

Geocaching in Northern Michigan

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Have you ever been on a stroll through the woods and come across a person staring inquisitively at a stump or looking under a trashcan in a park? These people may seem a little odd, but there's a good chance they are on a specific mission.

Welcome to the unique and challenging world of *Geocaching*. The origin of sport can be traced back to Oregon in May of 2000, when government regulations were lifted making handheld Global Positioning System (GPS) receivers much more accurate. So accurate in fact that under the right conditions you can get to within ten-feet of a pre-determined spot.

Geocaching in simple terms is a high-tech hide and seek. Someone will hide a container called a Geocache (pronounced Gee-Oh-Cash) or cache. They will then note the coordinates for the location and post them online. These containers vary in sizes and are often camouflaged or painted to help conceal them. Inside the container is a logbook and in larger containers there will be small trinkets referred to as swag. Once found, the finder will sign and date the logbook and if he/she would like, trade swag items. Once that is done the finder re-hides the cache in the same location for the next person to find. Later the finder can go to www.geocaching.com and log their find online.

Geocaching.com is the worldwide standard for geocaching. At the site a user can set up a free account to begin their journey. This is a relatively simple setup that starts with choosing a nickname. The user also has an option to become a premium member for \$30 per year and may then access additional tools and options. Once a user has an account (free or premium) they can begin searching for caches in their area or around the world. *Geocaching.com* will also keep track of user finds. When a person logs a cache online as found, the site will assign an icon and keep a running tally for them.

Surprising to most, geocaches are found just about everywhere and chances are you have passed right by one and never knew it was there. With over a half-million caches worldwide it is not hard to find an ample supply in your area. There are several thousands in Michigan alone with a hearty supply right here in Northern Michigan.

If this sounds like something you may enjoy, a small group of geocaching enthusiasts, the Straits Area Geocachers, will be hosting an annual event in the fall. The event will be open for beginners and experienced "cachers" alike. There will be a Geocaching-101 class specifically designed to introduce beginners to the

sport. Afterwards, beginners can try their newfound skill with some hands on experience. There will be plenty of volunteers available to assist people with their GPS units and searches. Even if you do not own a GPS receiver but are still interested, there will be a limited supply of GPS units there to loan out for the event.

Currently there are over 200 caches within a 20-mile radius of downtown Cheboygan and the group plans to place new permanent caches in honor of this event. In addition there will be food, prizes and several GPS games for everyone's enjoyment. Many local businesses have partnered up with the group and have donated fabulous "First-To-Find" prizes for the new caches. For more information on the event and its sponsors, you may visit the group's web site at www.geo-cachers.com.

So the next time you are out and about and come across someone with an arm elbow deep in a hole in a tree or rummaging through a pile of rocks in a field you might look at them a bit differently knowing what sort of mission they are probably on.