



## ANNUAL REPORT FRIENDS OF VALLE DE ORO NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE 2023-2024

### **Mission Statement**

To help shape and support the development of Valle de Oro National Wildlife Refuge, the Friends foster a community conservation ethic by promoting environmental and cultural awareness through public educational programs and recreational opportunities.

### **About the Friends of Valle de Oro NWR – “The Community’s Refuge”**

In 2011, the South Valley community in Albuquerque, New Mexico organized a grassroots effort to preserve the former Price’s Dairy property as green space for wildlife and future generations. These engaged community members later became the Friends of Valle de Oro National Wildlife Refuge (Friends).

Through hard work, persistence, and vision, we worked alongside the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and local partners to establish the Valle de Oro National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). Valle de Oro NWR is the first Urban National Wildlife Refuge in the Southwest region, and it is the first to develop from the ground up under the new USFWS’s [Urban Wildlife Conservation Program](#).

The Friends and USFWS operate under a formal agreement to achieve our mutual conservation and community engagement goals. As such, the Friends continue to play a significant role in supporting programs, events, and activities at the refuge, conducting outreach and hosting events, forging partnerships, supporting environmental education, fundraising, and involving the greater community in visualizing and shaping “their” refuge. Our work illustrates how communities can unite under the common goals of protecting the natural environment and creating a resource for both wildlife and people.

Valle de Oro NWR is an extraordinary project and its success is due to the efforts of many individuals and organizations, local and state government agencies, and federal partners. This annual report highlights not only the numbers but also the many accomplishments of the Friends over the 2023-2024 fiscal year. Our hope is to inspire you to become involved in shaping and supporting the refuge’s unique model of collaboration, community involvement, and the future of conservation.

### **Program Highlights**

- Continuing successes with community-engaged conservation
- Supported expanded program offerings of the refuge
- Expanded youth employment opportunities at the refuge
- Provided five \$500 scholarships to local undergraduate students
- Established the Environmental Justice Air Monitoring Network
- Continued to build a strong social media presence

### **Next Steps**

#### Continue to Seek and Incorporate Community Input

Continue to implement goals of Valle de Oro NWR’s Environmental and Economic Justice Strategic Plan (EEJSP)—the first in the nation of its kind developed for a public land site – and the Urban Standards of Excellence.

#### Plan Strategically



Reevaluate the Friends' strategic plan, goals and tasks, and build our outreach capacity. Increase membership and volunteer numbers, as they are treasured assets and incredible ambassadors for the refuge.

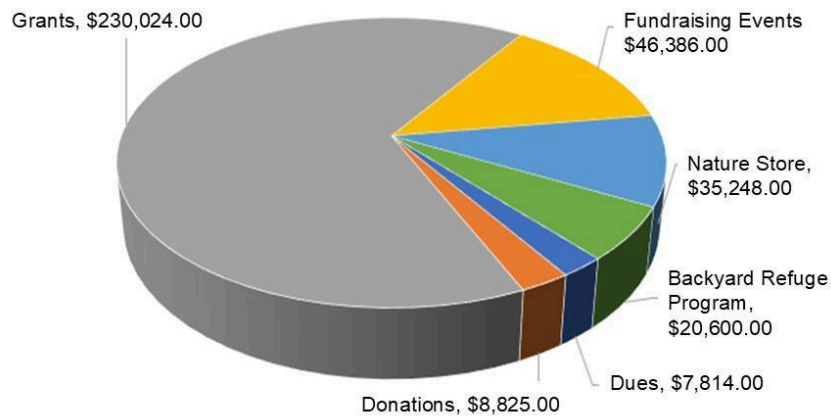
### Fundraise

Move forward with the refuge's next goals – youth corps expansion, develop the Nature Play Area, continue with habitat restoration. Continue to support the refuge through grant writing and fundraising.

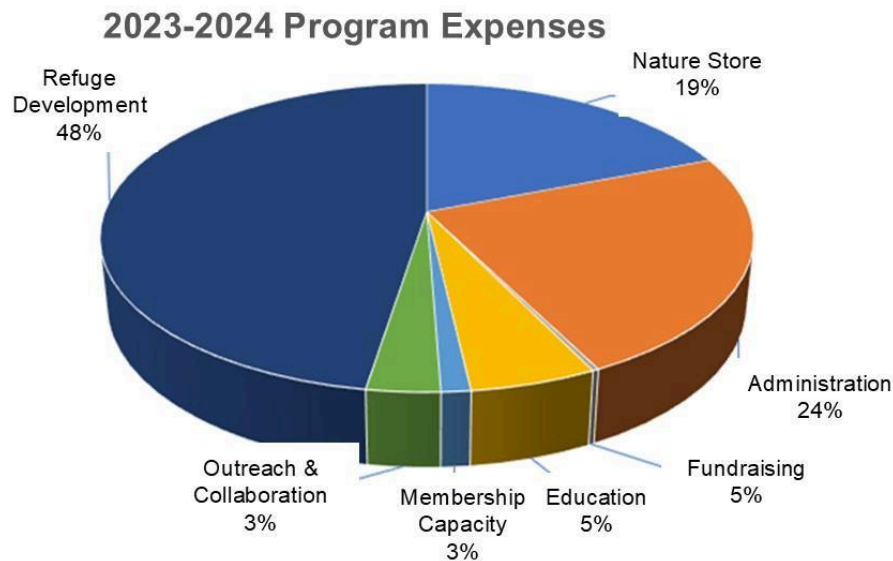
### **Fiscal Year 2023-2024 Breakdown**

The majority of fundraising came in through grants and fundraising events. Friends and Backyard Refuge Program memberships, donations, and certifications also made up a significant portion of fundraising.

### **2023-2024 Fundraising Accomplishments**



Primary program expenses went into refuge development projects which include programming, events, and restoration projects on the refuge. The Nature Store and Friends' staff salaries (administration) also made up a large portion of program expenses.



## Staff

Executive Director - Under the director of the board, the ED is responsible for the overall management and operations of the organization

- Katie Dix (February 2022 – February 2024)
- Annie Montes (March 2024- present)

Kathleen McKinstry, Nature Store Manager (September 2021 – present)

Janet Garcia, Environmental and Economic Justice Coordinator (May 2024 – present)

Laurel Ladwig, ABQ Backyard Refuge Program Director (Fall 2020 – present)

## Board of Directors

### President

- David Barber (2015-July 2023)
- Forest Graber (August 2023 – present)

### Treasurer

- Bryan Crawford (2020 – present)

### Secretary

- Kathleen Burianek (January 2023– March 2024)
- Joan Morrison (January-December 2022, April 2024 – present)

### Education Committee Chair

- Joan Morrison (January 2018 – January 2024, March 2024 – present)
- Annie Montes (January 2024-March 2024)

### Refuge Development Chair

- Kat Wheeler (2022 – December 2023)
- Jaren Peplinski (December 2023 - August 2024)

### Other Board Members



- Makenzie Sanchez (January 2023 – June 2024)
- Jeremy Vesbach (January -September 2023)
- Kathleen Burianek (June 2022 - July 2024)
- Clay Meredith (June 2024 – present)
- Fiore Bran Aragon (June 2024 – present)

### Sponsors

- The Wilderness Society
- Explora Science Center
- Nusenda Foundation
- Talking Talons
- Urban Wildlife Conservation Program
- Trust for Public Land
- Public Land Alliance
- Department of Energy's Kansas City National Security Campus managed and operated by Honeywell FM&T
- Formative Architecture
- Bennu Organics, LLC
- Petroglyph National Monument
- New Mexico Nature by Design, LLC
- Jezebel Incorporated
- Token Ibis

### Key Partnerships

Valle de Oro National Wildlife Refuge, Mountain View Community Action, Mountain View Neighborhood Association, Los Jardines Institute, Pueblo of Isleta, Ancestral Lands Conservation Corps, Rocky Mountain Youth Corps, Trust for Public Land, City of Albuquerque Open Space, Ciudad Soil and Water Conservation District, and Bernalillo County.

### Accomplishments

- Established the Environmental Justice Air Monitoring Network (EJ Air).
  - Friends became the fiscal sponsor of EJ Air in October 2023 and continues to fundraise with EJ Air's Steering Committee.
  - Three staff positions are funded for EJ Air, a data specialist, an air monitoring technician, and a program coordinator.
- Established EJ Air Steering Committee, which includes representatives from the following organizations: Friends, Valle de Oro NWR, Los Jardines Institute, Pueblo of Isleta, Ancestral Lands Conservation Corps, Bosque Ecosystem Monitoring Program, Mountain View Community Action, Mountain View Neighborhood Association.
- Albuquerque Backyard Refuge Program (BYRP) - Since the certification program's launch in 2021, BYRP has certified **139+** acres with **480** individual, community (community gardens, schools, libraries, etc), and business participants!
  - In 2023-2024 BYRP certified **35.6** acres with **146** participants.
  - Launched a Bat Conservation International bat survey pilot project with partners
  - Engaged with over **120** University of New Mexico students across four departments: Geography, Sustainability Studies, Philosophy, and Landscape Architecture.



- o Began a project with the ABQ BioPark to add new plant labels at the Botanic Garden with QR codes that lead to information about each species and our program's educational materials.
- o Worked with Explora Science Center to add food production beds in the Dorn Community Charter School garden where we have added habitat plants over the past decade.
- Mountain View Elementary School Field Day: In June 2023, served **206** students, grades K through 5, from Mountain View ES who spent the day at the refuge learning about the history of the refuge, nature journaling, birdwatching, and other age appropriate activities.
- Nature scholarship program – since the program’s inception, the Friends have awarded **34** scholarships to undergraduates totalling **\$17,200**
  - o For the 2022-2023 academic year, the Friends awarded **one \$750 scholarship** and **two \$500 scholarships** to local undergraduate students pursuing studies in environment and conservation fields.
  - o For the 2023-2024 academic year, the Friends awarded **five \$500 scholarships** to local undergraduate students pursuing studies in environment and conservation fields.
- Supported refuge programs and goals by working with refuge staff, providing community stipends and giveaways, and funding catering for events. Programs the Friends supported included Nature Tots, B.A.R.K. Ranger, Star Parties, Build Your Refuge Day, Saturday at the Refuge, Latino Conservation Week, and EJ Days. Other support included:
  - o Volunteer recruitment for on site irrigation.
  - o Helping to lead an Apprenticeship for Leaders in Mosaic Arts (ALMA) workshop and coordinating with ALMA to complete crane sculpture at Valle de Oro NWR.
  - o Recruiting volunteers for shuttle tours – Wednesdays and Saturdays.
- Conducted several outreach events in support of the refuge and its programs including:
  - o Book launch, book (poetry) reading with Renata Golden.
  - o Canteen Brewery’s Thirst for the Outdoors.
  - o Environmental Justice Community Day.
  - o Quarterly Community Updates at Valle de Oro NWR.
  - o Backyard Refuge Events – over **40** events, reaching almost **2,000** residents.
    - Two Build Your Backyard Refuge days – approximately **600** participants.
  - o EJ Air Community Updates – quarterly.
- Engaged over **300** members via events and monthly newsletters, the Friends have over **700** subscribers to our newsletter.
- Continuing to build our social media presence, the Friends have **1,069** followers on Instagram and **2,700+** followers on Facebook.
- Applied for and received over grants for **\$225,000** for refuge development projects including the construction of bosque bridges to increase access to the refuge.
- Supported refuge staff in designing the Valle de Oro Nature Play Area and the Outdoor Classroom.

## **Valle de Oro National Wildlife Refuge - YOUR National Wildlife Refuge**

### About the Urban Wildlife Conservation Program

Created by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, this program works to garner broad support for conservation, providing a reason and opportunities for urban residents to find, appreciate, and care for nature in their cities and beyond. The Urban Wildlife Conservation Program focuses on engaging urban neighbors and fostering a sense of stewardship. The program consists of three components: Urban

Refuges, of which there are 101 total, 14 of which are considered Priority Urban Refuges; Urban Refuge Partnerships; and Urban Bird Treaty Cities. Valle de Oro NWR is proudly classified under all three designations. For more information visit [www.fws.gov/urban](http://www.fws.gov/urban)

### Standards of Excellence

Valle de Oro NWR is the first refuge to be built from the ground up using the Urban Standards of Excellence. We have built our foundation with these standards, using them to guide all aspects of our work in habitat planning, biology, outreach, education programs, and partnerships. We are proud to model these principles for future urban refuges, bringing these standards to life in innovative ways. Our guiding principles are:

- Know and relate to the community
- Connect urban people with nature via stepping stones of engagement
- Build partnerships
- Be a community asset
- Ensure adequate long-term resources
- Provide equitable access
- Ensure visitors feel safe and welcome
- Model sustainability

### Map of Valle de Oro National Wildlife Refuge



<https://www.fws.gov/refuge/valle-de-oro>