

The joys of GEOCACHING

Internet-driven sport sends players off on scavenger hunts with GPS devices to guide them

By LISA PALMER, *Standard-Times correspondent*

Last Saturday morning, Dawn Macomber scuttled over a stony breakwater near Clarks Cove in Dartmouth and stared at the small yellow device in her son's hand.

"We are within 12 feet," she announced, surveying the beach. They were closing in on a treasure, their Holy Grail.

On three other occasions over the last two months, Ms. Macomber, 7-year-old D.J. and husband Dave had scoured the same shoreline unsuccessfully.

But the fourth time was the charm. Using a hand-held global positioning system, the Maccombers finally found what they were searching for: a small plastic canister containing small toys and other odds and ends.

The so-called "Clarks Cove Cache" was duly logged. The Hudson, N.H., family chalked up another victory in the pursuit of their favorite pastime.

It's called geocaching. And it's the fastest growing sport you've probably never heard of.

Geocaching (pronounced geo-cashing) is an Internet-driven game of hide and seek. Using coordinates posted on the official geocaching Web site, www.geocaching.com, adventurers armed with cell-phone-sized GPS devices search for caches, which are small boxes filled with all manner of sundries.

Today, there are 82,314 geocaches hidden in 196 countries. More than 900 caches are hidden in Massachusetts alone, including 200 in the SouthCoast.

The locations vary by terrain and are graded by difficulty.

There aren't many rules involved, but approved caches are placed on property to which the public normally has access. Once located, players are encouraged to take an object from the cache, leave one of their own, and write about their experience in the cache's log book.

Jeremy Irish of Seattle, Wash., is among the sport's creators. He calls geocaching, "The sport where you are the search engine."

Techies started playing nearly four years ago when the U.S. Defense Department stopped scrambling the signals from 24 satellites orbiting the earth. That allowed GPS units to pinpoint locations to within 12 feet -- far greater accuracy than in the past.

Geocaching was born immediately thereafter. The first cache was hidden in Oregon. By September 2000, geocachers used the Internet to communicate location coordinates for 70 caches planted throughout the Northwest.

Geocachers Dawn and Dave Macomber are originally from Dartmouth. Both served in the U.S. Army in the early to mid-1990s. During training exercises, Mr. Macomber remembers using GPS units, which "weren't very good back then," he says.

"They didn't get a signal if there was cloud cover. Mostly, we used a compass and a map."



Photos by **ANDREW T. GALLAGHER**/*Standard-Times special*

Dawn Macomber, a N.H. resident formerly of Dartmouth, signs the logbook she found inside a geocache in Dartmouth. Using a hand-held global positioning system, players track down caches -- usually, a small plastic box containing simple odds and ends -- hidden by other players worldwide. There are hundreds of hidden caches right here in the SouthCoast. Dawn and David Macomber watch as their 7-year-old son D.J. finds the geocache hidden at Clarks Cove. The precise coordinates to this cache and all others are posted on the geocachers Web site. Debra and Richard Golen of Dartmouth are longtime players of the sport. He holds the toy parrot he placed in a geocache a couple of years ago, inviting other players to find it and move it south to its ultimate destination: Key West. The toy made its way back to its owners just weeks ago.

The family, whose Internet name is "TeamPookie," learned about geocaching last November at a Boy Scout meeting they attended with D.J.

"We bought a GPS that same day, and we found our first geocache that same day," says Ms. Macomber. "We were hooked."

The Macomers now regularly go on excursions for various caches.

"We like to hike. Now, we go places we wouldn't normally go to," Ms. Macomber says. "D.J. holds the GPS. That way, we can get him to go for a walk with us. It's exciting for him and he pays attention."

Richard Golen, an assistant dean at UMass Dartmouth, and his wife, Debra, are charter members of the sport. They have hidden several caches, including the one at Clarks Cove -- specifically, N 41° 35.678 W 070° 55.665.

Typically, when a geocacher locates a cache, usually a plastic container filled with inexpensive curios and a logbook, they sign in and swap trinkets, Mr. Golen says.

The Macomers did just that after locating the Clarks Cove Cache. They signed the log, then D.J. took a toy frog from the cache in return for a plastic utility clip. But the family went a step further, leaving a so-called Travel Bug in the cache, a trinket that has a name tag (in this case, "Swamp Thing") and a serial number that allows other geocachers to track its progress, via the Internet, from cache to cache.

Swamp Thing isn't the first Travel Bug to visit Clarks Cove, however.

In the playful spirit of the game, Mr. Golen put a toy parrot into the cache two years ago. A Jimmy Buffet fan, Mr. Golen dubbed it the "ParrotHead" Travel Bug and invited players to help it travel to Key West, Mr. Buffet's hometown.

Bruce Rocha Jr. of Mattapoisett was the first to find the parrot. On June 16, 2002, he migrated the bird south, to a Heritage Park cache in Portsmouth, R.I. It took a year for the toy to reach its ultimate destination and it only made its way back home two weeks ago.

"He went 3,700 miles," Mr. Golen marvels, adding, "The whole sport is about the spirit of adventure."

The Golens have gone on geocaching journeys throughout the world. They placed a cache in Germany, and have gone caching in the Bahamas and Key West, where Mr. Golen met Jimmy Buffet himself.

"We had this picture taken together right outside his recording studio," Mr. Golen says, pointing to the photo he sent to Mr. Buffett, who signed and returned it to his fan.

The Macomers hope to hide their own cache in Dartmouth in memory of Dawn's grandfather, Harry Rowbotham, who used to go boating on the Slocums River.

The sealed Rubbermaid container is already prepared for the site.

First, though, the family will seek permission to place the cache. Respect for the environment is a paramount concern for geocachers. A site can't be posted on geocaching.com without earning the approval of its volunteers.

Bruce Rocha started geocaching in 2001. At the time, he was unfamiliar with GPS technology, even though his father had given him a system two years earlier. Geocaching helped him learn the technology, he says.

Mr. Rocha, who has logged more than 300 caches, says finding some caches are baffling.

"You have to complete a puzzle in order to find the final prize," he says.

"Some are multi-stage ... you have to find three or four clues before you find the final location."

"I talked my girlfriend into finding our first treasure," he says. "We chose one close to home, at Fort Rodman in New Bedford. At first I was pretty skeptical. Why would someone hide something and have others find it?" Immediately, however, he became an avid gamer.

"I just loved it," he says, becoming hooked after that first find. "Not so much for finding the treasure ... It brought me to places where I would not necessarily go, and/or didn't know about. Some real interesting places and, of course some not so. For the most part, all have been pretty good."

To date, Mr. Rocha has discovered 280 cache sites. He says most of his travel takes place on weekends.

"At first it seemed as if all the other people doing it were like ghosts. You never saw them, just read their logs," he says. "I didn't actually meet another geocacher on the trail until I found my 200th cache."

There are gamers who have taken the sport so much to heart that they play it just about every day.

"Our local hero in the geocaching society is a man who calls himself Waldenrun, who has accumulated 1,330 caches or so in the last few years," Mr. Rocha says.

Waldenrun, it turns out, is Geoff Matter of Hopkinton.

A longtime trail runner and outdoorsman, Mr. Matter, currently an unemployed software engineer, is proud of his record number of geocaching discoveries made within the last two years.

But what motivates the region's king of geocaching?

"The challenge," he says. "I'm obsessive about it."

In fact, Mr. Matter, who geocaches six days a week, adds to his pleasure in the sport by skipping the GPS altogether. He doesn't even own a GPS. Instead, he fixes his locations with a compass, topographic maps and orthographic projections, or aerial photos.

"It takes more brainwork," he says.

To prove his point, Mr. Matter points to a small, black dot he has marked on an aerial photo of a portion of Myles Standish State Park.

"Do you see that shadow created from this evergreen tree? It's the longest shadow on the row of trees," he says. "When I walk along that trail, I'll look for the tallest tree. Then, I'll know the geocache location."

At the very least, one of the joys of the game is being outdoors, Mr. Matter says.

"Geocaching is a fantastic way to get out and enjoy the vast number of woodland trails we have in Massachusetts."

Should you try your own hand at geocaching and head out with your GPS, the man called Waldenrun has this advice: Glance around every now and then.

"Sometimes people forget to look around and see what's out here," he says.

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