

**Building Community Through a Refuge**  
**By Dan Ashe**  
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The *Albuquerque Business Journal* in March named 30 women from a highly competitive pool of 435 nominees as this year's Women of Influence in the state of New Mexico. The *Journal* was looking for women who are leaders, innovators, mentors and role models. It comes as no surprise that Jennifer Owen-White, manager of Valle de Oro National Wildlife Refuge, was an honoree.

Owen-White is pouring her heart and soul into Valle de Oro, the first urban refuge in the Southwest Region. And she is building the refuge with the people of Albuquerque. Valle de Oro is, "a refuge established, designed and built by the community for the community, and that is so exciting," she says. That it is!

"I often tell people that it is not my job as the refuge manager to build this refuge; it is my job to help the community build its national wildlife refuge," she says.

Throughout the National Wildlife Refuge System, our visitor services folks are engaging nearby communities and helping them build their connections to nature by answering their concerns and meeting their needs.

Unless we act, many of today's children will have few opportunities to experience nature. We have become a more diverse, more urban nation, and many kids don't get a chance, like I did, to wander fields breathing in pristine air, to turn over rocks in creeks and find out what was hiding out there, to watch a bird of prey swoop down on a river and grab a fish with its talons.

But visitor services folks are working tirelessly to find programs that do allow young people to connect with nature, even in the heart of a city like Albuquerque. At Valle de Oro Refuge, one project uses community gardens to help youth really get their hands dirty. Sometimes, geo-caching or other adventures that use the latest technology get people out into nature.

I know many refuges are holding fishing derbies for new anglers or wildflower walks or even "spring cleaning" events. That's on top of the normal events that happen at refuges: teaching people about the amazing critters and beautiful places that we share the world with.

Since I took this job, I have emphasized that priorities are making the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service relevant in people's lives and ensuring that all Americans really see that what we do matters in their lives. We can't afford to allow millions of kids to continue growing up with little understanding of the personal stake they have in healthy wildlife and ecosystems. A world without a conservation ethic is not a world friendly to humanity.