

The Hunt IS ON

*Geocaching
offers worldwide
exploration and
discovery*

TEXT BY KEITH GILLOGLY

There isn't anything remarkable about the conduit pipe located 300 feet from Alex Smith's home in Medford. Past the street, behind a little market, the narrow tube stretches along the ground, hardly noticeable amid the surrounding urban sprawl. Smith stops to investigate the pipe. He looks inside of it, then reaches into it — he's found something: a small plastic container. Within the container, a scrap paper bears a list of names, to which he quickly scribbles his own.

The container Smith found is a geocache, one of some 2 million that are hidden worldwide. Finding geocaches and writing your handle, or player username, on the paper logbooks that they contain are the main objectives of geocaching. "It's a real-world treasure hunt that you can do anywhere," Smith says. In 2012, when Smith learned from friends that people hide geocaches all around the outdoors and then post the containers' GPS coordinates for others to locate, he became hooked on geocaching. He's

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Siblings Skyler Shaffer and Cameron Smith find a cache at Bear Creek Park in Medford. Photo by Alex Smith.



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SPECIAL

Alex Smith of
Medford finds
a cache on
Roxy Ann.



found some 2,500 caches since then and now actively promotes geocaching in Southern Oregon through social media and other means.

What's the cache?

Geocachers get started by creating a handle and logging in to Geocaching.com, the primary online hub for users to connect and look up geocache locations. From there, typing in a zip code or city will bring up a (surprisingly large) list of nearby caches and their corresponding GPS coordinates, which can then be typed into a smartphone or any GPS-enabled device — and the hunt is on! Each cache is rated from one to five

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in terms of search and terrain difficulty.

Geocaching perpetuates because anybody with a Geocaching.com login can create and hide a new cache — which can be just as fun as hunting for geocaches. “The whole geocaching community really is self-driving,” says Mark Stein of Ashland, a charter member of the Geocaching.com website. But there are rules for hiding. A cache cannot be hidden within .1 of a mile, or 528 feet, of another cache (to prevent overcrowding), and cachers must observe land laws.

It takes creativity to hide a cache, since the environment can't be disturbed — no digging, burying, or chopping trees, Smith says. Geocachers hang their containers in tree branches or tuck them under rocks. They latch magnetic containers

beneath metal benches or hide them in plain sight inside false rocks. Film canisters, ammo cans, Tupperware, or other sealable, durable repositories make up some of the common types of geocache containers.

After finding their treasure, geocachers can log the find on the geocaching website and share any observations, stories or issues surrounding the hunt after replacing the cache exactly as found. Some larger geocache containers contain little trinkets to enable a take-something, leave-something component. Others involve solving a riddle or puzzle in order to then locate the cache container and log, Stein says.

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GETTING STARTED

Geocaching apps for Apple and Android devices provide a map and compass to lead to a target cache and often sync with Geocaching.com. Using Geocaching.com and the apps and similar apps is free, with options to pay for upgrades that allow access to more caches and organizational tools, among other features. A pen is the only other essential tool, so that cachers can inscribe their handle names and the date on found log papers.

Geocaching websites track users' reported finds, but Alex Smith says the feature is more for personal use than competition. “Here in Southern Oregon, people are just relaxed about it,” he says. “It's not necessarily just a numbers game.” Geocaching is popular among retirees, Smith says, as it promotes getting out, staying active and traveling. He knows local retiree cachers who've taken their geocaching quest across the country, amassing some 10,000 or 15,000 finds. Younger cachers also find fascination with embarking on real-world treasure hunts, making geocaching a popular family activity, Smith says.



Local cachers in SOGeo participate in a worldwide geocaching event.

SOUTHERN OREGON GEOCACHERS UNITE!

Geocachers use the forum and discussion pages on Geocaching.com to plan events ranging from large conventions to smaller group hunts that all help keep a local geocaching scene strong and connected. Smith, whose geocaching handle is "Socks4," has started Facebook and Instagram pages to help unite Southern Oregon geocachers. Smith regularly posts events on Geocaching.com for Southern Oregon geocachers, which can be looked up from the "Find Nearby Events" link on the homepage.

Make local connections:

www.geocaching.com

www.facebook.com/SouthernOregonGeocaching

www.instagram.com/southern_oregon_geocaching

Email Alex Smith at
SouthernOregonGeocaching@gmail.com.


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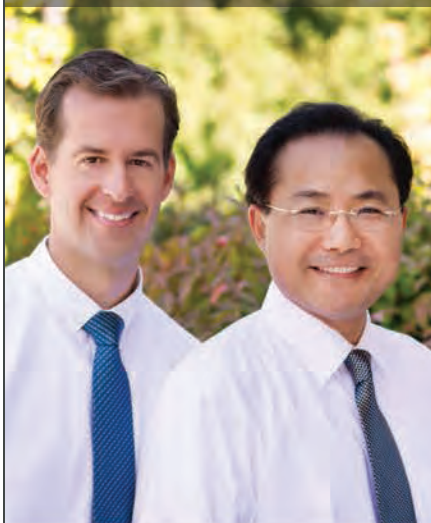
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David Watts of Medford, a.k.a. "Davey Dude," strikes another find off his list near Mt. Shasta.

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Finding caches and discovering new places

Geocaching lends itself to exploration and hiking. Caches may lead to places with particularly beautiful vistas or enable pursuers to notice a hidden waterfall, secret trail or some other unique and overlooked element of the outdoors, Smith says. Caches are often placed at historical sites or may be aligned to give a little tour of a town, Stein says. Smith recommends walking or biking the Bear Creek Greenway trail connecting Ashland and Central Point and stopping to pursue the treasure trove

of caches along the way. Or, cache hunt while hiking around Roxy Ann Peak or the Table Rocks, he suggests.

Yet some caches involve simply stepping out from your front door — which was exactly the case for Smith. After entering his zip code and pulling up the coordinates of a nearby cache, he bounded from his house, embarking on his first solo geocache hunt. He didn't have far to go — in fact, only 300 feet. There, in the hollow darkness of a conduit pipe, his first geocache lay invisible to the outside world, waiting to be found. ■

CACHING UP ON HISTORY

After the U.S. military turned off the selective availability of GPS, consumers with GPS-enabled devices could harness the now ubiquitous satellite location technology, and, soon after, geocaching was born. In May of 2000, a five-gallon black bucket stashed with goodies — videos, books, software, a slingshot — was hidden in the Beavercreek woods in Clackamas County. This GPS stash, as it was called, became the first recognized geocache. It's not in play today, but there is a plaque commemorating the site.

Early GPS stash hunters branded their activity as geocaching, and their online presence and community expanded. Back then, Stein had used GPS as a private pilot and later had a personal GPS receiver, although such devices were expensive and rare. "My inner geek was also fed,"



Stein says, recalling that such cutting-edge devices appealed to tech enthusiasts. Since then, Stein, who lives in Ashland and whose geocaching handle is "markers," has racked up some 7,300 finds. GPS technology has continually improved and is an included feature on virtually all smartphones. Smith says the technology is accurate enough today to get cachers within 10 or 15 feet of their target — then they begin overturning rocks, sifting through tree limbs and doing the cache-hunting dirty work.