

'Geocachers' play high-tech hide and seek

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John Willard | Comments(0)

About 50 people combined space-age technology with frontiersman's savvy on an outing Saturday that left Scott County Park cleaner while giving them the excitement of finding hidden treasure.

The occasion was a "Cache In-Trash Out" hosted by the Iowa Geocachers Organization, a club devoted to the hobby of geocaching.

Geocaching is a relatively new game in which participants use Global Positioning System, or GPS, coordinates to hide and search for a "geocache" (pronounced geo-cash), a container of treasure. The "treasure" typically is in the form of coins, toys and other trinkets.

Saturday's event at Scott County Park was one of the largest gatherings of the organization since it was founded in January 2004. Geocachers spent the morning cleaning up trash before venturing out again after a picnic lunch, this time with their hand-held GPS receiving units, combing the landscape in search of treasures.

Geocaching enthusiasts say the hobby combines the fun of walking outdoors and enjoying nature with the added dimension of hunting treasure with high-tech tools.

"It gets you out in the woods with a purpose," said Jay Lash, a software engineer from Vinton, Iowa, and the president of the Iowa Geocachers Organization.

Monica Smith, a chiropractor from Davenport, said the geocaching is a fun family activity. "It is something I can do with my grandchildren," she said.

Members of the organization represent all ages and backgrounds, with most sharing a fascination with electronic gadgets such as portable GPS receiving units. Widely available at department stores, consumer electronic stores and sporting goods outfitters, the units start at less than \$100 and can go upward in price to several hundred dollars.

A typical GPS receiver acquires signals from up to 12 of the 24 orbiting satellites and uses the data to triangulate a position fix anywhere on earth.

The other tool needed for geocaching is a personal computer, with which the geocacher calls up www.geocaching.com, the definitive geocaching site featuring more than 100,000 active caches hidden in 219 countries.

By entering zip codes, geocachers locate the caches hidden around those areas. Clicking on the cache listings reveals more information about the caches, including the latitude and longitude of their locations. The geocacher downloads the coordinates into the GPS and is ready to go treasure hunting.

During Saturday's outing, Bill Bartley, an accountant from Bettendorf, walked in the direction of the arrow on the compass displayed on the tiny screen of his GPS receiver. As he walked, the unit told him how many feet he was from the cache. Others tracked their units to the same coordinates, identified on the Web site as "Kids Cache 2."

"It's a fun hobby and it is the perfect family activity," Bartley said.

Mike Flick, 14, of Blainstown, Iowa, found the cache. Mike, who was with his grandparents, Carol and Ron Geiger, of Vinton, Iowa, looked for tell-tale signs, such as bent grass and other indications that a cache site might be near.

"Here it is," he said as he hauled out an ammunition box hidden under a dead branch in a growth-covered ravine not far from Whispering Pines shelter.

It yielded a Ward Burton toy NASCAR racer, a plush animal and other trinkets.

Gary Cadogan, an industrial supervisor from Morrison, Ill., added a small souvenir frisbee and a Sacajawea dollar to the cache. Before the box was returned to its hiding place, the treasure hunters wrote messages to future discoverers, using the small notebook that was part of their find.

"This way we all can share our adventures," Cadogan said.

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WHAT IS GEOCACHING?

Geocaching, the hobby of hiding or finding treasure through use of the Global Positioning System, has attracted an estimated 750,000 people who call themselves geocachers.

The door to the hobby was opened in 2000 when the United States discontinued the use of "selective availability," in which the government introduced intentional errors in the satellite signals received by GPS receivers of all users except those in the military. With selective availability, hobbyists using GPS receivers

could locate objects within an accuracy range of only 30 feet.

After selective availability was removed, the accuracy range was boosted to 15 feet, a move that encouraged one GPS receiver user to hide a small container in Oregon and to post its location on the Internet. Three days after the longitude and latitude coordinates of the geocache's location were posted, two GPS hobbyists found it.

In Iowa, the main geocaching hobby group is the Iowa Geocachers Organization (www.IowaGeocachers.org). It formerly was known as the Eastern Iowa Geocachers Association (www.EasternIowaGeocachers.org). It was founded Jan. 10, 2004.

— John Willard

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