

Atlanta Journal-Constitution, The (GA)

October 11, 2004

Section: Gwinnett News

Edition: Home; The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Page: JJ1

Geocaching: High-tech hunt for low-cost treasure

ADRAINNE GRAY

For the Journal-Constitution

Geocaching (v.):

1. A sport where one uses expensive global positioning technology to locate useless dollar store items in remote locations of the planet.

-- definition used by cachers

The water parks have drained their pools and the days have turned cool, but families need not run inside just yet.

It's a great time to go geocaching -- an outdoor adventure hidden in many Gwinnett-area parks and monuments.

Geocaching, called a sport by some cachers (people who participate in geocaching) and a game by others, has attracted hundreds of Gwinnettians and visitors to hunt for loot (or hide) using a global positioning system unit.

The birth of geocaching is fairly recent.

In 2000, the U.S. government unscrambled data streaming in from its global satellite system, allowing civilians the opportunity to receive more precise signals. Global positioning system units help determine exact locations with longitude and latitude coordinates.

A person with coordinates for a certain spot can be guided there by the signals of a GPS unit.

Although in earlier years the signals were less exact, captains of boats and aircraft used the technology for navigation.

Many newer model vehicles use GPS technology to guide motorists.

But for geocaching, one needs a handheld GPS to carry on the popular hunts. These units can be found at outdoor, boating or sporting goods stores and cost from under \$100 up to \$1,000.

The fall can be one of the best times of year to go geocaching, because the weather is so mild.

"Without leaves on the trees, it can be easier to find caches in the late fall and winter months," said Brandon Tarver, a Gwinnettian who loves to take his family geocaching.

This is how the game is played:

- > Players log on to any geocaching Web site to receive the game coordinates.
- > Players then pack up and go to the location of the cache and start searching.
- > Once the cache is found, players sign the log book located in the cache (usually a sealed plastic container). If there are small tokens or items in the cache, a player can remove one as long as he or she replaces it with

another item.

Sound simple? According to cachers it is not always as easy as it sounds.

Geocaching.com warns that locating some caches could require everything from rock climbing equipment to scuba gear, and if the person hiding the cache is clever, it may be extremely tough to pinpoint.

"There are too many [caches] that are covered over with sticks and straw. I like it when the cache is concealed in such a way that you can only find it after looking at it several times," Tarver said.

Geocaching.com, one of the leading Web sites with game coordinates, suggests there are more than 116,900 active caches hidden in 210 countries and more than 14,800 cachers on the hunt.

Gwinnett County is home to several caches, but Lawrenceville and Duluth are the only two Gwinnett cities with caches registered at geo-caching.com.

"We have hidden one cache on land owned by the Gwinnett Open Land Trust, and we volunteered to . . . regularly help pick up loose trash in the area," Tarver said. "The kids have had to take on the responsibility of caring for the environment and volunteering to help others."

According to geocaching sites, there are many easy hunts for small children to participate in, and hunts challenging enough for teens.

Volunteer Christina DeJaegher of Duluth has used the game to help an at-risk teen open up.

DeJaegher, a mentor in the Big Brothers -- Big Sisters of Metro Atlanta program, discovered that geocaching is a fun, free activity to help her and her 13-year-old "Little Sister," Jennifer Session, bond.

"Jennifer is not the type to get real excited about things, but the closer we get to finding it [the cache], the more excited she gets," DeJaegher said.

DeJaegher, who caught on to geocaching while in traffic when she noticed a geocaching bumper sticker on the car in front of her, said it makes sense for volunteers in Big Brothers / Big Sisters to explore the hobby as a suitable activity.

"BBBS encourages quality, low-cost-to-free activities, and this doesn't cost anything," DeJaegher said.

"I remember taking Jennifer to a picnic with friends and she stared at the picnic table the entire time. My friends said, 'She doesn't say much,' but when it was finally time to go hunt for caches, she came out of her shell. Usually, Jennifer has her nose glued to the [GPS] screen, and I'm watching for poison ivy."

Parents and volunteers both enjoy the teamwork needed for geocaching and the educational proponent made fun.

Tarver and Eric Pilcher of Duluth both cite the Thomas Jefferson cache as a hunt that led to a little history lesson.

During his first geocaching hunt, Tarver learned that there are revolutionary war soldiers buried in Tucker.

"There have been a number of caches that show old parts of town, take you to forgotten places . . . those are the types that are most educational for both the kids and I," Tarver said.

Still, outdoor fun and nature seem to be the consensus for reasons to geocache. Pilcher and his wife, Jodi, use geocaching as a way to share nature and exercise.

"We spend quality time together as a family and it adds another purpose to a typical nature walk," said Pilcher. The Pilchers are parents of a 3-year-old and a 20-month-old.

"The spark of excitement that lights in their eyes when we find a cache makes it all worth it."

Photo: Christina DeJaegher (left) and Jennifer Session go in search of caches in a geocaching adventure at Jones Park. / SUNNY SUNG / Staff

Photo: Jennifer Session (left) and Big Sister Christian DeJaegher take a look at the loot they found. / SUNNY SUNG / Staff

Photo: A global positioning system unit helps determine exact locations with longitude and latitude coordinates. / SUNNY SUNG / Staff

Graphic: TIPS ON GEOCACHING

- > Caches are usually hidden in parks, in wooded areas or near monument sites, but there are few rules about where a cache can be stashed. The creators of geocaching.com, Groundspeak, ask cachers not to disturb the environment when placing a cache. This freedom encourages creative cache location.
- > Use common sense when leaving items in a cache. NO explosives, knives, drugs, alcohol or other lewd items are permitted. It is unadvisable to leave food. Remember, most caches are outside; food would attract curious animals to your cache.
- > Once found, do not move a cache unless stated in the game.
- > Take the same precautions you would for hiking.

GEOCACHING WEB SITES

- > www.geocaching.com
- > www.brillig.com/geocaching
- > www.geocaching.navicache.com

LINKS TO CACHES IN GWINNETT

Thomas Jefferson cache:

www.geocaching.com/seek/cache_details.aspx?guid=ac65a799-5f5b-4e25-b18a-5a6a099d3108

> Playground caches: (Tunnel Vision)

www.geocaching.com/seek/cache_details.aspx?guid=de05fdb4-4703-4551-9021-11844fd59e87
(Tucker soldiers or Willie's World)

www.geocaching.com/seek/cache_details.aspx?guid=2726c417-34c9-40ab-953a-6a8870c1437a
(Woodward's Mill)

www.geocaching.com/seek/cache_details.aspx?guid=a6398ddf-6e76-40a9-b615-6778276c6916

Copyright 2004 The Atlanta Journal-Constitution