



PEAK OUT THE GPS ...

Enchanted treasure hunting

GeoCaching: What is it exactly?
Is it a sport, is it a hobby, is it even a word?

There is no standard definition, but geocaching is basically a recreational activity in which people use a Global Positioning System (GPS) receiver to either hide or find a container, one that usually contains a log book and some trinkets.

The GPS receiver taps into a network of medium-earth orbit satellites that transmit microwave signals. The unit translates these into coordinates: latitude, longitude and altitude. After creating a geocache, participants use a GPS receiver to determine its location, then post the location on the internet so others can look for the stash.

Similarly, to find a geocache you first use the internet to look up the location of geocaches in a specific area — the Enchanted Circle, for instance. Then you follow the coordinates on the GPS receiver and start searching.

That's exactly what I did in order to find the particular coordinates of a Red River geocache.

There are several websites that bring together cache-planters and cache-seekers. I opted to use the most popular, www.geocaching.com. After searching the 87558 zip code, I determined that I was going to find a geocache called Enchanted Circle Tour #7 — Red River Views. Note, there were 44 other choices as well. The website was full of information, and before long I had the coordinates, and knew who hid the geocache: the "Weisfamily and Blacklakers".

While the website stated there were no hints available, I deduced several clues from the description and was ready for action.

To ensure the mystery is kept alive, that's all I'm going to say, other than this: when you find this cache, look for my contribution. Then drop me a line.

The multiple pleasures of geocaching

I thoroughly enjoyed my foray into geocaching. I found it to be a great mixture of technology, perseverance, intuition and good old

walking around in the fields. Additionally, it forced me to get out of my car and explore the natural beauty of this area.

Through geocaching, I have discovered an intricate world with its own jargon and code of ethics, and simple yet valuable tenets like "if you take something, leave something." For the time being I will concentrate on discovering the geocaches in the greater Enchanted Circle.

Tom Turnbull, Manager of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial State Park, relayed a humorous and somewhat embarrassing tale of his first geocache experience at the memorial. A volunteer informed him of an ammo box found near the memorial. Unbeknownst to the volunteer, in Turnbull's previous job at Heron Lake State Park he had uncovered sticks of dynamite that had started sweating, meaning they were old and possibly very dangerous. He called the State Police who evacuated the area; a bomb squad was summoned to blow up the dynamite.

Turnbull heard "ammo box" and was immediately concerned. "I cautiously approached the chamisa bush, looking for wires and wondering if a psycho had planted a bomb or something. It turned out to be a geocache filled with tchotchkes and such. I guess I overreacted, but I was honestly nervous," Turnbull said.

GPS receiver units are suddenly quite common, with the cost ranging from under \$100 to \$500, depending on the features. There are a variety of styles available for different applications, but portable handheld units work best for geocaching. Most local electronics stores, including Radio Shack, will have several varieties for sale, or check out the internet. The two most common brands are Garmin and Magellan, with volumes of information available on their respective websites, www.garmin.com and www.magellangps.com.

Have you every tried geocaching, either here or afar? There may be enough interest for another story, so please email me your experiences.

Happy hunting and beware of Muggles. ☺

— Story and photos by Michael Johnston