

# HIGH-TECH HUNT

*If it's treasure you seek, break out the GPS.* BY ERIC HENDRICKSEN

Last November, as I set out down the Sweet Creek trailhead, fog was drifting down the hills. It diffused the daylight and shrouded the trees. The creek, which is just a trickle in the summer, was now surging from the Oregon winter rain. The trail passed by one thin, silver waterfall after another. It was beautiful — and most of it was lost on me.

I was busy staring down at the screen of my GPS device, wondering which way was north and at what time it would be dark. I had a set of coordinates written down on a piece of paper in my back pocket. This wasn't just an aimless hike. I had a mission: it was geocaching.



The sport of geocaching (pronounced geo-caching) is a child of the Internet. On May 3, 2000 David Ulmer hid a can of beans, a slingshot, and a few CDs in a bucket just outside of Portland, Ore., and posted the location on the web. Mike Teague was the first to find the container, and went on to design his own web page to document similar caches. By July of the same year, Jeremy Irish had found Teague's web site and approached him with a more complex site design with maps and log-books. This site lasted for only a little while, until Irish took further control and created Geocaching.com, now the sport's official web page.

Actually, geocaching is the offspring of a somewhat incestuous marriage. The sport's mother, the Internet, evolved from a Department of Defense program, originally called ARPANET, the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network. GPS (Global

Positioning System); the sport's father, was also created by the Department of Defense, and used exclusively in the military. It is basically a network of 24 satellites that orbit the globe, sending out signals that a GPS receiver on Earth can pick up.

The convergence of GPS and the Internet has created a powerful combination with potential that has scarcely been realized. Even those who don't own a GPS receiver, or a computer with Internet access for that matter, can still recognize the quantum leaps in navigation and communication that the two technologies represent.

At any given time, at any given location in the world, four or more satellites are within range and beaming clear signals down to GPS receivers (now about the size and cost of a cell phone). These portable receivers use the signals to triangulate their position on the ground.

If you ever find yourself scrounging

around in the woods, staring haplessly at your GPS receiver, you can either thank or blame the Clinton Administration. On May 1, 2000, the administration called an end to GPS Selective Availability, which until then was degrading satellite signals for anyone other than the military. This demilitarization made commercially available GPS units remarkably more accurate and opened up the possibility of sports like geocaching. A technology once used exclusively by the military to target missiles, guide aerial bombings and navigate navy ships has become a recreational device.

On Geocaching.com, someone can get coordinates at no cost for thousands of caches in over 180 countries. The United States has the most hidden caches — nearly 6,200 nationwide — but Canada has thousands and the same goes for much of Western Europe and South America. There are 400 caches in Denmark, 40 caches list-

ed for Malaysia, and 10 in Iraq (insert your own WMD joke here). The sport is international, but what exactly are these people hunting for?

The reality is that the caches themselves have little or no value, and can be hidden by anyone and posted free of charge on the site. Some cachers hide signature items, such as personalized key chains, initialed golf balls, Tibetan prayer flags or a short letter to the would-be finder. No one has ever found a Rolex. In the end the cache itself is relatively unimportant. Most of the thrill is in the hunt.

Kyle Lynch-Klarup, a geocacher for three years says, "Really you're not hunting for treasure. It's mostly to simply get out in nature. The actual prize isn't what drives you. Most of the things you find are simple, little trinkets."

The geocachers who enjoy this hunt are a weird mix, including computer nerds, Trekkies, survivalists, average families, nature lovers, and anyone else with a GPS device and enough money for gas. The official web site has an appealing conservationist quality and has enacted a Cache In/Trash Out program to encourage participants to clean up as they hunt.

Really, those who savor geocaching the most are as much outdoor enthusiast as they are gadget nut, a burgeoning personality combination that seems to be indicative of our era. While it may seem nearly sacrilegious to some, the blend of electronics and outdoors can be quite inviting.

Sweet Creek is located just outside Mapleton, Ore., about 15 miles from the coast. The trail is well manicured, but it's still a hike. As I walked along the dirt path intent on my GPS, I tripped on a root protruding from the ground. Pausing there on the trail to examine my bleeding knee, I had time to think about direction and orientation, which is often a necessity in this game. People learn much of the common sense of the sport on their first trip or two.

Geocacher Mike Wunderlich says through the Geocaching.com chatroom, that on the subject of his second attempt, "I was introduced to many of the important lessons of geocaching: Stay on the trails as much as



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