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U.S. Rarities Spotted in Texas' Rio Grande Valley

Several sightings of birds rare or unheard of in the United States have cropped up recently in Texas' Rio Grande Valley. Sightings of the Green-breasted Mango and Amethyst-throated Hummingbirds and a Mottled Owl have all been reported in the last 30 days, said McAllen Convention and Visitors' Bureau Director Nancy Millar.

On July 8 a Green-breasted Mango, a relatively large Mexican hummingbird, was sighted in San Benito, about an hour east of McAllen. The Green-breasted Mango is commonly found from eastern Mexico to northern South America.

There have only been approximately 15 documented records of Green-breasted Mango for Texas, primarily in the fall and winter. That few sightings of any bird makes it a rarity and very attractive to birders, who like to keep lists of all the birds they have seen.

The Amethyst-throated Hummingbird was sighted, also in San Benito, on July 4. It was the first sighting ever of the bird species in the United States. The Bird Records committee hasn't officially accepted the sighting yet, but according to a very good source, it is highly likely.

It was a busy month, with also multiple sightings of a possible Mottled Owl in Weslaco, 15 minutes east of McAllen. The first sighting occurred on July 5. If accepted, this would also be the first record of a live Mottled Owl in the country.

"It's interesting to us that these birds have been spotted during the summer," said Millar. "Fewer people bird here during the summer in large part because they believe that rarities aren't around then. These sightings prove that theory false."

Birding is big business in the McAllen area, bringing in \$125 million per year to the Rio Grande Valley. And, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, each rare bird species, such as the ones sighted recently, contribute \$100,000 each in local spending.

"Birders will hear about a bird, fly or drive down, rush out to see it, spend the night, eat a few meals, the head home."

"It's a passionate group," she added. "Birders are very committed to their hobby, and when they have an opportunity to add a bird to their lists, they grab it. Fortunately for us, we give them lots of opportunities."

The economic force of wildlife watching is why many Chambers of Commerce, Convention and Visitors' Bureaus and Economic Development corporations are wholeheartedly embracing nature tourism in general and birding in particular. Coordinated by the Chamber of Commerce, McAllen's

annual Texas Tropics Nature Festival, this year March 29-April 1, highlights the birds and butterflies that live here year-round as well as those that migrate through.

According to the McAllen Chamber of Commerce, for example, 125,000 birders who come into the region and support 2,500 jobs. Birders are big money in this rapidly growing area, ranked the 4th fastest growing MSA in the country.

“Often people understand the economic value of building buildings,” said Millar. “But McAllen is proof that sometimes there’s also value in not building them, and that the two concepts actually can work together. After all, if you want the money birders bring in, you must have the birds. And to have the birds, you must have the habitat.”