Siuslaw News
Coast Life

Geocaching: hitting pay dirt

Florence area boasts more than 500 geocache sites

JACK DAVIS/SIUSLAW NEWS

BY JACK DAVIS
Siuslaw News

You can geocache from your car, on your favorite hiking trail, in your kayak, or even just strolling down Bay Street.

But what is geocaching you ask?

Geocaching is like a modern-day treasure hunt, only with a smart phone instead of a ratty pirate's map and Global Positioning Satellite (GPS) coordinates as the "X" that marks the spot.

As for the booty? You never know.

As local geocaching enthusiast Kenny Henson explains, "Geocaching was once described as finding Tupperware in the woods with million dollar satellites."

Geocaching is a worldwide phenomenon that started near Portland in 2000. Before that time, non-military GPS readings were only accurate to about 100 to 200 feet of a person's position. In 2000, the U.S. government changed the parameters to within 10 feet.

"A man named Dave Ulmer from Beaver Creek, Ore., got the idea of going out and hiding something and then posting its GPS coordinates on the Internet for people to find," Henson said. "He called it a 'stash.' It was a 5-gallon bucket that he buried in the ground with a bunch of stuff in it."

There is now a bronze plaque marking the location of that first site.

Not long after, a website, geocaching.com, was created and rules and standards were developed.

Today, Henson said, there are more than 3 million geocache sites around the world, and more than 6 million geocachers.

According to Henson, there are approximately 500 geocaches within a 10-mile radius of Florence, many within the city limits.

The rules on geocaching.com caches state that geocaches must be at least 1/10 of a mile, or 528 feet, apart.

Free GPS apps are available to anyone that owns a smart phone. All you need to do is download the app and start geocaching.

The next step is to go to the geocaching.com website and create a free geocaching profile.

"When you create an account online, you create it using your 'handle,'" Henson explained, "which is like a geo-alias. Mine is 'Kenny art.' When you locate a geocache, it has a log sheet in it, either a piece of paper or a book where you can write your geo-cache handle.

"On the log sheet, you put the date and your handle. If it is a bigger logbook you can actually write a message."

Next, Henson said, geocachers often go back to the website to write a log entry on the stash's page. He added that each log-in helps a geocacher's statistics.

There is more involved than just finding the geocache, if you want to play by the rules.

Often geocache sites contain "swag": small, inexpensive items or mementos that can be collected or traded.

Top, geocacher Kenny Henson displays his unique log book, next to the geocache location he placed in his front yard. Above, geocache kayakers and paddlers prepare to portage the dam to hunt for geocache locations along the Siltcoos River in July, led by Henson. "You meet the nicest people while geocaching," Henson said. More than 500 geocache sites are located within a 10-mile radius of Florence. Fifteen water-accessible sites are located along the river. "This is a fun way to enjoy time on the water, especially with friends," Henson added.
COURTESY PHOTO

However, the one cardinal rule every geocacher is expected to honor is: If you take swag, you must leave swag of equal or greater value.

Henson has discovered more than 3,000 geocache sites since he first began geocaching in 2008. That sounds like an impressive number until he mentions that some geocachers have logged more than 40,000 sites around the world.

In addition to searching for geocache sites, some geocachers leave "trackables" at a site. A "trackable" is a small geocoin or other small item that has an individual tracking number on it, called a travel bug.

"The travel bug is a little tag that can be attached to anything. You attach it to an item and give it a goal, like, 'I want to go across the United States,' or 'I want to travel the world,'" Henson said. "The item is then placed in a geocache location and waits there for someone to find it and move it to another location. Its travels are tracked on its geocache Web page. One of mine has traveled over 59,000 miles and been to numerous countries."

Geocachers can download a file from the cache Web page with helpful hints and coordinates to aid in locating the geocache.

"Each cache Web page has a "D" for difficulty and "T" for terrain and a rating from one-to-five stars," Henson said. "With difficulty; a one will be very simple and a five will be very hard to find, such as well hidden or even camouflaged. With terrain, a one means you can get to it in a wheelchair and a five means you will need some kind of equipment, like a boat."

There are even different types of geocaches, Henson notes. These include traditional, virtual, multi-geocache, unknown geocache, earthcache, letterbox hybrid or webcam geocache. People seeking a specific geocache can search for these different types individually or seek instead by area.

Henson actually has a geocache attached to a tree in his front yard. He gets a surprising number of geocachers dropping by to discover his cache and sign his oversized log sheet.
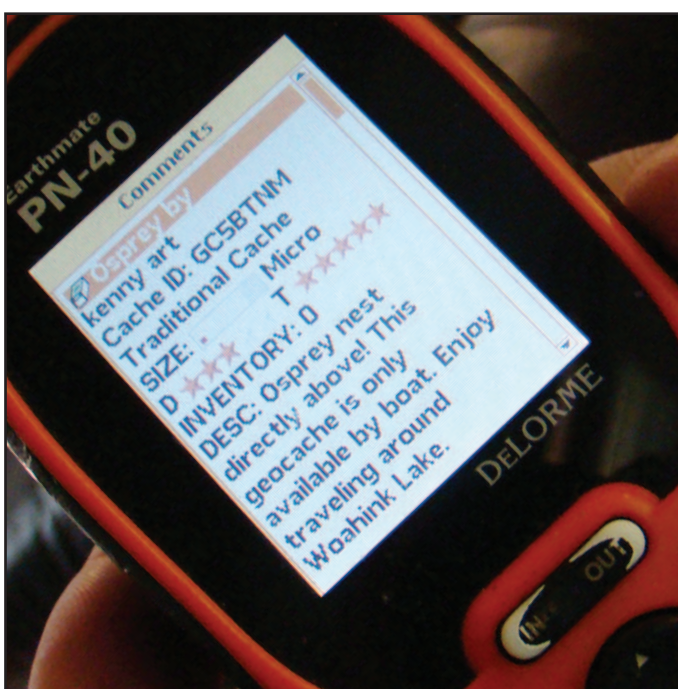
In addition to the traditional geocache search that requires just GPS coordinates and a log in, there are also mystery caches in which the geocacher is required to solve some kind of puzzle to determine what the cache coordinates are.

On a recent geocache expedition down the Siltcoos River, Henson led a group of 12 kayaks, one canoe and one stand-up paddleboard. They were searching for the 15 boat-accessible geocache sites located along the three-mile river.
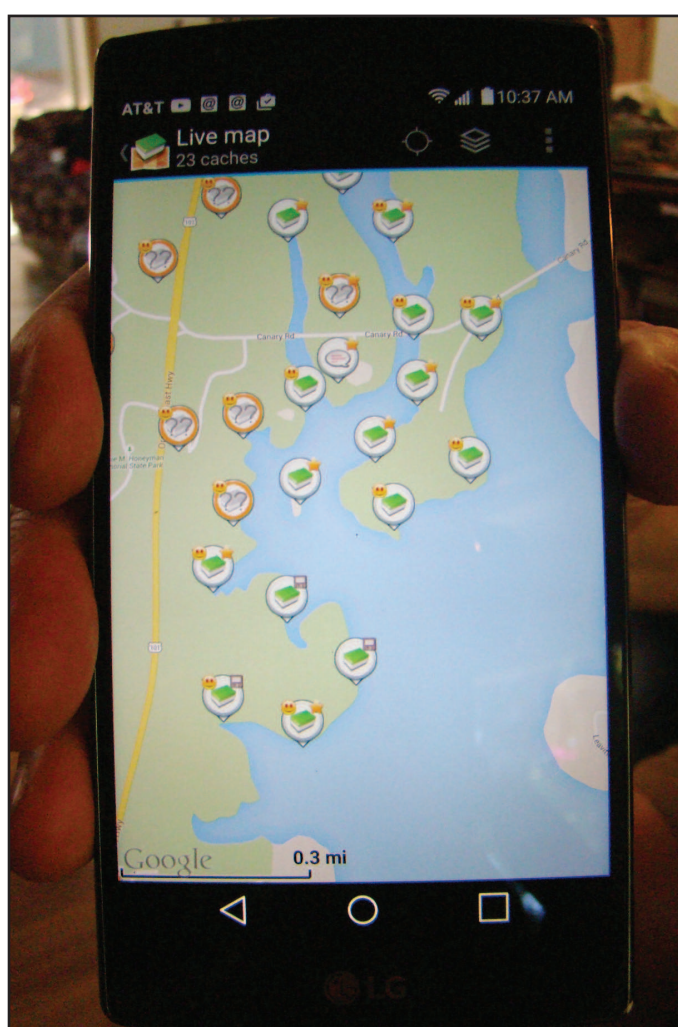
Anyone wanting more information on geocaching can go to geocaching.com.

Follow Jack on Twitter @SNews_Jack. Email him at jack@thesiuslawnews.com.

Geocache hide and seek

PHOTOS BY JACK DAVIS/SIUSLAW NEWS

Above, this Web page describes the location, degree of difficulty and equipment requirements for a hidden geocache site on Woahink Lake near Florence. Geocaching is an accessible, free GPS game that allows people to explore new or familiar areas and meet new people. Geocachers share advice and anecdotes about their finds on websites like geocaching.com. Right, a smart phone map shows some of the many geocache sites located around Woahink Lake.