

First-generation student from Tijuana found her calling in the wildlife of southern California's marshes

By Meenah Rincon, ASU News
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Editor's note: This story is part of a series of profiles of notable [spring 2026 graduates](#).

Wildlife thrives when given the freedom to exist on its own terms, and Karina Ornelas lives by that same principle.

It is a quality she carries within herself — the refusal to be contained by other people's expectations of what she could or could not achieve.

Ornelas grew up in Tijuana, Baja California, before moving to San Diego during middle school, not knowing a word of English. Her parents, whose own education and English remained at the middle school level, supported her every step of the way, as she took the lead in figuring out what came next.

After graduating from Montgomery High School with honors, she earned multiple associate degrees from San Diego City College while also dedicating her time to volunteering at the San Diego Zoo.

Her dream was to continue her education, and despite being rejected from universities close to home, Ornelas refused to give up, even when others urged her to slow down.

That is when she found Arizona State University. For the first-generation college student, receiving her acceptance letter was proof that the dream was possible.

She would go on to earn her Bachelor of Science in [biological sciences – conservation biology and ecology](#) through [ASU Online](#), and continue at ASU, enrolling in an online [biology](#) graduate program.

Ornelas found that concepts in her conservation and ecology courses directly reflected the real work she was already doing in the field.

"I am very grateful for the opportunity and for (ASU) believing in me when others didn't," she said. "Being a Sun Devil means a lot to me because my dream of attending a university became possible through this experience."

While earning her master's degree, Ornelas joined the San Diego Bird Alliance as a community science coordinator, leading research projects focused on the endangered light-footed Ridgway's rail, a marsh bird whose habitat has been devastated by decades of coastal development.

Now a two-time Sun Devil, Ornelas graduates with her master's degree this spring and is already considering a PhD. She is also working toward obtaining additional permits for the California least tern — a type of seabird — as well as permits related to rail nesting and nesting raft monitoring.

"My learning is not going to stop here," she said. "I want to keep gaining experience, building my skills and growing within the conservation field."

We spoke to Ornelas about her time at ASU Online and her plans for the future.

Note: The following interview has been edited for length and clarity. ?

Question: What was your "aha" moment when you realized you wanted to study the field you majored in?

Answer: My "aha" moment came when I realized that everything in my education and field experience aligned perfectly with my passion for conservation. The combination of hands-on experience and academic learning made me realize I was in the right field and that conservation biology was exactly where I was meant to be. Seeing so many different paths and directions I can take has been incredibly motivating. It has shown me that working hard does and will pay off, and that all the effort I've put into my education and career is opening doors I never even imagined before.

Q: What's the best piece of advice you'd give to those still in school?

A: The best advice I would give to those still in school is not to give up, even when things don't go the way you planned. I would also say to take advantage of every opportunity, especially volunteering or gaining hands-on experience, because that can help you discover what you're truly passionate about. Most importantly, believe in yourself.

Q: What are your plans after graduation?

A: After graduation, I plan to focus more on my career while also continuing to plan for my future. I recently completed my required permit hours to survey the light-footed Ridgway's rail, and my next step is to officially obtain that permit. I'm also considering pursuing a PhD in the future, depending on where my path leads.

Q: If someone gave you \$40 million to solve one problem on our planet, what would you tackle?

A: I would use it to restore and build coastal wetlands for the light-footed Ridgway's rail, an endangered marsh bird that depends on salt marsh habitat in southern California. With that funding, I would focus on restoring wetlands by planting native marsh vegetation, such as California cordgrass and pickleweed, which provide shelter and food for birds. Overall, my goal would be to rebuild a healthy ecosystem that supports many other species that depend on coastal wetlands.

This article was written by Sabrina Baker for ASU Online.

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Text image(s)



Karina Ornelas handles a crab in the marshes of southern California. Courtesy photo