

The art classes began as fun, until she realized she could combine two of the things she enjoyed most — her art and her enjoyment of nature.

A post-graduate certificate in scientific illustration at the University of California in Santa Cruz sealed the deal.

Helm said the job market is varied and, thanks to the Internet, an artist can work almost anywhere. "Most are freelancers, like me," she said.

The most common jobs in her field might include illustrating for National Geographic or Scientific American. Other possibilities are anthropological illustrations for museums.

Instead, Helm has set up her office/studio in the second floor of her house. Two drawing tables, water colors, a bottle of India ink (it's the traditional medium for scientific illustrations) are situated near a double window.

Her style of illustrations is crisp with a harder edge, she said.

In Nebraska, Helm can go to her own backyard for inspiration, she said. The perennial flower border includes prairie coneflowers, phlox and iris.

She's used some of them in a series of watercolor and pen and ink drawings entitled "Great Plains Wildflowers."

Helm got a list of plants from the arboretum Web site and is working her way through them.

With seed packets of wildflowers on her dining room table waiting to be planted, Helm is also adding to her garden.

She enjoys discovering the Great Plains, after living in Alaska and California — two very different landscapes.

She takes her sketchbook, puts on a broad-brimmed hat to block the sun and props a stool in the middle of the tall grass, getting an up-close look at her subjects as she draws.

The sketchbook is brimming with landscapes, details of leaves and petals and wildlife.

Right now, Helm, 28, has added teaching visual arts to her skills. Last year, she taught the Arts are Basic program with elementary students.

During Wildflower Week, which begins Saturday, she will be teaching illustration classes at the Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center near Denton.

Helm has been surprised at the interest she's received from all age groups in the classes.

She has also been selling her work and has several shows scheduled this summer, including:

* "ARTitudes Summer Show and Sale," June 14-17 at Campbell's Nursery, 56th Street and Pine Lake Road.

* "Art in Bloom," Aug. 11-12 at Lauritzen Gardens in Omaha.

* The Midtown Art Shop at 1627 S. 17th St., in Lincoln.

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