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News Release



Southwest Region (Arizona • New Mexico • Oklahoma • Texas) <http://www.fws.gov/southwest/>

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Salt Plains Refuge Temporarily Closes Crystal Digging Site

Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge in central-northern Oklahoma has temporarily closed its popular crystal-digging fields to public access due to a recent discovery of vials containing unknown substances.

Several glass vials were unearthed by a boy digging for hourglass-shaped selenite crystals in a public area on the refuge. One vial broke and caused the child's eyes to temporarily sting. The Refuge remains in contact with the boy's parents and reports the child is doing well with no apparent effects. After the child's parents reported the incident, Jon Brock, refuge manager, closed the public digging site and requested assistance from the Army.

A team from the Army's 22d Chemical Battalion (Technical Escort) will arrive on the site to assess the vials and determine their contents. Based on that assessment, the team will determine the appropriate disposition of the items. The U.S. Army Air Corps used the salt flats on Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge as a practice bombing and gunnery range from 1942 to 1946.

The crystal digging sites will remain closed until officials deem them safe to reopen.

The annual Birding and Crystal Festival to be held April 27 through 29 will continue although the crystal digging portions will be cancelled due to investigation.

Selenite is a crystallized form of gypsum. On the Salt Plains, crystals form just below the salt encrusted surface. They are seldom found deeper than two feet below the surface. The salt flats have always been a tourist attraction because they are so unusual. Each year, more than 30,000 people recreationally dig for crystals on the refuge from April to October. This is the first time anything other than crystals have been found.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting

and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 547 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies. Visit the Service's website at <http://www.fws.gov>.

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