Helmut Nikla, Fotolia

Lightweight content management systems

WEB WEIGH-IN

Would you like a content management system that's actually easy to manage? We take a closer look at some user-friendly CMS solutions, including Pluck, SkyBlueCanvas, and NanoCMS. **BY DMITRI POPOV**

When you set up a website, you usually do so because you want to publish something, not because you want to spend time learning the intricacies of your content management system (CMS) or tinker with templates.

In most cases, what you need is a CMS that is easy to install and maintain and allows you to create pages without spending hours reading documentation. If that's what you are looking for, you'll be pleased to learn that quite a few lightweight CMS solutions are available.

Pluck

If you need to set up a foolproof CMS that has virtually no learning curve, consider Pluck [1]. Unlike many high-end CMSs, Pluck doesn't use a database back end, which makes installation, troubleshooting, and maintenance significantly

easier. To install Pluck, download the latest release of the software and unpack the downloaded archive in the document root of your server. Set the permissions of the *pluck* directory to *777*, then point your browser to *http://yourserver/install.php*. After you enter the required information, give your website a name, and add some text to the homepage, your website is ready to go.

To tweak Pluck and populate it with pages and content, log in to the Administration area using the password you specified during installation. The Administration area is divided into three sections: *Pages*, *Modules*, and *Options* (see Figure 1).

As you might have guessed, the *Pages* section is where you manage web pages and images. To create a new page, press the *New page* button. The WYSIWYG editor makes it easy to add and format text,

insert images, and embed media files (Figure 2). The right column of the page-editing area contains a list of all uploaded images and existing pages, and you can insert an image or a link from the list in a page by clicking on *Insert* or *insert link*. The WYSIWYG editor provides all basic formatting tools, but if you find them a bit limiting, you can switch to HTML mode. If you want, for example, to embed a YouTube video or use markup not available in the visual mode, HTML mode can come in handy.

Once the page is finished, save it by pressing the *Save* button and return to the *Pages* section. Here you can use the available buttons to reorder and delete the existing pages and edit each page's description and keyword. Although the latter step is optional, a good description and relevant keywords can make the page easier to find with the use of web search engines.

The *Modules* section allows you to manage installed modules used to add new features to Pluck. The default Pluck installation comes with two modules: Contact Form and Albums. The Contact
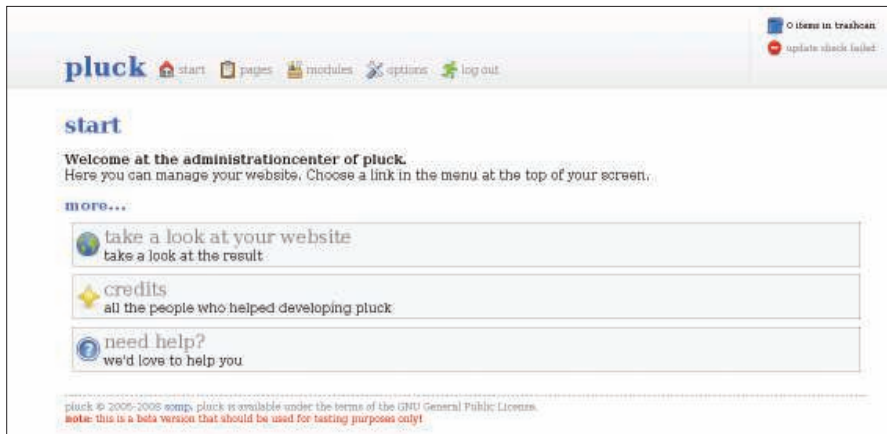
Figure 1: Pluck is ready to use in minutes.

Form module is built into Pluck, and because you can't modify it, it doesn't appear in the *Modules* section. The Albums module allows you to create and manage photo albums that you can then publish on a web page (Figure 3).

Creating a new photo album is rather straightforward. In the *New album* field, give your album a name and press *Save*. Then use the *New image* form to upload photos to the album. To publish the newly created album, create a new web page (or open the existing one) and scroll down to the *Modules* section. To specify the order in which the added modules appear on the page, select *1* or *2* from the *Albums* drop-down list and press *Save*. In a similar manner, you can add a contact form to a web page.

The *Options* section allows you to modify general settings, such as the site's title and your email address. Here, you can also change your password, manage modules, and change the default theme.

Pluck does have some limitations: You can only insert albums and contact forms at the bottom of a web page, and the system doesn't provide an easy way to embed videos from YouTube or other similar services.

Although Pluck is not the most flexible CMS around, it really excels when it comes to ease-of-use. If you want to set up a website for your family and you don't want to spend hours on the phone explaining simple things such as how to create a page or insert a photo, then Pluck is a good pick.

SkyBlueCanvas

Like Pluck, SkyBlueCanvas [2] doesn't rely on a database back end, and install-

ing this CMS is ridiculously easy. To do so, first download the latest release and unpack the downloaded archive in the document root of your server. Then change the file permissions of the */sky-blue/data/* directory to *755* and point your browser to the server's address. The installation consists of just a single step in which you specify a username

and a password. After that, log in with the newly created credentials to go directly to the administration area that consists of five sections: *Pages*, *Pictures*, *Collections*, *Templates*, and *Settings* (see Figure 4).

As in Pluck, the *Pages* section is where you add and manage web pages. However, if you press the *Add* button to create a new page or *Edit* to modify the existing one, you'll immediately notice that SkyBlueCanvas offers more editing tools than Pluck (Figure 5).

In addition to a WYSIWYG editor, SkyBlueCanvas features so-called containers and classes. Containers allow you to apply text formatting to the selected paragraph, such as *Heading 1*, *Preformatted*, and *Blockquote*.

The classes let you apply specific layout settings to the selected paragraph. For example, applying the *Note (hidden)* class to a paragraph hides it from the page, whereas the *Important* class turns the paragraph into boxed text. The *Pub-*
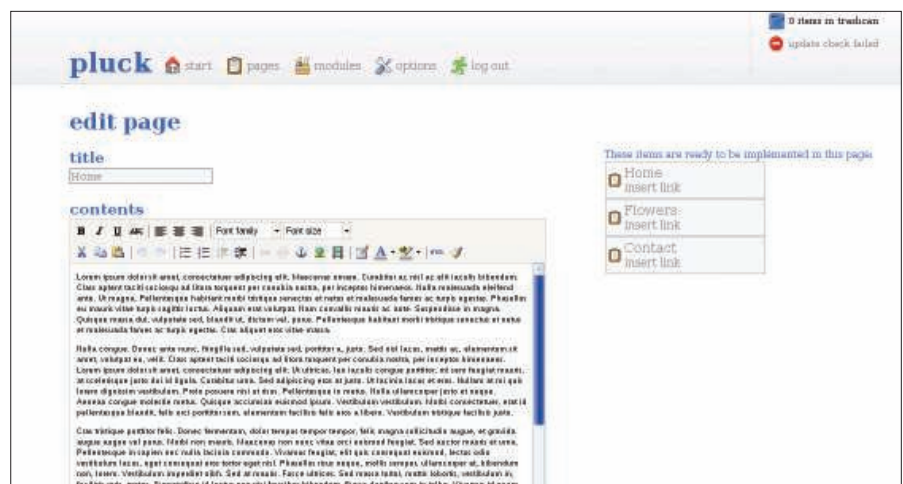

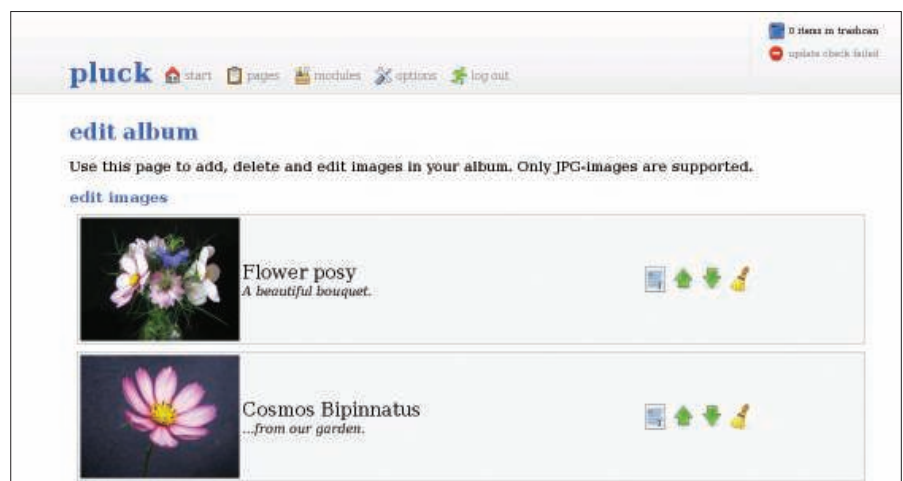**Figure 2: The WYSIWYG editor makes it easy to edit pages in Pluck.**

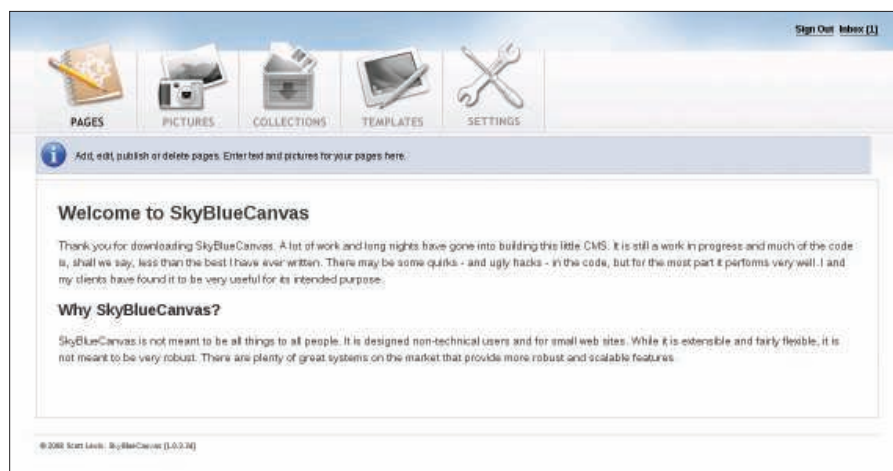**Figure 3: With the Albums module, you can publish photo albums with Pluck.**
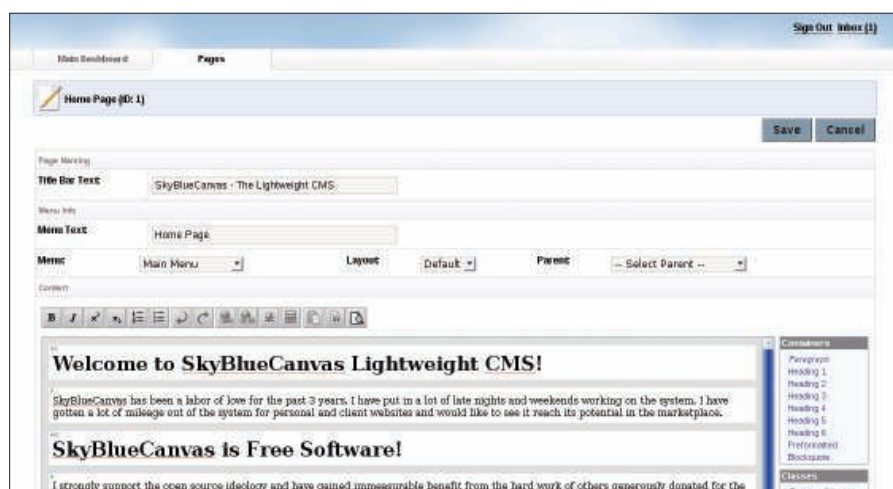
Figure 4: SkyBlueCanvas.

Figure 5: Besides a WYSIWYG editor, SkyBlueCanvas features containers and classes.

lished drop-down list lets you choose whether to publish the page.

The *Pictures* section is designed to add and manage graphics files used in web pages. When you press the *Insert image* button in the editor's main toolbar, the system displays a thumbnail gallery of all graphics files in the *Pictures* section.

Simply click on the picture you want to insert into the page.

The *Collections* section is the most interesting but also the most complicated feature of SkyBlueCanvas. Say you want to use SkyBlueCanvas to publish a series of articles. To do this, create a new page in the *Pages* section, then type "Articles"

Figure 6: Container Publisher allows you to manage collections.

in the *Title Bar Text* and *Menu text* fields, and choose *Main Menu* from the *Menu* drop-down list. After setting the *Published* option to *Yes*, press *Save* to save the page. Now take a look at your website and notice the *Articles* entry in the main menu. If you click on it, you will see a blank page with no menus or content. Because SkyBlueCanvas treats each page as a placeholder, you must manually populate it with content.

The content in SkyBlueCanvas is managed as collections, which can be anything from links and contacts to photo galleries and articles. For starters, you might want to add the main menu to the Articles page. To do so, press the *Collection Publishing* button in the *Collection* section and click on the *Edit* link next to the *Main Menu* entry (Figure 6).

After you locate the Articles page, choose *Yes* and *Top* from the *Show* and *Page Region* drop-down lists, respectively. Now if you press *Save* and refresh the Articles page in your browser, you should see the main menu on the page. In a similar manner, you can add links to the right column. In the *Collection Publishing* section, click on the *Edit* link next to the *mod.links.php* entry and choose *Right* from the *Page Region* drop-down list. Among other items, the *Collections* section contains the Articles collection, which allows you to create pages using the supplied article template and organize the articles using groups. Next, press the *Articles* button in the *Collection* section and add new article pages and groups.

After you've done that, go back to the *Collection Publishing* section, click on the *Edit* link next to the *mod.articles.php* entry, and choose *Main* from the *Page Region* drop-down list. After you refresh the Articles page, you should see an expandable and clickable list of articles in the body of the page. Although this is not the most straightforward way of creating a web page, it does offer you a lot of flexibility in how you present the content of your website.

As the name suggests, the *Templates* section is used to install new templates and tweak the existing ones. Finally, the *Settings* section allows you to modify basic settings, such as website title, URL, general info, and so forth.

SkyBlueCanvas provides more flexibility than Pluck, but this power comes at a
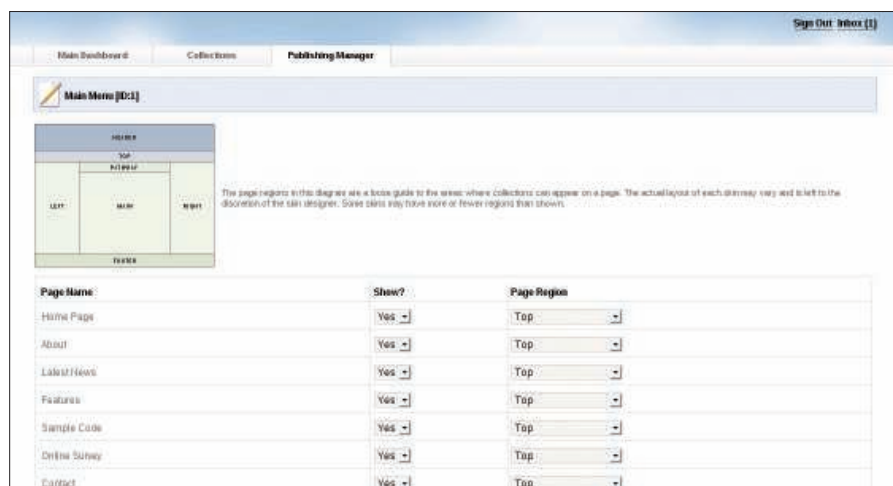
Figure 7: NanoCMS is a tiny, no-frills system.

price – understanding how to manage content and construct pages with the use of collections requires time and effort. However, if you are willing to go through the learning process, you can use Sky-BlueCanvas to manage small and medium-sized websites like a pro.

NanoCMS

NanoCMS [3] is billed as the tiniest CMS you can ever find, and this is not far from the truth. When unpacked, the entire system is only 70KB in size. Also, it is one of the easiest systems to install and configure. First, download the latest version of the software and unpack the downloaded archive. In the resulting directory, locate the *data/config.php* file and open it in a text editor, then change the default username and password, save the file, and upload the contents of the folder to your server's document root. After you change the permissions for the *data/pages* and *date/areas* directories to *777*, NanoCMS is ready to go.

In your browser, navigate to *http://yourserver/data/nanoadmin.php* and log in to the administration area using the

specified username and password. The administration area is divided into four sections: *Create Page*, *Pages & Options*, *Content Areas*, and *Tweakers* (Figure 7). Creating pages in NanoCMS is as easy as it gets. Just go to the *Create Page* section, give the page a name, enter text in the *Content* field, and add the page to the menu you want; you can add pages to the sidebar, the top menu, and the footer menu.

NanoCMS doesn't have a WYSIWYG editor, so all formatting is done with raw HTML code. When the page is ready, press the *Add Page* button to publish the page. The *Pages & Options* section allows you to manage the existing pages: you can re-order them, move to a different section, and delete them. To modify your website's general settings, click on *Content Areas*.

NanoCMS's default functionality can be expanded with the use of so-called tweakers. For example, you can add a WYSIWYG editor to NanoCMS by adding the OpenWYSIWYG tweaker (Figure 8). To install a tweaker, copy the content of the tweaker's archive in the *data/*

tweaks directory of your NanoCMS installation. In the administration area, navigate to the *Tweakers* section and press the *Activate* link next to the Open-WYSIWYG editor item. Now you can edit pages without getting your hands dirty with HTML coding.

As you would expect from such a tiny system, NanoCMS's functionality is pretty bare-bones, but the system still offers all the essential tools for managing a small website. Although you probably wouldn't want to use NanoCMS for managing a site with more than 15 to 20 pages, if you need a no-frills solution that can be deployed in a matter of minutes, NanoCMS might be just what you are looking for.

Additional Lightweight CMSs

Other excellent lightweight CMSs are out there. Before you commit to any of the systems described here, you might want to take other applications for a spin.

Frog CMS [4] uses MySQL as its database back end, and it provides an easy-to-use interface for managing content and users. This makes it suitable for larger websites maintained by several users. Similar to other systems, Frog CMS can be extended with the use of plugins, and you'll find quite a few modules to choose from on the project's website.

Pixie [5] is a sleek CMS that is loaded with features, including a WYSIWYG editor, support for microformats, a file manager, database backups, a dashboard, spam protection, and much more. If you are looking for a blog application rather than a traditional CMS, Chyrp [6] definitely deserves a closer look. Chyrp features an AJAX-ified interface that allows you to manage a blog with consummate ease. Furthermore, dozens of Chyrp extensions can help you customize your blog installation to your liking. ■

Figure 8: NanoCMS can be expanded by tweakers.

INFO

[1] Pluck: *http://www.pluck-cms.org*

[2] SkyBlueCanvas:
     http://www.skybluecanvas.com

[3] NanoCMS: *http://www.nanocms.in*

[4] Frog CMS:
     http://www.madebyfrog.com

[5] Pixie: *http://www.getpixie.co.uk*

[6] Chyrp: *http://www.chyrp.net*