

Loop 4 – Bats and Bluffs Loop



Alabaster Caverns State Park (4-1) : 580.621.3381;
<http://www.travelok.com/listings/view.profile/id.110>;

Directions: Located 6 miles south of the town of Freedom on Hwy 50, then ½ mile on Hwy 50A.

What to Expect: Over 250 million years ago, this area was covered by a warm, shallow inland sea. Millions of years of streams cutting down through this region have resulted in gypsum capped bluffs, gorges, and canyons exposing soft red shales and sandstones. Caves and extensive cave systems created by the dissolution of gypsum provide critical habitat for many species of hibernating and breeding **bats**. During summer evenings in this Loop, millions of **Mexican free-tailed bats** spiral out of caves into the evening sky to consume tons of insects each night. The wide, slow-moving, sandy-bottomed Cimarron River, the dominant water feature in this Loop, is fed by numerous springs and creeks and provides nesting and foraging habitat for the endangered **Interior least tern**. A mixture of tallgrass and shortgrass prairie plants with abundant scatterings



of sand sagebrush and yucca create habitat for **roadrunners, rock wrens, bobcats, badgers, kangaroo rats**, many species of **skipper butterflies**, the **Texas horned lizard**, and the **western diamondback rattlesnake**.

Lodging: Freedom: Camping & RV – Alabaster Caverns State Park (see info above).
Alva: 35 miles east of Alabaster Caverns State Park.

One-Day Outings: Fill up your gas tank and pack a picnic lunch (grocery stores in Alva, Corner Store in Freedom) or enjoy lunch at any of the local cafes and restaurants in Freedom and Alva.

Alabaster Caverns SP (4-1): Explore the largest gypsum cave in the world open to the public. Massive boulders of gypsum are illuminated in many varied colors ---pink, white, and even a rare black, by a state-of-the-art computerized lighting system. But gypsum isn't all you see in the cavern. There are 5 species of bats using the cavern to hibernate or roost during the day. Other activities at the Park include wild caving (permit required), sleeping in a cave, and hiking the 4 trails ranging from ½ to ¾ mile in length. Prepaid reservations for cavern tours are encouraged and can be made by calling the Park. (See contact info above.)

Buffalo Creek (4-6) and Gypsum Prairie (4-4) scenic routes: **The Buffalo Creek scenic route** traverses ~ 42 miles of gypsum bluffs and sand sagebrush valleys. Travel N1980 south off of State Highway 64 (sign points to Selman), then turn east onto E0290 and continue to State Highway 34. The **Gypsum Prairie scenic route** (~ 21 miles) weaves its way through gypsum prairie vistas and begins in Freedom. Take Main Street east and turn immediately right onto Greer Road. Continue on Greer Road to N2240, then to E0190 to State Highway 14. Turn south (right) onto SH14 and travel 4 miles and turn left at Avard sign (E0220 Rd). At N2370 Road, turn north (left) and **Avard Lake (4-3)** is less than ½ mile. This small lake was built to provide aquatic habitat for wildlife. A picnic area provides a place to relax with a snack and watch kingfishers, orioles and waterfowl enjoy open water in an arid region of the Great Plains. Note: No Public Restrooms are available on either of these routes.

Birding Route: Start with a full tank of gas and be aware public restrooms are available at Alabaster Caverns, Freedom, and Alva. Begin at sunrise at the overlook at **Alabaster Caverns (4-1)** then take Raptor's Roost Trail to just past Water Cave to observe bird species in the densely wooded canyon below the bluffs. Drive north from Alabaster Caverns through Freedom. Go west on Hwy 64 to the junction of Hwy 34 N, travel north 6 miles, turn west on Major Rd, travel 2 ½ miles to the **Cimarron Hills WMA (4-8)**. Return to Hwy 64, travel west to the Cimarron River Bridge to watch hundreds of turkey vultures at the **Turkey Vulture Roost (4-2)** (not present in winter) as they prepare for their day of soaring from the power lines. Continue west on Hwy 64, turn south on Hwy 34 and travel 4 miles. Turn east (left) on EW15. Follow road to **Cimarron Bluff WMA (4-7)**. Return to Hwy 34, turn south (left) and turn east (left) on EW20. Drive 4 miles east, turn south (right), travel 1 mile and turn east onto EW21. Travel approximately 9 miles to Hwy 50. Alabaster Caverns is 1 mile to the south and the town of Freedom is 5

miles to the north. Next, take **Gypsum Prairie scenic route (4-4)** out of Freedom (~ 21 miles) to **Avard Lake (4-3)** and then, if reservations are made in advance (580.327.8564), take a tour of Northwestern OK State University Museum of Natural History to view specimens of western OK. www.nwosu.edu/museum

Special Wildlife-Viewing Events: **Selman Living Laboratory (4-6)** offers star parties to the public at their state-of-the-art observatory on top of a gypsum bluff. For information: : <http://ranger3.nwosu.edu/science/physics/sll/>

Selman Bat Watches: During the month of July public viewing of the emergence of over 1 million Mexican free-tailed bats is hosted by the OK Wildlife Dept. For more information: <https://wildlifedepartment.com/wildlife/wildlife-diversity/selman-bat-watch>; Melynda.hickman@odwc.ok.gov