

Collecting on National Forest System Lands

What types of recreational rock and mineral collecting are allowed on the National Forests and Grasslands?

- Collection of small amounts^{1/} of widespread, low-value, relatively common minerals and stones (common quartz crystals, agate, obsidian) for noncommercial use.
- Hobby mining activities; such as recreational gold panning or use of metal detectors^{3/} to prospect for gold nuggets and other naturally occurring metals.

Are there any National Forest/Grasslands areas that are *closed* to recreational collecting?

- Certain lands within the National Forest System are not open to collecting due to wilderness designation or other sensitive areas. Contact the local District Office for information.
- It is a good idea to check with the Bureau of Land Management for specific locations to find out whether or not there are mining claims in the area.

Would I need a permit or other permission?

No permit or notification is required for collecting if the following applies:

- Collecting of samples is on the surface (no digging with hand tools or mechanized equipment).
- Collection is for personal use and esthetic values (cannot be sold or bartered).

For the following activities, please contact the Forest Service to discuss permitting or authorization:

- Activity that **does** involve digging with hand tools or mechanized earth-moving equipment, including bobcats, suction dredges, 'high banking' or dry washing equipment.
- Commercial activities including collecting mineral or fossil specimens for re-sale.
- Removal of more than insignificant amounts^{1/} of landscape rock.

The following items may *not* be collected or removed by casual collectors:

- Any part of a Vertebrate fossil (dinosaurs bones, fish, - anything with a backbone), and shark teeth.
- **Archeological resources** including any material remains of prehistoric or historic human life or activities, which are at least 50 years old, and includes the physical site, location, or context in which they are found. (36 CFR 261.2)
- The collection of **projectile points, pottery**, or any other archeological resource or artifact is not allowed (36 CFR 261.9 (h) without a permit. Projectile points include 'arrowheads' and any prehistoric human-modified stone.

^{1/} You may collect reasonable amounts of specimens. Generally, a reasonable amount is up to 10 pounds.

^{2/} Commercial use is any trading, bartering, or selling of rocks and minerals from National Forest System Lands.

^{3/} Searching for artifacts (manmade objects) with metal detectors is discouraged, as **any** ancient or historical artifacts found may **not** be removed from federal lands, such as old coins, metal implements, or utensils.

Some USFS-managed public lands are open to recreational rock hounding. There are some exceptions; certain lands that are withdrawn or reserved for specific purposes other than rock hounding are off limits to rock hounding. These areas include the following:

- ★ Wilderness Areas (there are over 700 Wilderness Areas comprising over 107,000,000 acres and the USFS has management responsibility for over half of this property)
- ★ "Wild" areas of specially designated rivers
- ★ Recreation Sites
- ★ National Historic Sites

Rock hounders should check - in advance - with the applicable District Office. Certain lands may be subject to mining claims that may preclude certain rock hounding activities. Some National Forest System lands allow rock hounders "limited collection" of rocks and minerals for personal use. These materials may be collected without a permit if:

- ★ You are on Forest Service land
- ★ The mineral rights are not privately owned
- ★ Rock hounding is not prohibited in the area
- ★ The collecting is for personal, hobby, and noncommercial use
- ★ No digging (beyond small hand tools) or excavating takes place

SPECIALLY DESIGNATED ROCK HOUNDING SITES

In addition to other rock hounding opportunities on National Forest System public lands, the USFS has certain specially designated existing developed and undeveloped opportunities for to collect rock and mineral specimens. These areas include:

- ★ Arkansas: Ouachita National Forest
- ★ Idaho: St. Joe National Forest
- ★ Montana: Beaverhead National Forest

COLLECTION LIMITS: ROCKS & MINERALS

Recreational often may collect – for personal use – “small quantities” of rocks and minerals from USFS-managed public lands.

Note: In some cases, a permit (often free) may be required prior to collecting. See, e.g., Modoc National Forest (obsidian collecting).

COLLECTION LIMITS: PETRIFIED WOOD

See [Petrified Wood](#) page.

COLLECTION LIMITS: FOSSILS

See [Fossils](#) page.

COLLECTION METHODS

Rock hounders are allowed to collect specimens found on the ground or beneath the surface if the excavation is done by hand (e.g., pick, shovel, etc.). Excavating with explosives or mechanical equipment (e.g., backhoe, trencher, auger, bulldozer, etc.) is prohibited.

IMPORTANT PROHIBITIONS & RESTRICTIONS

There are a variety of important prohibitions and restrictions. These include:

- *Explosives & Mechanized Equipment*- Excavating with explosives or mechanical equipment (e.g., backhoe, trencher, auger, bulldozer, etc.) is prohibited.
- *Commercial Use and Trading, Bartering, or Selling Fossils* - The material must be for your personal use only. It may not be sold or bartered to commercial dealers or any other person. Trading, bartering, or selling any fossil material (plants, invertebrates, vertebrates, or any trace fossils) removed from National Forest System lands is prohibited.
- *Stockpiles* - Taking rock from stockpiles is not allowed (this rock often is used to surface roads).
- *Withdrawn Lands & Special Designation Areas* -Some USFS lands are withdrawn or reserved for certain purposes such as wilderness areas. Rock hounding is prohibited in those areas that are managed under such special designation.
- *Mining Claims* - Some lands are not open to collecting due to the presence of mining claims.
- *Artifacts* - Rock hounders may not collect artifacts (ancient or historical) without a permit. This includes petroglyphs, human remains, dwellings, and artifacts of Native American cultures; arrowheads or flakes; pottery or potsherds; mats; rock art; old bottles or pieces of equipment and buildings. The USFS also discourages searching for artifacts (manmade objects) with metal detectors on the basis that any ancient or historical artifacts found (e.g., old coins, metal implements, or utensils) may not be removed from federal lands.
- *Archaeological Resources* - Rock hounders may not collect archeological resources, including any material remains of prehistoric or historic human life or activities, which are at least 50 years old, and includes the physical site, location, or context in which they are found without a permit. See 36 CFR 261.2.
- *Arrowheads* - Rock hounders may not collect projectile points (including arrowheads and any prehistoric human-modified stone), pottery, or any other archeological resource or artifact without a permit. See 36 CFR 261.9(h).
- *Human Burial Remains* - Human burial remains on both public and private land are protected by federal and state law from being collected.
- *Temporary Restrictions (e.g., Fire Closures)* - Some lands may be closed to rock hounding because of fire or vehicle use restrictions.
- *ESA & Other Environmental Restrictions* - Some lands may be closed to rock hounding because of Endangered Species Act restrictions.