureserve for North and South American species, plus eBird maps and maps created by Denis for every other species. Clicking on the link for sound recordings will take you to a list of recordings of that species at Xenocanto, one of the best online sources for bird recordings. The photo links are also very handy, bringing up photos from either Google or Flickr that are tagged with the species' name.

Checklists and trip reports from around the world

Another two incredibly useful features of Avibase are tools designed to be essential to travelling birders. The first of these was another cornerstone of Avibase's creation: checklists from around the world. Currently, you can pull up a checklist for any one of about 2,400 regions around the globe. Not only

that, you can choose the taxonomic authority you want to follow, or one of about 16 languages to display the list in. It gets better too, because thanks to the previously mentioned links to photos and recordings, you can display the checklist with a photo and a link to sound recordings – a pretty handy tool for study-

ing up before that big trip. Another option when displaying your checklist is a printable pdf version that is all ready to print to take out into the field with you.

If you still want more information about your destination Avibase also offers a huge database of birding trip reports from around the world. You can search for reports based on location, season, length of trip, number of species, number of endemics... the list goes on. There is enough information here to make your mouth start watering just by thinking about where you want to go. Just don't blame me if you can't stop reading trip reports from Ecuador.

Bird Links

Avibase's final feature, which may be the most useful one yet, is the list of birding websites around the world. This isn't just a mishmash of links though; they are nicely organized by geography and topic. If you haven't already found the information you were looking for on the other portions of Avibase, then you should find what you are looking for in the links. If not, it probably isn't on the internet yet!

Avibase offers many useful tools for birders from around the world. It has grown vastly since it began and promises to be a hub of information into the future as the internet continues to become more and more important for information about birds and birding. It nicely synthesizes many sources of information that are available throughout the internet and should be at the top of every birder's favourites list.