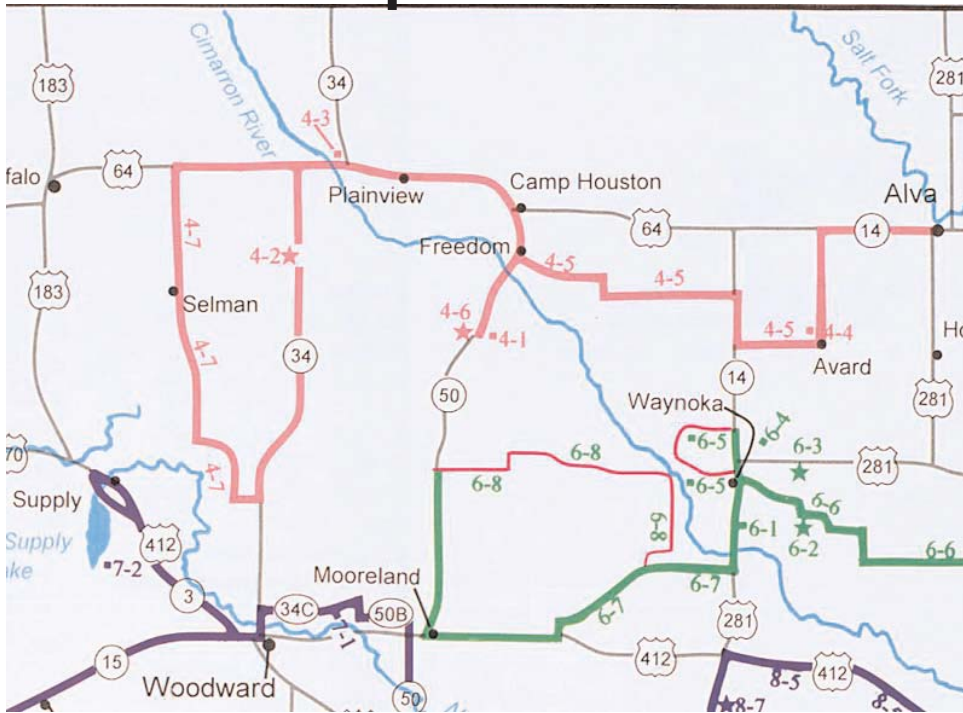


Loop 4 - Bats and Bluffs Loop



- (4-1) Alabaster Caverns State Park
- (4-2) Selman Ranch Lodge
- (4-3) Turkey Vulture Roost
- (4-4) Acard Lake
- (4-5) Gypsum Prairie scenic route
- (4-6) Selman Living Laboratory
- (4-7) Buffalo Creek scenic route

Alabaster Caverns State Park: 580.621.3381; www.oklahomaparks.com; abstrcaverns@pdi.net. Directions: Located 6 miles south of the town of Freedom on Hwy 50, then ½ mile on Hwy 50A.

What to Expect: More than 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, is fed by numerous springs and creeks that provide 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: Sage & Saddle B&B, www.travelok.com/toStay (select Freedom); 580.621.3338; Camping & RV - Alabaster Caverns State Park (see info above). Alva: www.alvaok.org; (4) motels & hotels; (1) RV lot.

Special Note: Be aware that cellular phone signal availability is limited within this Loop. Gas stations are available in Alva and the city of Woodward (located ~ 27 miles south of this Loop).

One-Day Outings: Fill up your gas tank and pack a picnic lunch or enjoy dining at any of the local cafes.

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. There are 5 species of bats using the cav-

ern 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 (4-7) and Gypsum Prairie (4-5) scenic routes: The Buffalo Creek scenic route traverses ~ 42 miles of gypsum bluffs and sand sagebrush valleys. The Gypsum Prairie scenic route begins in Freedom, where main street retains the old western cowtown appearance, and weaves its way for ~ 21 miles through gypsum prairie vistas to **Avard Lake (4-3)**. This small lake was built to provide aquatic habitat for wildlife and fish. 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. Stop 2: Drive north from Alabaster Caverns through Freedom to **Turkey Vulture Roost (4-4)** to view hundreds of "TV's" (not present in winter) as they prepare for their day of soaring from the power lines at the Cimarron River bridge. Next, head west and drive the **Buffalo Creek scenic route (4-7)** ~ 42 miles. Take your picnic lunch back to Alabaster Caverns or eat lunch at local cafes. Next, take **Gypsum Prairie scenic route (4-5)** 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.

Guest Ranches

Selman Ranch Lodge (4-2): The Lodge offers longhorn cattle drives, wildlife viewing, birding, fishing, hiking, trail riding and more! One of the key attractions of this working ranch are booming and dancing of the male prairie chickens from March to May on the several leks on the ranch. The guest-house, once the train depot in Selman, OK, sleeps six and has its own bathroom and kitchen with a small but growing Library. Contact: www.selmanguestranch.com; 580.256.2006.

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: www.nwosu.edu/science/physics/sll. 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: www.wildlifedepartment.com; 405.424.0099.