

A Bhutanese student's birding map reflects her personal journey By Dave Shelles

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Tshering Dema (MA '11) had traveled around the world from Bhutan to pursue her education. As a graduate student at Teton Science Schools in Jackson, Wyo., she stomped through miles of bear and cougar habitat. But when she spotted her first great horned owl, the gutsy student was deeply unnerved.

"Bhutanese culture attributes the hooting of an owl as a harbinger of death," she later wrote. "Owls are alternately known as *tegyen wookpa*—directly translated as evil owls." For weeks afterward, she waited for tragedy to befall herself or her family.

Dema revisits her owl encounter in the essay "Birds, Birding and Birders," which she completed in a graduate nonfiction seminar through the University of Wyoming's MFA Creative Writing Program. The piece weaves Dema's reflections on her personal journey through America with descriptions of bird activity near campus. She also worked with local artists to create two maps of her findings.

In spring 2011, mapping projects by Dema and 15 classmates and community members were exhibited at the University of Wyoming Art Museum as *Laramie: A Gem City Atlas*. The project was inspired by the work of Rebecca Solnit, cultural historian and author of *Infinite City: A San Francisco Atlas*. Solnit served as UW's spring 2011 Eminent Writer in Residence.

"In a sense, we're all cartographers," Solnit says. "We all have this desire to know where we are and to map it more carefully."

Dema, who had transferred to UW to complete master's degrees in natural science education and environment and natural resources, wasn't expecting to take a creative writing class. But her advisor suggested that as a practitioner of place-based education, she might benefit from the project.

"I was very nervous," says Dema, for whom English is a second language. "But before I signed up, I had a couple of meetings with the instructor, Alyson Hagy. She read a couple of my papers and said I'd do fine."

Before choosing a topic, Dema listened as classmates discussed mapping beetle kill, saloons, salons, and nuclear missile silos. "I wanted to map my experience here, but I didn't want to just put down where I had various experiences," she says.

Birds had been a motif throughout Dema's American journey, starting with her graduate research monitoring songbird nests around Jackson. "The best part was seeing them hatch because I had to visit them every week," she recalls. "We saw them grow from an ugly little chick to a beautiful bird."

She was also fascinated by birders, a group that seemed to her a culture unto themselves. "Starting at the Teton Science Schools, she kept running into scientists in Wyoming, in the Tetons, and here who just thought going birding was fantastic," says Alyson Hagy, professor of English. "She wanted to figure out what it is Americans find so fascinating about birds."

Dema decided to map local bird nesting and migration patterns. Her essay begins with a roll call of the various birds encountered on her daily movements across campus—brown creepers clinging to the conifers outside Wyoming Hall, house sparrows greeting students at the library entrance.

She also contrasts images of birds from Bhutan's oral tradition with her real-life experiences. Ravens, for example, are symbols of Bhutanese power and authority that adorn the crowns of kings. "Having this romanticized image of Raven, it never fails to disappoint me to see the creature from the crown hovering on garbage," she writes.

Near the end of her essay, Dema recalls the day two saw-whet owls were spotted near her research site. She marches "with newfound confidence" to a scene she describes as "a total bird-nerd haven"—enraptured birders delighting in a rare encounter. As for the owl, "it was perched on a willow branch with its eyes half-closed, trying to look small and tame," she recalls. "I wanted to yell, 'I saw my first saw-whet owl!' But yelling would have earned me scorn of other birders."

She concludes, "I can't say I have overcome my fear of owls as harbingers of misfortune, but I have certainly learned to look beyond the myth and appreciate them for the amazing creature they are."

Dema hopes to someday map her home city of Thimphu, Bhutan, with her own students. "There's so much oral tradition in Bhutan, and most of the history is based on storytelling," she says. "Only recently have people started writing it down and recording it. I have to develop a curriculum as part of my thesis, and I'm going to implement this curriculum so that they can do their own maps."