

Geo-cache-and-carry

By James A. Fussell

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Peering under rocks, stepping over stumps and knifing through overgrown brush, Brian Yonke inspects an urban jungle in his home town of Liberty, Mo., with near-surgical precision.

The thickly wooded area teems with ticks, spider webs and poison ivy. Near 100-degree heat causes sweat to drop from his chin in dime-sized droplets. He doesn't care; his \$400 GPS device tells him there's something hiding here, and he and his wife, Carlin, aren't leaving until they find it.

The couple is part of a growing group of modern-day Magellans, tenacious treasure hunters who scour the earth in what amounts to a global game of hide-and-seek for adults. The Yonkes' passion is geocaching, a gadget-driven, Internet-assisted pastime that uses map coordinates and satellite signals to guide searchers to a world of hidden goodies.

"It's become an addiction," Carlin says.

In the last three years, the two have found more than 1,100 objects in more than 30 states. Like all geocachers, the Yonkes use handheld global positioning systems (they own five) to quite literally point the way. They check the main geocaching website, www.geocaching.com, to find "caches" to locate.

While geocaching is the most popular form of adult hide-and-seek, it is not the only one. Letter-boxing, which originated in England 150 years ago, is also gaining a following in the States.

More artistic than geocaching, letterboxing combines hiking with

puzzle-solving and creating hand-carved personal stamps. Visitors who find a letterbox mark the logbook inside the box with their stamp and use the stamp they find in the box to stamp their journals as a memento of the discovery.

Letterboxing does not require a GPS. Instead, seekers follow step-by-step clues found on the website www.letterboxing.org, like a treasure map. Clues can be simple or devilishly complex. Hard-core letterboxers pride themselves on creating elaborate, challenging, even poetic clues. Many employ metaphors, symbolism or other literary devices. As a result, letterboxing is often as much a mental and artistic exercise as it is a physical one.

Geocachers and letterboxers don't always see eye to eye, but their passions are simply different ways of doing the same thing. Both activities combine mystery and adventure with exercise and a way of connecting with others.

Geocachers and media wags alike have called the hobby "the first new sport of the new millennium." Since a GPS owner hid the first cache in May of 2000, the activity has exploded.

Jeremy Irish of Seattle, who runs the game's Web site, estimates that there are now more than 111,000 caches hidden around the globe in virtually every country on Earth. More than 90 percent of all caches are in the United States. Seventy thousand new logs are posted each week to the Web site concerning geo-caching activity.

It all started in May 2000, shortly after President Clinton gave an executive order that improved the accuracy of commercial GPS devices from about 300 feet to less than 20. Two days after Clinton's announcement, a man outside Portland, Ore., hid the first cache,

and the sport has been growing ever since. GPS systems, originally developed by the defense department for military use, are now produced in increasing numbers strictly for commercial use.

"In the last six to eight months we've introduced several GPS receivers that have a special geo-caching mode," said Garmin spokesman Ted Gartner. "It allows hard-core geocachers to log their geocaching history—where they've been, what they've found and when they found it."

The units range from \$350 to \$550.

Usually caches contain a collection of small items such as keychains, McDonald's toys and erasers. But they've also been known to hold items ranging from clothing to cash. If you take something, geocaching etiquette requires you to leave something of equal value.

There are a few shared rules for both geocaching and letterboxing. No food or dangerous materials should be placed in boxes, personal property rights of landowners must be respected, and items should never be buried. James Sanders, superintendent on the Harry S Truman National Historic Site in Independence, Mo., asks that people get a special-use permit before hiding anything on a national park. Otherwise, he said, they could unintentionally hurt the environment or disturb sensitive wildlife nesting areas.

On the Web

Sites to get you started:

www.geocaching.com

www.letterboxing.org

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