FRIENDS OF
NACHUSA
GRASSLANDS

May 2025

Dear Friend,

Many of you know Betty Higby. She has been a long-time volunteer and steward of her own units. She has served on the planning committee for the annual Autumn on the Prairie event and has served on the Board of Directors several times. Betty has hand-written thank you notes to donors for several years, as well as given presentations about Nachusa to local groups.

But you may not know that Betty is an accomplished artist. She combines an aesthetic sense with a scientific accuracy in portraying various aspects of Nachusa's environment.

This issue of *A Prairie Calling* focusses on Betty's art. But what you see here is only a sample of the vast output Betty has created over many years. I think you will enjoy this issue.

With warm regards from Nachusa Grasslands,

Charles Larry

nachusagrasslands.org • (708) 406-9894 • NachusaGrasslands@gmail.com
8772 S Lowden Road, Franklin Grove, IL 61031

A Prairie Calling

ISSUE 17 - May 2025

FRIENDS OF NACHUSA GRASSLANDS

An Artist at Nachusa

by Betty Higby

I grew up on a 123-acre dairy farm at the south end of Nachusa Road, surrounded by unique habitats -- a small cattle farm with a few bison on our west, a wildflower-filled woodland to the south, a shallow wetland directly east, and along the north, a railroad, bordered by intriguing native plants.

Following a career path that included 14 years of teaching and 26 years in information technology, I retired in 2008. About that time, my husband, Jim, and I discovered Nachusa Grasslands. I had been surrounded by nature's diversity while growing up, so walking at Nachusa Grasslands that very first day felt like a homecoming. But it was also the discovery of many new habitats, teeming with both familiar and new plants, abundant pollinators and other creatures, already calling me to explore and to draw and paint them. I didn't know exactly how, but I was certain I was about to become much involved in supporting this exuberant abundance that we call Nachusa Grasslands!

Art and Science

My favorite subjects are native plants and their habitats. Most of my artwork can be described as botanical art, which, having historically been used to visually document scientific discoveries, was an important link between science and art, focused on detailed accuracy.

The medium and the techniques that I choose for any given artwork are largely determined by my subject. For example, the slender structure of a stiff, dried shooting star seedhead can be well illustrated with fine pen and ink, whereas it's hard to beat a graphite pencil for representing the veins and shadows of a fallen leaf.

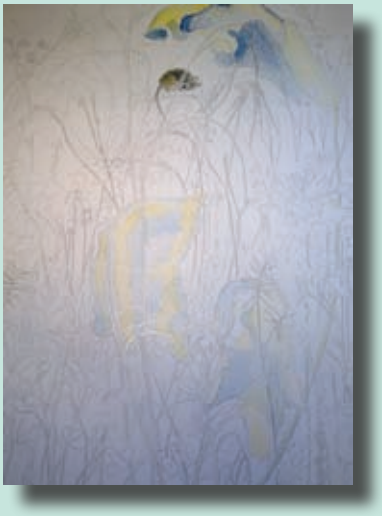
Bur Oak Leaf
(*Quercus macrocarpa*)

Shooting Star Seedhead
(*Dodecatheon meadia*)

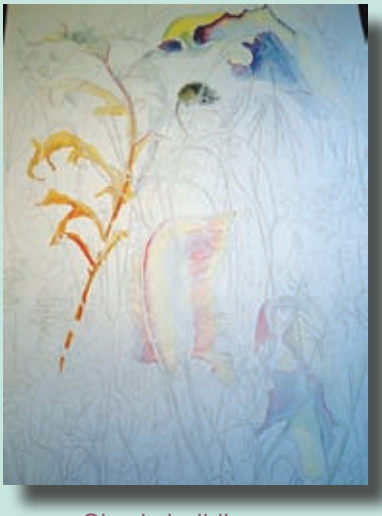
Wanting to capture both the rugged bark and massive heavy branches of a bur oak in the same image with the softness of new-fallen snow, I discovered how versatile carbon pencils and carbon dust (applied with an old paint brush) can be.

Little Mouse: from drawing to painting

Sketch



Beginning watercolor



Slowly building...

Wild Strawberry
(*Fragaria virginiana*)

Great Spangled Fritillary
(*Speyeria bele*)

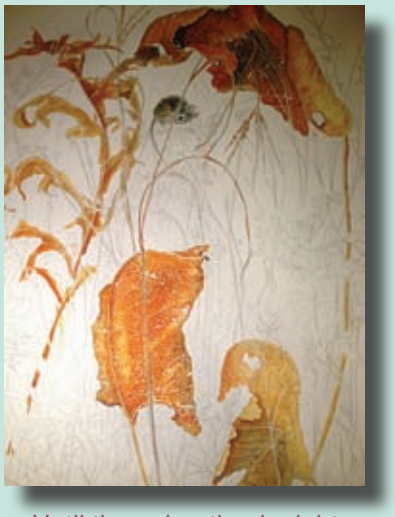
Ladies' Tresses Orchid
(*Spiranthes magnicamporum*)

For the tiny charming transluscent blossoms of a Spiranthes orchid, the unique leaves of a wild strawberry plant, or the wings of a butterfly, transparent single pigment water color over extremely light pencil drawings is my choice.

My general process is very similar for all of the above. To choose my subject, I usually start with a walk either at Nachusa Grasslands or in our garden. After taking many photos from various angles to capture details and lighting, I make quick sketches, including the nearby habitat. These preliminary sketches are typically on parchment 100 paper, because it is inexpensive and erases easily. After capturing the plant structure and composition to my satisfaction, because parchment paper is so thin, I can use a well-lit window or a light box to transfer (trace) this structure onto my good paper (generally 140LB hot-pressed smooth Fabriano or Arches). I add the detail freehand, which is my favorite step.

Columbine
(Aquilegia canadensis)

Layer upon layer...



Until the coloration is right

Photo: Charles Larry

Betty Higby

I am hopeful that my artwork can be helpful in engaging more hearts and minds with the work and the results of Nachusa Grasslands, such that even more folks will want to join in caring for this treasured environment in whatever way they can.

Using pen and ink and "dry brush" watercolor, I also like to capture plants and pollinators in a handmade sketchbook, seasonally organized. These sketches are small, having less detail, usually with at least six grouped together on each 90LB 6-by-9-inch page.

My first art training occurred after my retirement in 2008, when I took a botanical drawing class at the Chicago Botanic Gardens, which happily led to many more classes there. During this time frame, I was becoming involved with volunteer work days and eventually stewarded two areas on my own, Aldo and Leopold knobs and their surroundings, learning something new every day and taking on other responsibilities at Nachusa as needed. I have especially enjoyed being able to assist a bit with science projects and monitoring efforts, and contributing an occasional article and many illustrations for our Friends publications.

Illinois Native Milkweeds

Upland Sandpiper
(*Bartramia longicauda*)

100% Recycled Paper

This newsletter was produced by Friends of Nachusa Grasslands volunteers:

Editor-in-Chief: Charles Larry

Editor: James Higby

Design: Charles Larry

Website: *www.nachusagrasslands.org*