

Hide-and-Seek for Grownups

An outdoor adventure that combines art, athletics and mystery

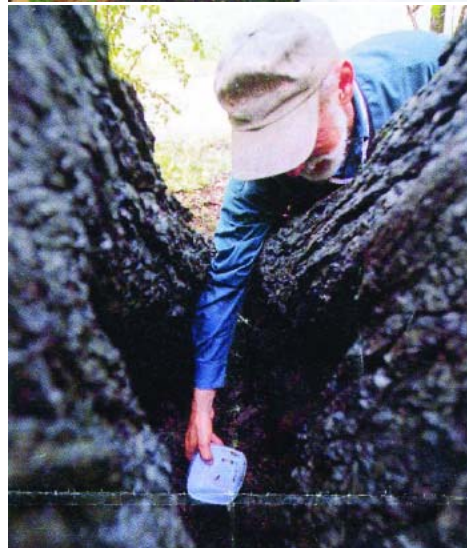
By DEIRDRE VAN DYK EAST LYME

THEY HAVE ALREADY CROSSED the bridge, scooted up a hill and, determined to keep their doings private, dodged some passing fishermen. Now, instructions in one hand and a compass in the other, Brian Connolly is leading his wife Lori and two friends toward a tree sprouting from a rock in Connecticut's Rocky Neck State Park. Stooping at the base of the tree, Connolly pushes aside a rock and pulls out his quarry: a Tupperware container. Inside are a rubber stamp, an ink pad and a notebook filled with imprinted marks and messages left by people who discovered the box earlier. "All right," he says with a grin. "Let's stamp in."

Connolly, 44, a packaging engineer from Taunton, Mass., is a letterboxer. Part hiking, part puzzle solving, part treasure hunt, letterboxing has become an obsession for people who enjoy physical and mental workouts. "I was out of shape and needed more exercise," says Linda Kazel, 55, of Wallingford, Conn., "and I love mysteries. I thought, This is perfect."

Letterboxing is said to have started in England 150 years ago when a Victorian walker left a bottle by Cranmere Pool, Devon, with his calling card in it and an invitation to those who found the bottle to add theirs. It caught on in the U.S. after a 1998 article about the British pursuit appeared in *Smithsonian* magazine. Since then, more than 9,000 letterboxes have been planted in state parks and nature preserves around the country. Each waterproof box contains a logbook and a rubber stamp. Visitors mark the book with their stamp and use the stamp in the box to document the discovery in their logbook. Secrecy is paramount; boxers take pains to avoid being seen uncovering their prize, and they carefully hide it again for the next person to find. Clues to the location of the boxes can be found on the main letterboxing website, Letterboxing.org. The number of hits on the site has doubled in the past year, from 206,513 in May 2003 to more than half a million this April.

Letterboxing attracts a diverse following. Families appreciate the outdoor activity and bonding experience. Trish Kurdziel,



TREASURE HUNT: Clockwise from top, the discovery; a stamp imprint; returning a box to its hiding place

44, of North Kingstown, R.I., goes letterboxing regularly with her husband and their three children, ages 6, 9 and 11. "They take turns reading the clues and opening the box," says Kurdziel. "It's fun as long as your kid knows what poison ivy looks like." Artistic types delight in carving the stamps, handcrafting logbooks and creating distinctive boxes.

Barry Bennett, 46, a business analyst in Pasadena, Calif., who has located about 160 boxes and acquired some local celebrity for his unique stamps, says, "It's really a performance-art type of thing. You put this thing out there, and other people come and experience it." Although some instructions offer fairly straightforward directions, puzzle addicts love the challenge of solving and creating clues replete with clever puns, math formulas and other riddles. Some of them can take weeks or even months to solve (one consists solely of lyrics to songs by the Barenaked Ladies, the Violent Femmes and the Call).

Die-hard boxers, most of whom adopt trail names like Funhog, SpringChick and

Mapsurfer, pride themselves on the intricacy of their clues and the ingenuity of their box placement, and they develop followings. Ryan Carpenter, 29, an unemployed software engineer from Portland, Ore., estimates that he has located 500 boxes and placed 150, including "two boxes in Africa and half a dozen in Central America." His turtle stamp is so well known that other boxers instantly recognize it and have even invited him to stay in their homes during his travels.

Some enthusiasts hide boxes in urban areas. (There's one near the Lincoln Memorial in Washington.) But in this day and age, such sites present a unique set of problems. "If you're hiding one in a city somewhere, or near a bridge or something that might be a target for terrorists," says Carpenter, "it definitely is a concern." To lessen anxiety, most boxers use translucent containers so that people can see inside and know they're safe. Ultimately, however, the game is about the thrill of the unknown. In April the Connollys found themselves in the middle of a herd of wild boar near Tampa, Fla. Says Lori: "If not for letterboxing, we never would have seen something like that."

—With reporting by Elizabeth Coady/Chicago and Sean Scully/Los Angeles—*Time*, July 26, 2004, page 55