

Wilderness.net's Wichita Mountains Wilderness Fact Sheet

Introduction

The United States Congress designated the Wichita Mountains Wilderness in 1970 and it now has a total of 8,570 acres. All of the wilderness is in Oklahoma and is managed by the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Description

The American buffalo once roamed in uncountable numbers here among the grasslands that rise to lakes, streams, and stunning canyons. Today there's a small but growing herd. Something about seeing these near-extinct creatures, grazing in apparent contentment, leads visitors to believe that in the Wichita Mountains life must be close to the way it was in the Old West.

Although the National Wildlife Refuge System technically was born when it claimed Florida's Pelican Island in 1903, the history of this Wilderness—which lies within what is now known as the Wichita Mountains National Wildlife Refuge—dates back to 1901 when the area was proclaimed a “Forest Preserve.” In 1905 President Theodore Roosevelt signed a law creating the first "Game Sanctuary" here for the almost-extinct bison and a portion of that area has since become the Wichita Mountains Wilderness. Thanks to careful management, a remnant bunch of 15 buffalo has grown to a maintained herd of about 650, which live among the rugged rocky outcroppings, oak forests, and the mixed-grass prairie of the refuge.

Rare in this area, a herd of about 285 free-ranging Texas longhorn cattle shares the Wilderness with elk, deer, and buffalo. Open range allows the animals to wander through your camp, but they are not tame. At night you will probably hear coyotes howl and owls hoot, and you may be visited by the resident population of overly friendly raccoons.

The Wichita Mountains Wilderness makes up roughly 15% of the Wichita Mountains National Wildlife Refuge and is split into two areas. The northern portion of Wilderness, the North Mountain Wilderness Unit, is a part of the refuge special-use area which is reserved for wild animals and has very limited public access. The southern portion of Wilderness, in the rugged southwestern corner of the refuge, is protected as Charons Garden Wilderness Unit and is open to the public. The outstanding and unique scenic qualities of this Wilderness unit attract many visitors. Two designated trails totaling about 3.5 miles are maintained by hand within the Charons Garden Wilderness. There are also some nondesignated and unmaintained trails the area.

The ruggedness of the weathered granite mountainous terrain in the Charons Garden Wilderness Area provides an experience of solitude, naturalness, and wildness. Group sizes are limited to alleviate the heavy use impacts. Temporary access restrictions are occasionally used to protect sensitive sites or resources from disturbance. In addition, temporary closures may be implemented during periods of extreme heat and drought for public safety.

Leave No Trace

How to follow the seven standard Leave No Trace principles differs in different parts of the country (desert vs. Rocky Mountains). Click on any of the principles listed below to learn more about how they apply in the Wichita Mountains Wilderness.

1. [Plan Ahead and Prepare](#)
2. [Travel and Camp on Durable Surfaces](#)
3. [Dispose of Waste Properly](#)
4. [Leave What You Find](#)
5. [Minimize Campfire Impacts](#)
6. [Respect Wildlife](#)
7. [Be Considerate of Other Visitors](#)

For more information on Leave No Trace, [Visit the Leave No Trace, Inc. website.](#)

Location

How to Get There

From I-44 take Highway 49 (exit 45). Go west 8 miles to the Refuge gate. If coming from Highway 62, take Highway 115 (Cache Exit) north about 3 miles to the Refuge Gate. A map is available on the Refuge website. You will find leaflet dispensers inside each of the Refuge gates that have maps and information. The Charons Garden Wilderness Area is located in the Southwest portion of the Refuge. Contact the Refuge Visitor Center for more information.

Area Management

The Wichita Mountains Wilderness is part of the 110 million acre National Wilderness Preservation System. This System of lands provides clean air, water, and habitat critical for rare and endangered plants and animals. In wilderness, you can enjoy challenging recreational activities like hiking, backpacking, climbing, kayaking, canoeing, rafting, horse packing, bird watching, stargazing, and extraordinary opportunities for solitude. You play an important role in helping to *"secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness"* as called for by the Congress of the United States through the Wilderness Act of 1964. Please follow the requirements outlined below and use Leave No Trace techniques when visiting the Wichita Mountains Wilderness to ensure protection of this unique area.

The 8,570-acre Wichita Mountains Wilderness Area, which was designated by Congress through Public Law 91-504 on October 23, 1970, consists of two units: the Charons Garden Unit (5,723 acres) and the North Mountain Unit (2,847 acres).

The North Mountain unit lies in the north-central part of the Refuge and is located in the Special Use Area where public access is very restricted. This wilderness unit is also managed as a Research Natural Area, with access and use limited mostly to scientific and educational purposes. Public access is very limited, only to intensively managed elk and deer hunts.

The Charons Garden unit is located within the Public Use Area of the Refuge and open to many public uses, including hiking, wildlife observation, photography, and rock sports. In addition, a limited number of backcountry camping permits are available for overnight visits into the wilderness area. Except for the permitted camping, public use of this wilderness unit is limited to daylight hours. The Refuge also allows for a small amount of guided interpretive and organized

environmental education hikes with a Leave No Trace message or theme. Two designated trails totaling about 3.5 miles are maintained by hand within the Charons Garden Wilderness. There are also some nondesignated and unmaintained trails the area.

The ruggedness of the weathered granite mountainous terrain in the Charons Garden Wilderness Area provides an experience of solitude, naturalness, and wildness, but attracts heavy public use that erodes those wilderness qualities. Group sizes are limited to alleviate the heavy use impacts. Temporary access restrictions are occasionally used to protect sensitive sites or resources from disturbance. In addition, temporary closures may be implemented during periods of extreme heat and drought for public safety.

Contacts

Wichita Mountains NWR Visitor Center
32 Refuge Headquarters
Indiahoma, OK 73552

Phone: 580-429-3222
Email: wichitamountains@fws.gov

Links to Other Websites

[Wichita Mountains National Wildlife Refuge](#)

Links on Wilderness.net

[National, Regional and Local Wilderness Organizations \(NGOs\)](#)

A listing of societies, organizations, coalitions and other wilderness-related advocacy and stewardship groups.

[Career and Volunteer Opportunities](#)

A listing of sites providing information about wilderness- and environmentally-related career and volunteer opportunities.

Applicable Wilderness Law(s)

Law	Date	Acreage Change (in acres)
Public Law 91-504	October 23, 1970	8,900

(No official title, designates Fish and Wildlife Service wildernesses) - Public Law 91-504 (10/23/1970) To designate certain lands as wilderness within National Wildlife Refuges

[download 91-504](#)

General Trip Planning Information

The Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge consists of 59,020 acres of unique habitats that embrace the ancient Wichita Mountains in southwestern Oklahoma. Located about 20 minutes northwest of Lawton, Oklahoma, the natural beauty of the Refuge coupled with quality outdoor recreational uses

and world-class wildlife viewing opportunities attracts between 1.52 and 1.72 million visitors each year. The outstanding scenic qualities and recreational opportunities offered by the 5,723 acre Charons Garden Wilderness area, located in the rugged southwestern portion of Refuge, renders it one of the most popular attractions for Refuge visitors. Refuge maps and other general information are available at the Refuge Visitor Center, and on the Refuge website.

Recreational Opportunities

Refuge visitors may hike, explore, observe and photograph wildlife and outstanding natural scenery, and climb rocks within the Wilderness area. A limited number of camping permits are available that allow overnight camping in a designated area of the Wilderness. Elk and deer hunting are allowed by permits issued under a lottery system administered by the Oklahoma Dept of Wildlife Conservation. Some guided wilderness hikes are available.

Climate and Special Equipment Needs

The Charons Garden Wilderness may be subject to extreme heat during the summer, and often very cold weather during the winter. Take plenty of water, especially during the summer. The area is also subject to severe storms, including tornadoes, especially during the spring. The area is very rugged and rocky. Dress appropriately and wear durable shoes or boots suited for use in rocky and rough terrain.

Safety and Current Conditions

Most injuries that occur in the Refuge result from falls, dehydration, and heat sicknesses. Venomous snakes, primarily western diamondback rattlesnakes and copperheads, are common on the Refuge. Visitors are cautioned to avoid close proximity to bison and longhorn cattle, which freely roam throughout the Refuge.