



Map illustration by Julie Cassata

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HIKE AND SEEK

By Abby Wolfe

"Now, this is what geocaching is all about!"

I hustled up the last few feet of Wedge Mountain and joined my friends in awe of the panorama before us: the Snow Lakes at our feet and sweeping views westward into the heart of the Enchantments. We made quick work of locating the nearby cache, then relaxed over lunch and enjoyed yet another amazing spot discovered through geocaching.

There's something about geocaching that holds special appeal. Maybe it's the quest for "hidden treasure," or the ability to sign a log showing I was there, much like a summit register. Or maybe it's that geocaching shows me places that aren't in hiking guides, where I can experience something new and special. Whatever the reason, I was hooked on geocaching from the first time I tried it. I dubbed it "goal-oriented hiking," and it became a great way for me to learn about Washington's outdoors.

Thanks to my geocaching adventures, I've explored countless parks, pioneer cemeteries and fire lookouts; climbed Mount St. Helens and Mount Aix; hiked every part of the state from the Olympics to the Salmo-Priest Wilderness; and wandered back roads in national forests from the Cascades to the Umatillas. Nine years and 8,300 caches later, I probably know Washington better than most—yet I'm still discovering new places!

A NORTHWEST PHENOMENON

Born right here in the Pacific Northwest just twelve years ago, geocaching is one of the fastest-growing recreational activities around, far outpacing its older cousin, letterboxing. It is essentially a game of high-tech hide-and-seek using a GPS receiver. Players hide containers and post the coordinates on a geocaching website. Geocachers locate the caches with their GPS device, sign the logbook, trade trinkets, then log their experiences online.

The first geocache was placed May 3, 2000, the day after the U.S. government turned off "selective availability," the intentional degradation of the GPS (Global Positioning System) signal available to civilians. Consumer GPS units instantly became 10 times more accurate. An Oregon man tested the new capabilities by hiding a container in the woods outside of Portland. He posted the coordinates on an Internet newsgroup and challenged others to find his "GPS stash."

Within a year, hundreds of geocaches appeared around the world. Today there are more than 1.7 million active geocaches worldwide—27,000 in Washington state alone—with more than 5 million people calling themselves "geocachers."

The first caches were placed by hard-core hikers, who shared favorite locations and hidden wonders. While geo-hiking remains a key draw, especially here in Washington, geocaches can be found just about anywhere, from local parks to remote fire lookouts. There are caches for city slickers and mountain climbers, for boaters and scuba divers, for bicyclists and snowshoers. There's even a special designation for accessible caches.

While many caches simply provide an excuse to get outdoors, others share

local history or geology. A selection of Cougar Mountain caches highlights the mining, railroad and logging history of the park. This is information not available on park signs. A special category called "earthcaches," supported by the Geological Society of America, teaches about area geology. Through earthcaches, one can visit the spires of Palouse Falls or the eelgrass meadows of Puget Sound. Some of the best earthcaches are the ice age floods caches by renowned geologist Bruce Bjornstad, which describe specific features carved out by the massive floods.

ANYONE CAN DO IT

The greatest thing about geocaching is that anyone can do it, regardless of age or physical ability. It's a fun family activity—kids love gadgets and treasure hunts, so what better way to get them unplugged and outdoors? While many aficionados may have already been hikers, geocaching has encouraged folks who've never explored nature to venture off the pavement.

For serious geocachers, a dedicated GPS unit with mapping capabilities is a must. But thanks to the geocaching apps now available for smartphones, anyone can try geocaching or do it occasionally without making a major investment. (See this issue's Gear Closet for more on GPS devices.)

The leading geocaching website is geocaching.com, run by Seattle-based Groundspeak. This site provides information on available geocaches, which players can load onto their GPS devices. After finding the caches, players log their finds online and share their experiences.

Geocaching.com does more than simply list caches, however. It governs the activity through a set of guidelines and volunteer reviewers, which together encourage responsible participation and prevent cache placements in off-limits areas.

Despite being described as a "treasure hunt," one of the cardinal rules is that a geocache cannot be buried (and the trinkets have no real value). No disturbance or defacement of natural or manmade objects is allowed, and caches cannot be placed

on private property without permission. Restricted areas include schools, railroads and national parks.

WORKING WITH PARKS

When geocaching first appeared, land managers were concerned about its potential impact. Some park systems banned it outright (federal), others created a permit process (state), and many took a wait-and-see approach (city, county). But parks at all levels soon discovered that geocaching was bringing in more visitors, and the impact was no greater than hiking and less than mountain biking or camping. Park managers began to see geocaching as an educational tool and potential revenue source.

Geocachers also built positive relationships through the Cache In Trash Out (CITO) program, an environmental initiative supported by the worldwide geocaching community as a way to give back to the parks. A CITO event can be trash pickup, invasive plant removal, trail building—whatever the park needs. “Geocachers are, without a doubt, some of the hardest-working volunteers we get,” says Niki McBride, resource coordinator at Cougar Mountain, part of King County Parks.

King County was an early supporter of geocaching, but today, many land managers embrace geocaching and even offer geocaching classes and activities. Richland City Parks launched its third-annual geocaching challenge in June, and the National Park Service has recently revised its geocaching policy to allow geocaching at the discretion of park superintendents. In 2010, Chip Jenkins, superintendent of the North Cascades National Park Service Complex, permitted the first two caches in a western national park. At Mount Rainier, Ranger Kevin Bacher became an avid geocacher and has placed earthcaches highlighting his favorite mountain.

Today, Washington State Geocaching Association (WSGA; wsgaonline.org) represents geocachers across the state. Through their Park Liaison Program, WSGA works closely with park systems to educate them about geocaching, provide caching activities, address issues and create mutually beneficial relationships.

Twelve years after that first “GPS stash” was placed, the Pacific Northwest remains the home of geocaching, with enthusiasts visiting from around the world to find our historic caches in their breathtaking surroundings. As an Indiana cacher once told me, “We don’t have scenery like this back home!” ♦

Abby Wolfe, aka “hydnnsek,” is president of the Washington State Geocaching Association.

Geocacher Stefani Ryan finds a cache in the Salt Creek Recreation Area. Says Ryan, “Our signal was spotty in this area, so we spent a lot of time searching. The hunt was worth it though—we found a geocoin!”

Photo by Kelsie Donleycott

GEOCACHING RESOURCES

- ⇒ **Website:** Geocaching.com lists caches and provides in-depth resources
- ⇒ **Organization:** Washington State Geocaching Association (WSGA) supports geocachers and works with parks; wsgaonline.org
- ⇒ **Guidebook:** *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Geocaching*, by Alpha Books, is the go-to guide for all levels of geocachers. See how you can win a copy at wta.org/geocache
- ⇒ **Maps:** Northwest Trails offers a free mapset for Garmin and DeLorme GPS users for hiking and geocaching; switchbacks.com/nwtrails
- ⇒ **Event:** Seattle’s Geo-Days takes place August 18–19 this year. Join hundreds of cachers from around the world for a weekend of geocaching fun; geocaching.com



GEOCACHER QUIZ

Are you an experienced geocacher, or have you ever thought about trying it? Take our geo-quiz and find out how savvy of a cacher you are. After, enter the drawing to win a geocaching starter kit, complete with guidebook, geocoin and travel bug.

1. Who placed the first geocache outside Portland, Ore., on May 3, 2000?
2. Who coined the name "geocaching," and where did it first appear?
3. When geocaching.com launched on Sept. 2, 2000, how many geocaches were there in the world?
4. Which of the following require permission to place geocaches?
 - a. Washington state parks
 - b. National parks
 - c. National recreation areas
 - d. All of the above
5. Why was Washington State Geocaching Association (WSGA) formed?
6. Which of these is not a type of geocache?
 - a. multi-cache
 - b. indoor cache
 - c. event cache
 - d. puzzle cache
7. Which of the following is not part of a cache listing?
 - a. Coordinates
 - b. Terrain and Difficulty ratings
 - c. Cache size
 - d. Street address
8. Caches come in all sizes. What's the smallest listed size?
9. Name three things not allowed in caches.
10. What do these geocaching acronyms mean:
 - a. TFTC
 - b. DNF
 - c. BYOP
 - d. FTF
11. Who is responsible for maintaining caches?
12. What does it mean to "archive" a cache?
13. What are Travel Bugs and Geocoins, and how do they work?
14. What's the geocaching term for non-cachers?
15. How many continents have geocaches

For quiz answers, visit wta.org/geocache

CALLING ALL MUGGLES!

Washington Trails has three intro to geocaching toolkits available to help get you started.

Visit wta.org/geocache and enter our drawing for one of these free kits (GPS not included). Courtesy of Groundspeak and Gear Aid.



On your mark...
Get set...
Click!



2011 Grand Prize winner *Ruby Beach*, by Todd Mortensen

Northwest Exposure 2012

Washington Trails Association's annual photo contest is coming. That means it's time to get out on your favorite wilderness trails and start capturing those beautiful landscapes that make us so proud to live and hike here in the Northwest.

Trailsapes – Wilderness landscapes, and the trails that take you through them

Hikers in Action – Capture the experience with hikers on trails

Flora & Fauna – Woods, wildflowers and all things four-legged and furry

Families Go Hiking – Fun at your favorite hiking and camping destinations

Offbeat – Show us the weird, wild and wacky from your outdoor adventures

The contest kicks off August 15. Look for more info in the next issue of *Washington Trails*, or online at wta.org/northwestexposure.