

SAUTA CAVE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE - SCOTTSBORO, ALABAMA
22 AUGUST 2020

In August of 2020 my boyfriend and I took a mini trip to visit the Sauta Cave National Wildlife Refuge in Alabama. This had long been on my United States mammal watching bucket list, as it is the home to the largest bat emergence east of the Mississippi River. The cave is a summer roosting site for the endangered Gray Bat (*Myotis grisescens*) and contains about 1/4 of the population of the species. Every June-August at dusk, the bats emerge. At the time I went, a ranger had told me they estimated 400-500,000 bats were in residence.

The refuge was set up in 1978 to protect the species. The Gray bats also hibernate in this cave in the winter (I had read they only hibernate in 8 caves) as well as the Indiana Bat. While the cave itself is gated, the park set up a viewing platform for people to watch the emergence.

The cave itself had many previous uses. It was originally used as a Saltpepper mine, mainly during the Civil War. From 1919-1956 it was used as a nightclub and in 1962 a fallout shelter.

We opted to stay in Chattanooga, Tennessee to sleep, as the choices of hotels and restaurants in Scottsboro, Alabama are limited. Chattanooga is about 1 hour away. The cave itself is located about 7 miles west of Scottsboro on the southside of US Highway 72. Coming from Scottsboro itself, the entrance will be on the left side of the highway. I recommend putting the reserve into a GPS as there are no signs. That includes nothing on the highway itself and nothing when you turn into the reserve. What you will see is a chained gate (see below) as the actual entrance. There isn't even a parking lot, just a small area where you can pull your car over. We had several people while we were waiting by my car ask us if we were at the refuge.



The actual sign for the refuge is about 50 meters from where you can park your car. There is a small sign saying the cave is closed, but this is just to enter the cave itself. The actual entrance has a large gate in front of it. If you walk another 50 meters you will feel a pretty dramatic temperature drop and you will know you are getting close.



What you should see is a small wooden path to the cave on your right. When we went a storm had just occurred and the majority of the path was blocked with downed tree branches. We initially climbed under and over the branches to get to a small viewing platform that is close to the cave entrance.

While we were there a film crew was also present. One of the people went to a local store get a saw to cut down the branches. He returned with a wire pipe saw. His attempts were initially comical at best to watch. Luckily my boyfriend ended up doing most of the work getting the branches down. This was also his first major mammal watching excursion and now thinks tools are on his must pack list for any future mammal watching.



There is also a small path you can walk along past the cave. It was very overgrown and I doubt it gets much foot traffic. Despite seeing multiple DOR nine banded armadillos, deer, raccoons, and Virginia opossums, we did not see any live mammals.

My advice about the viewing platform is to duck under the railing and stand to the left of the entrance of the cave (as you are facing it). You are allowed to do this. You will get a much better view of the bats coming out of the cave from the main entrance and a small hole opening to the left. Bring a parka or an umbrella as the bats tend to urinate and defecate as they are leaving the cave. Also when I was there the entrance was muddy



so bring good shoes. When we were there about 25 other people were watching.



The film crew had lights as well so we could watch the exit deeper from the entrance. At some points the bats were buzzing right above our heads. Even if you have seen the species, it was impressive. The actual emergence itself lasts about an hour. We were the last to leave, and even after an hour and there were still a few bats exiting. Also watch under your feet as you are leaving as there were a good number of Salamanders (I am not sure of the species) walking around. The area in front of the cave was very swampy, but luckily no bug bites to be had there!



The person who was leading the cave film crew stated every October for one day a year, with a permit, you can enter the cave. He said it is never

advertised. You are not allowed near any of the large bat filled areas, but he reported he had been several times and still seen bats.