

Iron Matron: Geocaching offers treasure hunt, fitness

Sharie Epp

Times Colonist

Monday, July 09, 2007

Where else would you expect to find a 1979 Wayne Gretzky rookie card but under a dead tree in Beacon Hill Park? But before all you hockey nuts storm the petting zoo, it should be known that the card, being a "travel bug," was last seen hitchhiking to the Gulf Islands. The Great One was moving under cover, cautiously avoiding ubiquitous muggles.

Confused? Then you have never heard of geocaching.

I had never heard of it, either, until Shelley Brown of Victoria Parks and Recreation e-mailed an invitation to a geocaching course she was running. Why not, I thought.

Since spending a Saturday learning the ropes with Shelley and company, I've crawled under bushes in the middle of Colwood Creek Estates at 11 p.m. on Canada Day, found a pill bottle hidden among the 1,422 hectares of East Sooke Park, and almost figured out how to operate a Global Positioning System device.

In short, geocaching is a high-tech treasure hunt. Caches, which can be as tiny as a film canister or as big as a Tupperware tub, are hidden all over the world. Greater Victoria, for example, is a geocaching hotbed, having the largest number of caches for its size of any place on the globe. When I searched a 10-mile radius of my postal code, I came up with 602 caches.

The day of the course, I arrived with some trepidation, because the whole thing revolves around using a GPS unit. We had one of them stashed in the glove compartment of our boat, and the last time my hubby and I got caught in the fog, neither of us could figure out how to use it. The instruction book shares a dust-covered heap with the one-day-when-I-have-time-I'm-going-to-read-this manuals for my digital recorder, camera and two cellphones.

In a classroom at the Crystal Pool, Steve Romaine, who has hidden caches on seven continents, gave us a two-hour classroom session explaining the gist of geocaching. The heart of the whole thing is an Internet site called geocaching.com. Users register for free to gain access to the location of the caches, then enter the co-ordinates of a chosen site into a GPS. For the course, we shared about half a dozen of the little mind-numbing machines, and practised, with limited success, in a nearby field, before setting out for a family afternoon at Beacon Hill Park.

I brought my seven-year-old grandson Dylan along, and it was amazing how enthusiastic a kid can get on a two-hour walk when he has an electronic gadget in his hand. Steve had hidden a couple of caches just for the group, and two others were the real deal. With care not to disturb the flora and fauna in the park, we set out following the directional arrow on the GPS, which led us to the immediate area of the caches. Decrypting coded clues written on the cache description helped with the



CREDIT: Ray Smith, Times Colonist

Sharie Epp, left, sets out with Matthew Brown, 8, Daniel Frose, 7, and her grandson Dylan Ross, 7, on a geocaching expedition in Beacon Hill Park. At right is Shelley Brown, a recreational programmer with the City of Victoria.

last bit, and we made sure no muggles -- lurkers not geocaching -- were watching. The guy lying on a park bench had his eyes closed.

"It was cool," was Dylan's reaction, after slithering on a rabbit trail to pull out a white plastic container that was a keychain exchange. In the geocaching tradition of take something leave something, he took a little beaded gecko, and left a Budweiser carabiner, hastily pulled off my ring of car keys. We filled in the log book, a must in each cache, with comments about the find. The treasures usually include a variety of knick-knacks, and some have themes or offer clues to another cache. Online, each cache has its own comment section, and travel bugs -- items picked up in one place and dropped off somewhere else -- come with trackable dog tags and their own web pages. The Gretzky rookie card we found in Beacon Hill Park is a travel bug, and was taken by one of our group to be deposited in a cache somewhere in the Gulf Islands.

Following the initiation, and a perusal of our GPS handbook at home, Dylan and I set out to look for the cache on Creyke Point in East Sooke Park. Should have taken the book along. We got to "approaching the MOB," which stands for man overboard, and got stuck on the foredeck. We knew the cache was there, but exactly where? It seems our navigation techniques were a work in progress. After exploring a few paths we'd never trekked before, Dylan didn't seem too disappointed at giving up for the day.

We related the story to the rest of the family, and suddenly, the whole works was out tracking down caches. Jock-types who had previously eschewed hiking were flitting over hill and dale in the thrill of the hunt. We did a multi-cache, involving the pill bottle, a sudoku puzzle and the final cache at Uncle Jimmy's Rest Spot in East Sooke Park.

Geocaching was the hot topic during our Canada Day dinner, and -- possibly a few glasses of wine later -- we were trundling around with flashlights in Colwood Creek Park, while fireworks lit up the night sky. Luckily nobody called the cops.

The best thing about geocaching is where it takes you. With the wisdom of a seven-year-old, Dylan had it all figured. In the midst of our fruitless search for the cache that day, he stood at the edge of a beautiful little beach, swung his arm in a circle, and said:

"I know what the treasure is. It's this."

This is the sixth in a series of Monday morning columns that will track what happens when a 58-year-old grandmother takes on participation.

Each of the sports Sharie takes on is something that is possible for a novice without previous experience or a wad of cash.

Watch for future columns as Sharie dives into the world of in-line skating, kayaking, rock climbing and scuba diving.

For more on Sharie's adventures and to interact with her, go to www.timescolonist.com, where you will find her blog.

A HIGH-TECH TREASURE HUNT:

- Everything you ever wanted to know is on the website at www.geocaching.com. There's also a B.C. Geocaching Association site at bcgeocaching.com.
- A GPS is a must, and they're all different. Prices go anywhere from around \$100 to \$1,000 -- think birthdays or Christmas, because each of the kids (we're talking all ages here) will want their own. Some models are better than others for geocaching purposes, so finding a salesperson who knows what you're talking about is a good plan.
- The official guide -- The Complete Idiots Guide to Geocaching -- is available online.
- Another term for geocaching, which took flight on the notion "if you hide it, they

will come," is GPS stash hunt. The first cache was a black bucket located in woods near Beaver Creek, Ore., hidden on May 3, 2000, right after the U.S. relaxed its spy paranoia and allowed satellites to provide accurate readings to the ordinary GPS Joe.

- When geocaching.com was launched on Sept. 2, 2000, there were 75 known caches. As of last week, the global count was 422,892. In B.C., we have 6,110.

- Geocaching is perfect for holiday outings. Pack along the co-ordinates, and extra batteries, to take some neat side trips. Don't forget to take some toys or trinkets to trade, or just sign the logbook.

- For a different angle, anyone can plant a cache. New ones have to be approved via the website, and owners have to maintain their caches, checking the container hasn't been vandalized, been stolen, got wet, etc. If cachers can't find a cache, or it's in a bad way, they'll let the owner know in their comments.

- For obvious reasons, caches shouldn't contain food, alcohol, drugs, weapons or explosives.

- When individual caches are called up on the web, the instructions include the degree of difficulty of location and terrain, as well as accessibility for walkers, horse riders, boaters, scuba divers, cyclists, rock climbers, etc.

- To avoid being targeted by aliens who might use the satellite signal to shoot humanoids with gamma rays, the website recommends wearing tin foil on your head.

© Times Colonist (Victoria) 2007

CLOSE WINDOW

Copyright © 2007 CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc. All rights reserved.