FRIENDS OF
NACHUSA
GRASSLANDS

May 2026

Dear Friends,

Nachusa means many things to different people. For some, it affords an opportunity for a variety of scientific study. For others, it is a way of connecting with nature. Some find beauty in the almost endless array of nature's bounty. For Heather Baker, an artist, all of these may find a way into her art. She is a unique artist who utilizes the very seeds, grasses, and leaves in nature to create and celebrate the life of prairie, savanna, woodland and wetland.

In this issue of A Prairie Calling, Heather will show you how Nachusa continuously inspires her art. I think you also will find her work inspiring.

With warm regards from Nachusa Grasslands,

Charles Larry

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A Prairie Calling

Issue 20 - May 2026

FRIENDS OF NACHUSA GRASSLANDS

Inspired by Nachusa

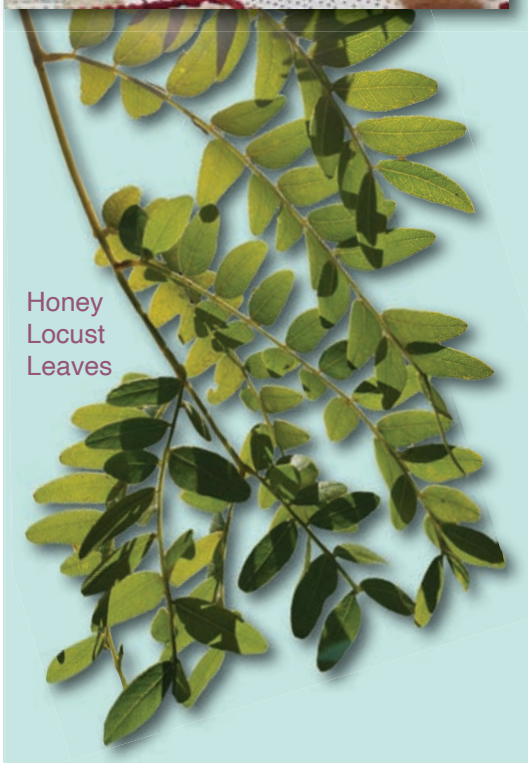
by Heather Baker

During the formative years of my 20s I started spending more time outdoors, camping, hiking, and canoeing. I developed a deep respect for the earth and its creatures, as well as an environmentalist mindset. I joined an environmental group at Kishwaukee College, and one day we volunteered at **Nachusa**. I grew up 20 minutes away from the preserve but had no idea it existed. I was enamored with the work being done there, but I moved to Chicago to focus on my art studies, and it would be four years later that I came back and really fell in love with the land.

These experiences influenced my life in many ways, including my art. The colors and textures of the natural world really started to speak to me, and in my junior year of college I started what is now my main form of art expression, which, for lack of a better term, I call plant art. Using various seeds, leaves, flowers, grasses, rocks, and crystals I create images of animals, skeletons, and mandala designs.

Milkweed silks and fountain grass become fur, honey locust leaves become feathers, rock and stone become bone, and pieces of quartz can be stars or part of geometric patterns that represent life energy. My work is a celebration of the beauty of the natural materials I use, as well my human experience on this earth and these amazing creatures we share it with.

I collect my materials from my neighborhood, my friends' yards, the side of the road, and on hikes, always asking permission. I only take materials that are plentiful and common, and not too much from one site. I learned collection ethics from working at Nachusa. I collect throughout the year to get a variety of colors of leaves, flowers, and different seeds. The materials are preserved through pressing and drying.



Honey Locust Leaves

Milkweed Pod

The Her

Sifting Rocks

Bison

Sketch

All drawings, photographs, and creations: Heather Baker

I typically start a piece by sketching my ideas in a notebook. Sometimes I'm trying to figure out how to make a visual representation of a feeling. Sometimes an image comes to me, and I don't know its meaning until I start working on it, and sometimes I just want to have fun with my materials and make a particular animal or design that would really let those materials shine.

From there, I make stencils of the basic shapes of what I'm trying to create and use them to trace the image onto a prepared piece of plywood. I make marks to designate where certain materials will be glued. Using tweezers and school glue to delicately place individual pieces of plant or rock materials onto my board, I layer them until it really starts to look like bird feathers, fur, or whatever kind of texture I'm trying to create. I build shadow boxes for my work with UV-protected glass. Some materials change color over time, but that is unavoidable. I use materials I know won't change too much in color or that will be just as beautiful as they transform.

on-from sketch to finished piece

Progress

Detail

Finished Piece

I am a multidisciplinary artist from Rochelle, Illinois. It's safe to say I've been an artist my whole life. My dad taught me how to draw when I was a kid and growing up I took all the art classes I could take in school, which eventually led me to art school. I double majored in anthropology and photography, at the University of Illinois at Chicago. For more of my work see:

www.etsy.com/shop/HBeeSTUDIO
Intstagram: @hbee_art
Facebook: www.facebook.com/Oogiebee

Rabbit Stencil

After graduating college in 2010, I moved back to Rochelle and decided to go back to that beautiful Nachusa place. I started volunteering weekly, learning more about our native flora and fauna, literally falling in love with the land. I eventually joined the crew, working seasonally for four years. After that, I continued to volunteer by doing regular workdays, helping researchers with their fieldwork, doing prescribed fires, leading tours, and eventually becoming the official t-shirt designer for Friends of Nachusa Grasslands in 2020. This meant brushing up on my drawing skills, an art form with which I had not kept up. I loved the challenge, and it became an outlet for me to pay homage to this very special place that had taught me so much. Each year I make a shirt that features a creature and plants found on the preserve.

T-Shirts

Badger

Bison

Blue-spotted Sally

Monarch Butterfly

This project has led to a larger illustration series that I call "We Are Worthy." Like the shirts, they focus on native animals and plants, and include words of affirmation from the perspective of the animals. I am trying to give a voice to these creatures that are literally losing ground. They know the value of their lives, and through my art I hope to bring their value to light to more people.

Prairie Mandala

I want to inspire folks to take a deeper look at the intricate unique beauty of the natural world, to learn about our native landscapes and ecosystems, and hopefully get folks to care more to protect and rebuild native communities that have become so rare. My experiences at Nachusa have shown me that all of this is both important and possible.

This Newsletter was produced by Friends of Nachusa Grasslands volunteers

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