

ABOUT BOOKS

Who Are Those Guys?

A Conversation with Josep del Hoyo, the Creator of the *Handbook of the Birds of the World* Series

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The year 1992 saw the start of what has become the most ambitious project in natural history publishing to date, the *Handbook of the Birds of the World*, a series of hefty volumes intending to illustrate and describe in depth every bird species of the world and most of the visually distinct subspecies. Although the thought of that was surprising enough, this ground-breaking series was to be published by Lynx Edicions of Barcelona, Spain. This was a publishing outfit most people at the time had never heard of, led by a group of editors most people did not know. Nine years and six volumes later, the handbook has more than lived up to its goals and is halfway through the projected series. With its state-of-the-art illustrations, sumptuous color photography, and writing by the world's leading ornithologists, the handbook is now lauded as a landmark series in ornithology books. Furthermore, the name Lynx Edicions is now recognized around the world as a leader in conservation and ornithology publishing. But how did this series come about? How do you get an international project like this off the ground?

On August 17, 2001, I had the pleasure of interviewing Josep del Hoyo, the mastermind behind the handbook series, for my radio show *Inquiry* on WICN. I do not exaggerate when I say that this was my most eagerly anticipated interview of the year. Josep was in America flying from one city and museum collection to another, gathering information for the next volume of the series. I found him a genuine pleasure to talk with, funny, modest to a fault, and always superbly enthusiastic about his project. He is Catalan, a resident of that large and independent-minded area of northeast Spain called Catalonia of which Barcelona is the capital. The following is excerpted from the thirty-minute interview. Throughout our talk, I was fascinated to learn how much this series was the vision of just a very small group of people, and Josep in particular. Often, in the interview, the *Handbook of the Birds of the World* is simply referred to as "the project" or "the handbook."

M: My first experience with your writing and Lynx Edicions was years ago (1990) when I bought Where to Watch Birds in Catalonia, a small where-to-watch guide. I was so impressed by the book, I went to Catalonia. I followed the directions of the entire book and had one of my best birding vacations ever. Regarding the Handbook of the Birds of the World, I have to ask you: whose idea was this project? This has to be the most mind-boggling project I have ever seen in my life.

J: (laughing) The crazy person was me!

M: *Tell me how you pitched this idea. You went to Lynx Edicions....*

J: No. Lynx Edicions was created to do the handbook project and the book you mentioned and a few others were a kind of "practicing" before starting the big project of the *Handbook of the Birds of the World*. This was the reason to create Lynx Edicions. We did not want to have a project that we had been dreaming of for so long then put under restrictive commercial conditions. We decided to start our own company so we could have the freedom to do the books as we wanted.

M: *Here are a series of volumes of the highest quality with the best, most exquisite photographs, beautiful illustrations and attempting to cover all the bird species of the world. When you think about this project, it just seems so mind-boggling. Were people at first a bit nervous trying to do this project?*

(both laugh)

J: I was! I was really, really nervous. I started even seven years before officially beginning this project. I was collecting information and buying all sorts of books. Compiling all the information in computers. I reached a point in which it was like we had ninety percent of what we needed and the rest of the information about the other species we thought would be possible to look for in museums. At that point, we decided to go ahead. But after we really began the project, we realized we needed much more information because we had to illustrate the many races. So, probably, if we had realized the truth at the beginning, we would have given up!

M: *Thank God you didn't! It is one of the great projects in natural history publishing. We are already up to the sixth volume now, and you have always met your deadlines.*

J: It's a matter of survival. We realized this at the beginning when we started the series. In the beginning, the series was not successful, but now sales have grown a lot. We can say the series is consolidated. But at the beginning, people were prudent...kind of waiting. Many people who were interested were not buying the series. We asked people why. One of the most repeated answers by people, say fifty years old, was "Oh...I'm too old. The series will finish after I'm dead." So, we understood that publishing the series with relatively short intervals between volumes was really important for our viability.

M: *Was part of the problem also that people were so used to either British or American companies publishing large bird books? That there was a prejudice against the series because it was being published by a Catalan company who nobody had heard of before?*

J: (laughing) This was a big surprise!

M: *Nobody had heard of Lynx Edicions before! I can remember the reaction of the birding community here: "who are these people?"*

J: Yes! (laughs) "Who the hell are you?" I have heard it many times from very important people, especially in the beginning. But now, the project is being done by such a large number of people. We have more than 100 authors, and it's a growing number. Authors from the States, from Britain, and more than twenty countries. So it has become really an international project. The only unique thing was that the idea came from a person from Catalonia. Then I had to look for partners who were also Catalan. Other people from the rest of Spain also helped a lot. But almost immediately, we had to ask for help in Germany, France, and many other places.

M: *One of the partners in this project is the ICPB, the International Council for Bird Preservation. Have they been with you since the beginning?*

J: Yes. Their organization, that is now known as Bird Life International, is very important in terms of conservation. Although they concentrate on birds, they are also concerned with all other kinds of animals and habitats. Perhaps because of what you mentioned before, being from Spain and not a well-known place, we were looking for some kind of support or a kind of relationship with a well-known organization. So we prepared a kind of sample dummy book with all blank pages except for sixteen more or less "real" pages and we went there (to Bird Life International). We did not know the people. We talked with them, showed them what we had and explained the idea of the project, and they were very enthusiastic. We agreed immediately to make a kind of association for these books, use their logo, and this relationship is still alive, and Lynx Edicions has now published *Threatened Birds of the World* (note: for Bird Life International), a big volume.

M: *I want to talk to you about the plan for the Handbook of the Birds of the World. You must have had to lay out the basic format of the book from beginning to end at the very start of the project. You made a decision to use the taxonomy of the time and stick with it throughout the series?*

J: No. Let's say the layout in terms of format is the same from volume to volume, but new taxonomic decisions are being adopted all along. When we are working on a bird family, if a new species has been discovered, or a species split into two species. And there is a general agreement on that split, because some of these decisions are very controversial. So, if these taxonomic decisions are reasonably accepted, we update every volume before publication. So we are not following an old system of taxonomy at all, we are following the current one. But there are many trends. There are people who want to split everything. There are people who want to lump everything. We try to be reasonable. Not especially revolutionary, but not old fashioned either.

M: *But tell the truth. Taxonomy must drive you crazy.*

J: Well...it also interests me a lot (laughs).

M: *I'm fascinated by the taxonomic revolution too, but if I was involved in a project attempting to describe all the species of the world, it would drive me crazy.*

J: Yeah...it really is a problem, because there is fighting, even some political fighting (laughs). Every species account starts with a section on taxonomy. In that we can explain all the alternatives. So it is not so important whether you adopt a new split or not because we are always going to comment on the taxonomic alternatives that someone is proposing. So all the taxonomic problems or alternatives are always explained, and this is quite positive. It is more interesting to know about all the alternatives rather than to decide which is the good one because many times it is a matter of opinion on where you want to draw the line.

M: *How did you deal with the fact that there may be new species described after a volume is published? It isn't going to happen a lot, but it is going to happen..*

J: If it is after a volume is published, of course there is nothing we can do with that volume. But we are planning a system of update volumes. Once we have finished the nonpasserines three or four years later, we plan on publishing a volume updating all the nonpasserines. We will do the same when the series is finished with the passerines. So the newer species will be included in these volumes. With all the new technologies, the Internet and so forth, we want to believe that the handbook is a work, that when finished, won't just rest on library shelves getting old. We would like to have it kind of a life project that we will be able to keep updating using several systems like the Internet or whatever is available at that moment.

But sometimes a new species is discovered a few months before a volume is published. This is a nightmare for us! (both laugh). But, so far, we have always been able to include that new species. We have to make new illustrations, realign the plates because there is no room for the new illustration et cetera, et cetera. In the end, you will see the new species in the volume and not notice all the work we had to do.

M: *Who does the illustrations? How are they done?*

J: The illustrations are one of the main points of the series because it is the first time that *all* the distinct subspecies are being illustrated. For this we have a team of specialist artists, people whose professional lives are spent painting birds. Most of them are from Britain, but there are some in America, some in Spain, and one in Holland. It is an international team of eighteen artists, but the majority are British artists. Not only are there many good (bird) artists in Britain, but the British Museum serves as a kind of base.

Whatever is lacking in (the collections of) the British Museum, I find here (referring to collections in America). I come here every year, sometimes even more, to look for additional materials.

M: *Two of the earlier Lynx Edicions books, guides to National Parks in Catalonia had illustrations done by Francesc Jutglar, and he is one of the artists still working on the project.*

J: He is the artist who paints the big bird heads on the front covers that are very characteristic of our series. He is now a staff member of the team, and he coordinates other artists.

M: *It must be very challenging for these artists to paint some of these birds because some of these species are very little known. I think particularly of rails, like the Invisible Rail. People have rarely seen these birds. How do the artists get hold of enough material to be able to illustrate them?*

J: We have put together a very large collection of images from other sources. But the basis (of the illustrations) are the specimens that are in the museums. Even the Invisible Rail has some specimens in museums which are visible (laughs).

M: *(referring to the Invisible Rail) It is a great name!*

J: Yeah! We plan a kind of humorous volume at the end of the series, and we want to paint the Invisible Rail with just background, that's all. (both laugh)

M: *Are there birds for which there are no specimens? Or do all bird species have type specimens?*

J: There was one exception in which the type specimen is free (i.e., released and in the wild). It was netted, not killed. But they took a lot of photographs. This is an exception. I think there was another exception in which the only specimen was burned in a museum, destroyed or something like that. But in general there is at least one museum specimen. There are a good number of species for which only the one type specimen is known. These are the specimens I have to look for in places like Petersburg or Lima and other places.

M: *Let's talk about the photographs.*

J: Because we have the illustrated plates to show how the birds look, we use the photographs to show aspects of behavior, feeding, breeding, and many other things. It is not always possible, but we try to include photographs that show those behavioral aspects that we talk about in the general family accounts. It is interesting. We are now seeing bird photographers taking pictures in what they explain is "the handbook style." We are happy to see that we have prompted some photographers to take photos in that way, looking for rare species, looking for unusual behavior.

M: *Do you get people swamping you with photographs?*

J: We accept everything. So everybody is welcome to send photographs. For the last volume we received 17,000 photographs.

(Mark laughs)

J: But this is nice! Perhaps one of the best parts of my work. During a month or month and a half, I spent all my time looking at the best photographs of the birds we were working on at the moment. So that really is a privilege. To reduce the 17,000 to 2000 is quite easy. But then when you have to reduce the number of photographs to the 300 or 400 you want to include in the volume; that sometimes is *very* difficult.

M: *How hard is it to edit and coordinate all the written material? It must be very tough.*

J: Very tough!! All the authors are great, but working with them can sometimes be difficult because they are world experts, very important people who have lots of things to do, and you have to be prodding them...

M: *Are deadlines a problem?*

J: Yeah, deadlines are always a problem. But now that six volumes have already been published, the ornithological community, the potential authors, already know what our deadlines are. In the beginning though, we would say: "Please keep in mind the deadlines!" And the authors would say "yes...yes...we have heard about that...don't worry." Then there were always some problems. But we haven't had a really big problem so far.

M: *What have been the real challenges of putting out the series?*

J: Probably getting started. Especially during the years when I was the only person. I tried to convince some of my friends to help me, and it was very difficult. I did convince one of the (now) coeditors, Jordi Sargatal, a good friend of mine. We went on a trip in winter to Holland to look at geese wintering there, and I took advantage of the fact that we were together twenty-four hours a day. In the end he said: "ok!"

Later in the interview, when I asked Josep about the ultimate success of the *Handbook of the Birds of the World*, he finished by saying:

J: I think there is a reason. We, the partners of Lynx, are really interested in conservation, in ornithology, in taxonomy, and not in the business aspect of this. Of course, we need to take care and keep the project viable. But as long as it is viable, we are happy. I think this project is starting to be appreciated by many conservation organizations, and they are offering Lynx Edicions other similar big projects. In the future it looks like we will be publishing even more big conservation books, not just about birds, but about mammals and other animals. ↗

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