

Loop 5 – Salt Plains Loop

What to Expect: As the traveler approaches this Loop, a view of the horizon shows sand dunes with what surely must be the white sands of a beach out beyond the dunes. Has a wrong turn been made? Actually the traveler is on track to visit one of the most highly specialized habitat types in the Great Plains – the Salt Plains, the heart of this Loop. The Salt Plains, a geologic wonder, consists of thin deposits of evaporated salt over mud interrupted by channels and pools of shallow water. Historically these salt deposits were used by Indian tribes and early pioneers but it wasn't just the salt that brought people to the salt plains – thousands of shorebirds and tens of thousands of geese and waterfowl are dependent on these salty wetlands as a critical stop-over during seasonal migrations. In addition to salt flats, this Loop area is comprised of marshes, wooded areas, creeks, mixed-grass prairies and cropland. For the bird watcher this Loop offers a rich diversity of bird species.

Lodging: Cherokee: [Cherokee Inn](#), [Grandad's Porch B&B](#); [Great Salt Plains State Park](#) – cabins, camping, RV; [Cherokee RV Park](#) .

Special Note: Gas stations are available in Cherokee and Jet; grocery store in Cherokee.

Birding Route: This route includes a mixture of “hot spots”, an auto route, and easy walking trails. Start by enjoying sunrise at the [Sandpiper Trail \(5-1-A\)](#) which is 7 miles east of the junction of State Hwy 11 and State Hwy 64 or 4 miles west of the junction at State Hwy 11 and State Hwy 38. Next, go 3 miles east on State Hwy 11, turn north (left) and go about .2 of a mile to parking area (on the left) for [Sand Creek Trail \(5-1-B\)](#). The old road serves as a trail and follows Sand Creek for ~ 2 miles for some excellent birding opportunities. This trail does not loop back so you might consider walking halfway or leave another vehicle at the trail exit. (Note: this trail is open from April 1 to Oct. 15). Next, return to State Hwy 11 go east (left) one mile to Refuge sign and turn south (right) onto gravel road (N2710 Rd.) and continue for about 2 miles to [Salt Plains NWR \(5-1\)](#) headquarters for a restroom break and excellent visitor's center (call in advance to determine if Center is open on weekends as it is run by volunteers). [Eagle Roost Trail](#) (just to the west of headquarters), an easy 1 ¼ mile loop trail, includes Sand Creek Bay overlook and is a great birding area! Next, drive the [Harold Miller Auto Route](#) with excellent views of marshes. The auto route exits onto State Hwy 11. Turn right (east) onto State Hwy 11, travel just over 1 ½ miles to the junction of State Hwy 38. Turn right (south) and travel 7 miles to [Great Salt Plains State Park \(5-2\)](#) which has restrooms, picnic areas, and trails through a variety of habitats. Next, from the entrance of the State Park turn right and continue south on State Hwy 38 for 5 miles and as the Highway curves sharply to the left, turn right onto dirt road and take dirt road through gate into [Jet Recreation Area \(5-1-C\)](#) . Be aware this area is open from April 1 to Oct 15. Next continue south on State Hwy 38 for 3 miles to the town of Jet. Turn right (west) onto State Hwy 58. Travel west almost 10 miles and at the intersection of State Hwy 8, turn

right (north) onto Hwy 8 toward the town of Cherokee. Travel north 3 miles and turn east (right) onto E0210 Rd. Travel 5 miles to the [Observation Platform at the Crystal Digging Area \(5-1-D\)](#). Before climbing the tower be sure to read the interpretative signage that explains about how the selenite crystals are formed and about the birds that make a living in this salty habitat. Return to Hwy 8, turn right and follow the signs to Cherokee. Enjoy dinner in Cherokee!