Dreamstime

Brenda Hopkins

High-Tech Treasure Hunt

From the park down the street to the wilderness, geocaching is a great way to explore the outdoors.

By Alex Roslin

Steve Hanes was amazed when someone showed him the strange photo on the web. The picture was of a plastic container hanging by a bungee cord from a tree somewhere in the woods behind his backyard.

A fellow hunter who found the online evidence told him it was something called a geocache. Someone had hidden it there for others, known as geocachers, to find.

What kind of crazy people were these? More importantly, Hanes wondered, how had he not noticed the contraption himself? "Impossible," he muttered. "I would have seen it."

Hanes rushed off into the woods behind his home in Ottawa's Barrhaven neighbourhood to check for himself. He searched and searched but he couldn't see it. He returned to his computer and checked the GPS co-ordinates for the geocache again. This time he finally found it. It had been just 170 metres from his front door for half a year.

The small plastic container held an assortment of coins and paper money from around the world, some Canadian Tire money, a casino token, a logbook, two pencils and a sharpener.

"It'd been here all these months, and I hadn't known it was out there," Hanes said. He was hooked. Like for many other people, geocaching quickly became more than a sport for Hanes. It became an addiction.

Over the next three and a half years, the retired teacher became "model12" (his geocaching nickname) — one of Canada's most prolific cachers, with 7,040 finds, an average of 170 per month. He was voted Ontario's Cacher of the Month in 2008.

Often accompanied by his wife (who's no slouch herself, with 1,173 caches found) and their two daughters, Hanes's obsession has taken his family caching across Canada and to 18 U.S. states, Germany, Mexico, the Bahamas, the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico.

"I plan my trips around geocaching," he says.

Geocaching has exploded since the sport started in the U.S. in 2000 and quickly spread to Canada and beyond. The number of caches worldwide has shot up from 80,000 in 2004 to 925,000 now.

Geocaching, which is basically a combination of high-tech treasure hunting and orienteering, has been dubbed "the sport where you are the search engine." Participants use a GPS receiver to find hidden items using co-ordinates posted online at sites like Geocaching.com, the sport's main web portal.

A cache can be anything from a 35-millimetre film canister (called a "microcache") to a plastic container, ammo can or 20-litre bucket. It usually contains several objects — small toys, CDs, books, memorabilia — and must include a logbook for cachers to record their find. (Finds are also logged online at Geocaching.com, where most cachers have personal pages.)

Cachers can take any of the objects except the logbook, exchanging them with things of the same or higher value. Some items are actually intended to be moved. Special tags, known as travel bugs, and coins dubbed geocoins are left for cachers to move from cache to cache, chronicling their progress online. Some bugs have moved 60,000 kilometres this way.

The Rules

Geocaching guidelines help to ensure the activity is carried out safely and respectfully. Caches aren't allowed on private property without the owner's permission. They can't be buried or involve damage to nature or property.

Caches can't be hidden near schools, government buildings, bridges, airports, military bases or dams. The goodies inside shouldn't include food or potentially dangerous items like knives, drugs or alcohol.

Cachers also practice a principle called Cache In Trash Out, which involves picking up garbage while hiding a cache or looking for one.

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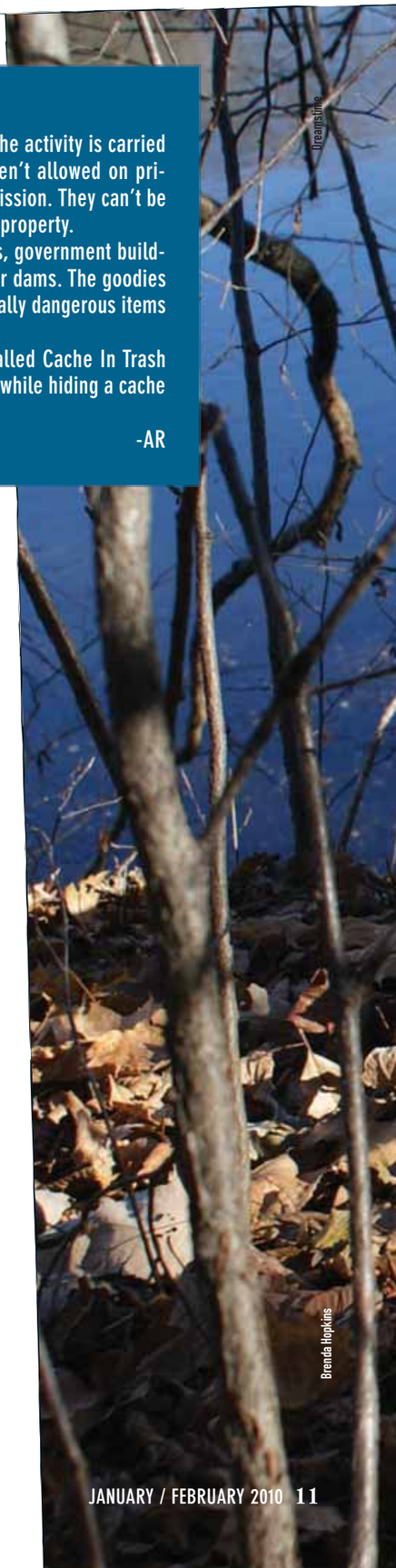
The addictive nature of geocaching comes from the joy of discovering new places, often in beautiful natural surroundings. (Geocachers tend to be big nature-lovers.) "I've gone to places I'd never, never visit that are magnificent," says Alain Couillard, who runs the QuebecGeocaching.com website, one of the first French-language portals for the pursuit.

Hanes agrees. "When most people go on a road trip, they stop in two places — the restroom and Timmy's. I look for different ways of getting there on back roads so I can look for caches. It's not the tourist trip where you see the same three tourist traps. This is more self-tourism where you go off the beaten trail."

Also addictive is the challenge of finding a cleverly hidden cache. A decent, newer-model GPS can put you within three to five metres of a cache, but that still leaves a lot of ground to cover. The cache may be hidden in a walnut or pine cone, behind a bogus piece of bark on a tree or in a fake mailbox. Most caches are hidden in public areas like parks, but they can be so ingeniously concealed that non-cachers — called muggles after the non-



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Getting into the Game

To become a geocacher, all you really need is a hand-held global positioning system receiver. A decent starter model can be had for about $125 new (or $50 used), while an experienced cacher may opt for one with extra bells and whistles (colour screen, more reliable receiver, a card for storing maps, longer-lasting battery), which would go for $300 to $600.

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Yes, there *is* a cache hidden in this pile of leaves.

En route to a cache site

Trying to figure out the combination to get into a cache

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magical characters in the Harry Potter books — don't even notice.

Lambert Paquette, a computer programmer in Blainville, Que., north of Montreal, has found 2,500 caches and has himself tucked away 83 of his own. One of his favourites (called "84 Conifers, One Microcache" — stashers name their caches) is a 35 millimetre film canister hidden in a stand of 84 fir trees. "Some people like it, others don't," he confesses.

Another of Paquette's devious caches is a large box full of 120 empty film canisters. The catch is that the logbook isn't in any of the canisters; it's in a false bottom in the box. "Some people open all 120 rolls looking for the logbook to sign. Then they reopen all the rolls to recheck them, thinking that they missed it," Paquette says.

Paquette, who has been caching with his son since the boy was three years old, says he loves the adventure, the time spent in nature and the constant surprises such as near face-to-face encounters with foxes, deer and an owl. "You can be surprised by every cache," he says.

Another attraction is the super-friendly caching community. Cachers often run into each other on trails, GPS in hand. They organize frequent events in most areas across Canada, ranging from informal gatherings of treasure-seekers who spend a day together hunting down caches to competitions involving hundreds of teams.

"It's a very social activity," says Brenda Hopkins, a building subcontractor who lives near Ingersoll, Ont., and is executive officer of the Ontario Geocaching Association.

Hopkins has made 635 finds since she started 18 months ago. "A lot of people comment how easy it is to get addicted. I always have my GPS with me. On my way home from work, I might go find one. Or maybe on my lunch. Once you find those first couple, yes, you get pretty proud of yourself."

Alex Roslin is a freelance writer based in Lac Brome, Quebec. He writes the Climate Files article in each issue of Canadian Wildlife.