Guadalupe Mountains National Park rises from 3,689 feet at the gypsum dunes to 8,749 feet at the top of the highest peak in Texas: Guadalupe Peak. This park is a magnet for geologists wishing to explore the Middle Permian geology of the region, a period from 260 to 270 million years ago during which layers of mud and sediments accumulated at the bottom of an ancient sea creating fossil-preserving limestone. Subsequent uplift and erosion exposed the wonderful plant and animal fossils visible today.

For a hike, take the Permian Reef Trail that begins at the McKittrick Canyon Visitor Center. The trail winds gradually from the canyon bottom to the top of the ridge, for a total elevation gain of 2,000 feet. Much of the story of how the mountains were formed is told in the first seven stops. It is a 4-mile hike, but even if you turn around at the halfway point (stop 15) you can still enjoy the scenic views and learn about the geology at exhibits that line the trail.
The presence of non-native fire ant colonies is a grave threat to all insectivorous reptiles and especially to our horned lizards. Nearly 70% of the diets of the Texas horned lizard and the round-tailed horned lizard are harvester ants. According to the Chihuahuan Desert Research Institute, “The combination of direct predation and destruction of the lizard’s food supply is probably sufficient to ensure the demise of horned lizards.” Please respect lizards and do not use insecticides on harvester ants.

The unmatched splendor of this national treasure lies in the cavern features themselves. Huge formations tower over you as you walk the cavern path. Above those enormous slabs of re-deposited limestone, tiny, delicate soda straws sparkle as water slowly drips off. Both rock hard and fragile, the tiniest formations are likely older than you, and the largest are much older than the world’s most ancient civilizations.

On warm summer evenings, stay to see a breathtaking spectacle. Just as the sun starts to sink below the horizon, Mexican free-tailed bats, notable for their dramatic flight displays, take to the air. Evening bat flights of this species can be enjoyed elsewhere, but none compare to the bats of Carlsbad Cavern.

Carlsbad Cavern is not the only amazing cave here. Just a few miles from the entrance to Carlsbad Cavern is Lehguilla Cave, a first-class cave of amazing beauty. For decades, people knew it as a deep pit that had a little guano and some rubble at the bottom, but not much more. In the 1980s, park managers gave three cavers permission to dig through the rubble. After a few years of weekend work and about sixteen feet of digging, they came upon a small room and from that the passageways took off. Park resource managers and the scientific community agree that Lehguilla Cave is best left as is and used for study. Scientists studying the cave’s water wear white protective suits to prevent contamination.