



OUTDOOR RECREATION

Cache as Cache Can Geocaching builds on an international activity

By Carrie Madren

A hybrid hobby that blends hiking and treasure hunting, geocaching has become a favorite of outdoor enthusiasts, who only need coordinates (found easily online) and a hand-held global positioning system. While many park systems have welcomed these high-tech hikers with challenging events, others are going above and beyond to keep the sport fresh for expert geocachers and novices alike.

In Texas, the Arlington Parks and Recreation department offered a commemorative pathtag (a quarter-sized metal tag for a cacher's personal collection) to those who completed a February geocache-trail, organized in honor of the Super Bowl (held in Arlington), explains Gary

Packan, assistant director. Packan first got interested in geocaching after winning a GPS at last year's NRPA Congress and Exposition.

To complete the geo-trail and win a pathtag, cachers had to discover all eight of the new caches placed by Arlington's parks department and local geocachers.

"The collectible coins are definitely a fun piece of the cache experience," says Gary Packan, who also worked with the local

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visitor's bureau to help engage Super Bowl visitors. The visitors were excited about free Super Bowl activities—even with 10 inches of snow on the ground. Arlington held a similar geo-trail for the Major League Baseball Rangers' opening day. Tying a geo-trail or cache series to community activities or traditions can be a way to update a geocache program.

Following the Super Bowl, a "Cache In Trash Out" (CITO) event drew 125 people

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Geocachers show off their finds in Arlington and Crystal Lake.

to an Arlington park cleanup, where they picked up more than four truckloads of trash.

Though CITO events have been going on since 2002, parks are devising ways to keep the events new and interesting. In one CITO variation, cachers in Crystal Lake Park District in Crystal Lake, Illinois, helped pick up trash and clear invasive brush for a couple of hours in exchange for a two-hour head-start on newly released cached coordinates—before they were made public—for a better

chance to be “first to find.”

Geocoins were the reward for a Crystal Lake passport program, where participants solved puzzles or figured out clues to find 8 of 12 caches. Those who collected eight stickers (created to be unique to each cache) received one of 150 minted geocoins: metal, wood, or clay coins the size of a quarter that bear a unique code, which can be tracked on the website Geocaching.com. Unlike a pathtag—which is meant to be collectible—geocoins can be logged online before being sent out

on a cache-to-cache journey. Then, when another geocacher finds the geocoin, he or she can enter the coin's tracking number and where they moved it to—thus a coin could be tracked around the world, explains John Fiorina, manager of natural resources at Crystal Lake Park District. This year, Crystal Lake is having 250 geocoins minted with a special color logo to celebrate the park district's 90th anniversary.

Crystal Lake also loans out GPS units for free. Cub and Girl Scout groups have been especially interested in borrowing the GPS units, Fiorina says. Parks can also explore new geocaching possibilities by partnering with local geocachers, visitors' bureaus, and businesses which can offer coupons and other freebies to add to caches.

Another trend is for park caches to have themes—cultural or natural history-based caches, for instance, may have interesting facts online about natural features or historical sites near the cache. Partner with a local geocaching group to place new caches in areas where you want to draw hikers.

“If the caches are listed on our website [Geocaching.com], they'll get a ton of people,” says Jen Sonsteli, marketing manager at Groundspeak, which runs Geocaching.com.

Geocachers themselves are evolving—no longer must a hiker have a pricy GPS system in hand. Tech-savvy individuals are now using GPS apps on their mobile phones to geocache, Sonsteli says. Such apps are available for Windows Phone 7, Androids, and iPhones. “That way, you can search for caches, navigate and log them—all from your phone,” says Sonsteli. “It's made geocaching more accessible.”

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