

# America's State Parks

## Oklahoma's *Alabaster Caverns State Park*

Alabaster Caverns State Park is a 200-acre state park approximately 4.5 miles south of Freedom, Oklahoma State Highway 50. It is home to the largest natural gypsum cave in the world that is open to the public. The gypsum is mostly in the form of alabaster. There are several types of alabaster found at the site, including pink, white, and the rare black alabaster. This black alabaster can be found in only three veins in the world, one each in Oklahoma, Italy and China. Another form of gypsum can be found in the many beautiful selenite crystal formations.

The first documented exploration of the caves occurred in 1898, shortly after Hugh Litton homesteaded the area in 1893. Public tours of the caves began in the early 1900s and increased with the 1939 purchase and renovation of the caverns by Charles Grass, who gave them their current name. Oklahoma purchased the land from Grass on September 1, 1953, for \$34,000, reclassifying the land as a state park in 1956.

The caves in the area were created around 20,000 years ago from dissolution of gypsum beds in the Permian strata. A small perennial stream now flows through the cave and is fed by various lateral tunnels and seepage from the roof. In the geologic past, the river was once capable of completely filling the 3/4 mile long caverns. The cave walls and gypsum formations show evidence of sculpting by rapidly flowing water.

The cavern is home to five different species of bat. Some are solitary while others are colonial. The cavern provides roosting sites that serve as daytime shelter and a place for the non-migrating bats to hibernate during the winter months. Mexican free-tailed bats migrate to Alabaster Caverns from Mexico in the spring to bear their young. They then return to Mexico in the fall. The bat species found in the cave are the cave myotis, Western big-eared bat, eastern pipistrelle, Western big brown bat, and the Mexican free-tailed bat.

Daily cave tours are available on the hour from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Spelunking, wild caving, camping, hiking trails, and recreational facilities such as horseshoe pits and volleyball courts are available to visitors.

