

Geocaching



The Technical Treasure Hunt

A PLASTIC FOOD CONTAINER WITH THE LOG BOOK ENCLOSED IN A PLASTIC BAG

I HAVE HEARD IT SAID that “large oaks from small acorns grow,” a statement that is very true of the geocaching hobby. Stemming from an idea beginning 150 years ago as “letterboxing,” geocaching escalated when the U.S. Department of Defense

removed its selective availability restriction in May of 2000, thereby considerably improving the accuracy of information obtained by Global Positioning Systems (GPS). It is estimated that there are now 650,000 registered geocaches in over 100 countries

and all seven continents. Established Web sites include geocaching.com and Navicache.com. Letterboxing, which offers clues and directions rather than coordinates to find the treasure, still exists, although the containers are sometimes linked with a geocache.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY STELLA GREEN

Typically, a geocache is a hidden container (with) a log book that the finder signs, and items for trading

What is geocaching?

TYPICALLY, A GEOCACHE IS A hidden container, preferably waterproof. It should contain a log book that the finder signs in addition to logging his find on geocaching.com, and items for trading. These articles can range from semi-valuable items to objects of little value—the cache owner's choice.

Geocaches are varied. They are mostly simple, traditional containers, but there are puzzle caches (the seeker has to solve a puzzle), multi-caches (the searcher must find a series of coordinates before finding the final treasure), and several other variations. Some caches can be very small—the size of a thumbnail, for example. These contain only a log book, with the seeker carrying his own pen. Containers can also be magnetic, hidden on guard rails or other fixed metal objects, but mostly they are large and hidden from sight in parks and wooded areas. Favorites seem to be ammo boxes and Tupperware containers with secure lids.

The trend lately seems to be away from caches holding many items for trade in favor of cleverly crafted items that require puzzle-solving, even before leaving home. "Event caches" are often announced, giving the time and place where cachers can gather to hunt caches together, swap caching stories, and enjoy one another's company. Some typical caches are shown in the accompanying pictures.

How do you do it?

To get started on this technical treasure hunt, a new cacher needs access to a computer that can be linked to the Web, a GPS

unit, the ability to walk and/or hike, probably a vehicle or access to one, a collection of trading items, and, above all, a sense of adventure and curiosity. Sometimes an ability to "think outside the box" is a help because cachers can be very innovative.

The prospective cacher begins by opening an account on geocaching.com, using a name of his or her choice to ensure privacy. There is no charge for opening such an account, though it is possible to pay a small annual fee to become a premium member. The easiest way to obtain information, once logged on, is to enter your zip code, which will access a list of caches close to that location. Coordinates are given at the top of the cache page; other information includes a sketch map of the cache location, the logs of other finders, and often a hint. These hints are encrypted, so that if the seeker is unable to find the cache by using only the coordinates, the information can be decrypted on site.

The coordinates thus obtained can then be logged into the GPS either directly from the computer or manually. There are other methods of obtaining information on caches for transfer to units such as a Personal Digital Assistant (PDA).

What else does the Web site say?

IN ADDITION, GEOCACHING OFFERS a cacher the opportunity to be notified when new caches are placed in his or her area. Having this information "pop up" on the computer, or other electronic units, sends many active cachers scrambling to the site to be the "first finder" (FTF), which often means an attractive prize.

This idea causes much competition, and cachers often vie with one another to be an FTF.

Another feature offered by geocaching.com is the Groundspeak Weekly Notification, which lists new caches in the area. It is sent out to designated e-mail addresses.

Geocaching.com keeps a record of the number of caches found for each participant, and cachers frequently write notes about their experiences with a particular cache, which are often amusing, and sometimes helpful to others. Caches that have been archived and therefore are not available are clearly shown.

What is the protocol?

CONSIDERABLE DISCRETION IS often needed to find, sign, and replace caches that are stashed in a high-use location. Non-cachers in the vicinity are referred to as "muggles," a term adopted from the Harry Potter volumes. A failure to find and sign the log book is called a DNF (did not find) and should be logged on the cache page in the hope that the information will assist others. Metal tags can be purchased and attached to an object, rendering it a "travel bug." These "travelers" can be entered on geocaching.com and given a goal for their travel, such as "visit every state in the U.S." or "travel to California and back."

Another hobby spawned by geocaching is the collecting of geocoins, which are often very attractive, and are sometimes linked to a particular event. Some cachers accrue tremendous collections and trade them with other cachers. Geocoins have individual numbers and can also be used as travel bugs.



In many families this hobby has gotten both parent and child off the couch and into an enjoyable outdoor activity

What are the ethical considerations?

OBVIOUSLY, THE DISCERNING hiker will see negative aspects of this hobby. On the other hand, children are often very enthused about geocaching. In many families this hobby has gotten both parent and child off the couch and into an enjoyable outdoor activity. CITO (Cache In/Trash Out) is an incentive to remove garbage left by others. One thing the conscientious geocacher watches is care of the place where he or she is searching, to avoid destruction of rock walls, plants, trees, and ecologically sensitive features.

When positioning a cache it is most important that the cacher know who owns the land and, if necessary, that he or she obtain permission to do so from the landowner. Government agencies and others responsible for the administration of public land sometimes have established guidelines for geocaching, and often require a written application for the placing

of a cache (see sidebar). When an application is approved, a permit number is often allocated; this should always be obtained prior to submitting the cache for approval to geocaching.com. A few caches have caught the attention of police, and some in the early days were destroyed by bomb squads. Caches are often hidden in nooks and crannies that might be attractive to other creatures; thus it is advisable to check the hiding place before inserting a hand. The conscientious cache owner will put neither the seeker nor wildlife in any kind of danger.

Where does geocaching take you?

GEOCACHING OFTEN TAKES cachers to places they didn't know existed, and never would have found without this hobby. Historical information, geological information, and other knowledge are often included on the cache page by the person placing a cache. Cachers

who make a real hobby out of geocaching and who are planning travel can access their driving route through Google Earth, and can then obtain a Pocket Query listing caches "Along the Route." Geocaches are available everywhere, from high mountaintops to lowlands and ocean sites. They can be found in large cities, suburbs, woods—anywhere imagination dictates.

Although this new hobby may sound complicated, it can easily be pursued by the entire family, who can be as energetic or as slothful as desired. Some caches can be found just by driving really close to the coordinates, while others require a substantial hike on trails or an exploration in a local park. So take your pick, gather your gear and perhaps your family, and get out there to have some fun.

◆ *Stella Green lives in northern New Jersey; she is a former officer of the New York–New Jersey Trail Conference and co-author of 50 Hikes in the Lower Hudson Valley, which is reviewed elsewhere in this issue of Adirondac.*

Geocaching in the Forest Preserve and State Forests

The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) does not require a permit to set geocaches on Forest Preserve lands or on State Forests. However, we do request that the cacher clearly label the cache with name and contact information. Caches not labeled may be removed from state lands, either for safety reasons or because they are not recognized as geocaches.

"Forest Preserve" means state-owned lands managed by the DEC Division of Lands & Forests inside the Adirondack and Catskill Park boundaries. The vast majority of these lands fall into one of the following classifications: Wilderness, Wild Forest, Primitive, Canoe, Intensive Use.

"State Forest" refers to state-owned lands managed



A "MICRO" CACHE

by the Division of Lands & Forests outside the Adirondack and Catskill Park boundaries. Most of these lands are in one of the following classifications: Reforestation Area, Multiple Use Area, Unique Area.

Lands that do not fall under either of these definitions include state parks, wildlife management areas, historic sites and education centers, among others. Anyone interested in setting caches on state lands should contact Lands & Forests staff at the nearest office (see <http://www.dec.ny.gov/about/558.html>) for clarification, or for identification of a particular parcel of public land. Special rules apply to lands in New York City and on Long Island; contacting regional field staff is especially critical in these areas.

—Robert Messenger, Principal Forester, DEC