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## From pique to peek on the peaks

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**KEMPTON, Pa.** - At the end of the Hawk Mountain trail, where two hikers emerge to a breathtaking vista known as North Lookout, stands a short man with copper-colored skin, a clipboard at his side, and binoculars pointed skyward.



LAURENCE KESTERSON / Inquirer

Surya Gurung of Dhikur Pokhari, Nepal is spending four months observing and counting birds on Hawk Mountain in Berks County.

In a thick, unfamiliar accent, he lists some of the raptor species he's spotted migrating along the ridge this day. He is friendly, telling the hikers he teaches at an impoverished school in Nepal.

So what is he doing in Berks County?

The story goes back 31/2 years, to another hillside, this one at the edge of the Himalayas. Two Americans with binoculars were sitting on land belonging to Surya Gurung. He went over to see what was up.

"We explain about the steppe eagles' [migration] and [ask] if he has ever seen one passing over this hillside," recalled Robert DeCandido, an ecologist who interned at the Hawk Mountain Sanctuary 18 years ago.

The man hadn't. For several days, Gurung sat patiently with the Americans on land that his family has farmed for generations. They spent hours telling him the finer points of the birds' seasonal migration.

Finally, the birds came.

"Surya was very happy, and I remember him telling me that he had lived in that village all his life and never had he seen the eagles in migration

overhead," DeCandido said.

By the next year, Gurung and his family were out counting birds themselves. Soon he was faxing counts in a scientific format - "The Migration of Raptors South of Annapurna, Nepal, Autumn 2002" - to biologists in the United States.

Now he is at Hawk Mountain, about 85 miles northwest of Philadelphia, taking part in a four-month internship that ends in early July. He hopes that it will lead to a better understanding of birds among people on the other side of the world.

Best known locally for bird-watching and the superb hiking trails that lead to the lookouts, Hawk Mountain Sanctuary is the oldest and largest member-supported raptor conservation organization in the world. Data collected there on the migration of raptors - hawks, eagles, falcons and other birds of prey - played a role in *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson's groundbreaking 1962 book, and in the lawsuit that eventually led to the banning of DDT.

More than 200 interns, many of them from remote areas of the world, have cycled through the sanctuary since 1976.

"It uses the spectacle of raptor migration to attract interest in the conservation of the raptors," said Cynthia Lenhart, the sanctuary's executive director. "Subsequently, other conservation issues come out - the habitat, the importance of clean air, clean water."

Birds care little about the levels of poverty or education in the countries they fly over, so many migration routes are in parts of the world where the people are more concerned about getting enough to eat than where hawks come from. That is the case in Nepal, whose 25 million residents earn an average of less than \$300 a year.

Gurung lives in a two-room mud-and-stone house with thatch roof in Dhikur Pokhari, a largely Buddhist village about 10 miles northwest of Pokhara, a staging area for trekking. The spectacular, panoramic view includes snow-capped Annapurna, the 10th-highest mountain in the world (the 14 highest mountains are in the Himalayas).

A math teacher in a community-run school, Gurung, 46, may well be the most educated person in his village. Yet he had never heard of the migration and had not noticed the steppe eagles that soar through every fall on their way to East Africa from breeding grounds in Siberia and other northern locales.

When they met Gurung in 1999, DeCandido and his girlfriend, wildlife photographer Deborah Allen, talked with him for days about the flights of eagles and lammergeiers and long-legged buzzards over his hillside. By the time the two New York residents left two weeks later, Gurung was hooked on migrating birds.

"The Nepalese people don't know where the raptors come from," he said in halting English the other day on Hawk Mountain. "[And] if they don't know, they are very interested."

Gurung and DeCandido never saw each other again. But the American scientist sent a steady stream of birding books and field guides, data sheets and binoculars, which were delivered to Gurung's door by Sherpa guides from a nearby trekking company. They also exchanged more than 50 letters.

"Sometimes they were about my school, sometimes about my life - most of the time about the birds," Gurung said. "We shared about each other."

Gurung had never traveled outside Nepal, and, at first, he could not imagine a trip to America. Soon, however, he began to think about speaking to groups of people in his village about the importance of raptors and about teaching the children in his school.

At Hawk Mountain, he is working with educator Anna Scheinzbach to develop a coloring book of the birds of Western Nepal. Ornithology was often taught with coloring books in North America through the early 1900s, Scheinzbach said.

Gurung, quietly intense and clearly committed to making a difference in his village, has a hard time putting into words what he expects to eventually come out of his time here. DeCandido believes something "phenomenal" will result.

"When anyone is brought to the USA, that is a sort of recognition that the person is special or important (or doing something important) in some way," he wrote in an e-mail from Israel, where he is a post-doctoral fellow at the International Bird Research Centre in Eilat.

"They will treat Surya differently since, in some ways, 'He made it.' And the message that Surya carries back with him, namely, that it is OK to watch and enjoy birds; that the environment is important in and of itself; and that the village can contribute important information about an incredibly majestic bird, is all good and will be received well.

"So, with Surya's position as a teacher and what he will learn at Hawk Mountain, we think only good things can happen for Surya, for the eagles, and for the hopes of the villagers."