

Q&A

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Introduction to Geocaching

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Q. Paul: When you find a geocache, are you expected to look at it but leave it behind (not take it) for the next cacher to find?

A. John: The expectations are:

1. Sign the physical log.
2. Re-hide the geocache precisely where you found it.

You have the OPTION to

3. Remove a trackable if you agree to report that you have removed it.
4. Place a trackable in the cache if you agree to report that you have done so.
5. Trade for any swag item in the cache.

If you were to take a cache or hide it somewhere else, that changes the cache coordinates. Unfortunately, very few geocachers have figured out how to record coordinates accurately, so hiding somewhere else can cause problems for everyone else who wants to find the same cache later.

One of the cool things about living in the Washington DC metro region is that many people here travel overseas and bring back an overseas currency. Often the coins and paper money end up in geocaches. I have traded for that foreign money almost every time I find it in a cache. Now I have coins from much of western Europe and also paper money from Africa as a result.

Also, back in the 70s, the US Patent Office used custom tokens bearing the Patent Office logo for operating public photocopier machines. In a previous career, before I started to be paid for software engineering, I visited the Patent Office occasionally and used those photocopier machines. I saved some of those old tokens; three decades later, I found the small container of saved tokens in my desk and put a few of those tokens in geocaches. A much younger employee of the Patent Office found one of those in a cache and had never heard of anything like it because the machines now accept only electronic payment. So, she had to ask some Patent Office old-timers about it. She wrote about that experience in her geocaching.com log, and that is how I found out about her quest to understand the token.

Q. Thomas: What are attributes?

A. Attributes are a series of symbols assigned to a cache by its CO, indicating either constraints (such as available or unavailable at night) or conditions that may require special preparation, such as snow skis, scuba gear, or a boat.

Honestly, I was surprised that the game rules allowed a cache to be placed underwater. The rules prohibit burying a cache, so I thought the rules would prohibit submerging a cache. Not so, apparently.

I have found two geocaches where I had to rent a kayak, one to go to a lighthouse and breakwater wall on the Delaware Bay, and one to go to a Potomac River island near Riverbend Park in Fairfax, Virginia.

There are a great many attributes that the CO of a cache can apply. The following web page provides a complete list with a brief word or two describing each attribute symbol.

<https://www.geocaching.com/about/icons.aspx>

Q. Bill: Did you ever have any interesting challenges from people not understanding your suspicious activity?

A. Yes, and this subject deserves a special comment.

Geocachers often encourage other cachers to be, well, stealthy. You will see some cache descriptions mention that a cache is located in a high-muggle area, so stealth is required to find the cache. Many urban caches are described that way and caches in any retail location, like a lamp post skirt in a shopping center parking lot.

Such descriptions encourage the very scrutiny that the cacher aims to avoid since the cacher is actively trying to avoid observation, acting differently from other people in the same area.

I live in a metro region where spies are known to be at work, not just Aldrich Ames (who lived across the street from my wife's cousin in Arlington County, in a house Ames bought from a former Apollo astronaut), and Robert Hanssen, but others too, some known and some yet to be known.

Plus, I worked for law enforcement agencies as an employee of an agency contractor company for much of my career as a software engineer, including the FBI and Homeland Security. I am quite aware of the possibility that a small bison tube or any micro cache looks a lot like a dead drop. Some of Hanssen's dead drop sites around Vienna, Virginia, have become geocache GZs.

I have had three occasions where police decided to speak with me when they saw my geocaching activity. Honesty is the best policy, so I have always explained the game and what I was trying to find and why. In two cases, the police thanked me and left. In

one case, the officers demanded my attention for half an hour until they asked where I worked. I said Homeland Security; I worked for a Homeland Security contractor on a very large project to maintain and enhance a gigantic computer system. That mention of Homeland Security immediately ended the interest of the police; my guess is their department had learned the hard way to actively avoid interaction with DHS. So they let me go at that point.

In a way, it is a shame that I am retired now because I no longer have that excuse.

The most irritating situation was in Elkins, WV, when my family was wandering about a central park trying to find a cache placed there by an official state agency of West Virginia. Some hyper-alert citizen called the police because we looked suspicious. He spoke very loudly, and the local acoustics allowed us to hear him over 100 feet away. When we started to get into our minivan to depart, he pulled up behind us and read our license plate to the police. He did not attempt to block our departure or follow us.

We drove away before the police arrived; my guess is they heard the tone in the guy's voice and his lack of specific details, maybe checked the database for wants and warrants associated with our plate (there were none), and assigned the call a lower priority.

Had we been questioned, I would have explained to the police that an official agency of the state placed the cache for the public to find (and we did find it and sign the log). The police could have checked and verified by contacting the state agency. I would have offered to show them other caches in the town. I would have spoken calmly. Acting exasperated in front of police does not win an argument.

I feel that local geocaching organizations could get the city or county parks department to explain geocaching to the police. The parks department already loves geocaching since the game increases attendance in parks.

In the case of retail parking lot caches, I recommend going for those at night, when people seem less interested in whatever is going on in the parking lot. For example, I have found some in hospital parking lots at night; those lots are usually almost totally unbusy at night, especially far from the ER entrance.

Q. Bill: Is "bison" a manufacturer, or does the name mean something else?

A. I had to look it up.

It's no secret that these tubes look nothing like real bison. Not even close. So what's the reason behind the name? These containers were originally created by a company named Bison Designs. The company originally made aluminum carabiners in multiple shapes, including dog bones, mouse ears, and more. Then, seeking out new things to create out of aluminum, the need for a small, waterproof container to carry medicine in arose—and thus, the Bison Tube was born.

That is an excerpt from the following web page:

<https://www.geocaching.com/blog/2014/07/the-secret-double-lives-of-geocaching-containers/>

It is a very interesting reading.

You can buy silver aluminum tubes for pills in some drug stores, usually close the pharmacy counter.

In short, the company name has become a somewhat generic description for the container type, regardless of the maker of any individual container of that type.

Q. Bill: What have been your favorites cache containers/sites?

A. Certainly the triple waterfall in the Monongahela National Forest, where we found the cache in the vertical face of the lower waterfall. That triple waterfall is near a cranberry bog covering several acres and near a fire tower, a family favorite to climb. The waterfall has colorful rhododendron all around it in May or June each year, quite a beautiful sight. Also, we once found a micro-size magnetic geocache at the top of the fire tower, roughly 100 feet above the ground.

Another favorite of the Arizona fire truck cache is now "archived," meaning gone for good.

The two found via kayak are favorites. The one on the Potomac was a two-person effort, me and my RN daughter in a two-person rented kayak. That was one of the two I have found where the cache was in a hollow tree, and I had to photograph the depths of the hollow from above to find the container and the tether.

I found a cache in Randolph County, West Virginia, with a friend in 2019. That cache had not been found since 2014, so the find was a major coup for me. My friend provided the SUV, and we traveled several miles on a fire road to reach the cache GZ. The cache was not especially well hidden, but the fire road was quite a challenge to drive.

I found eight geocaches while driving up and down Pike's Peak one day in July 2016, including three at the top, at 14,000 feet altitude. I have no problem walking around and climbing a hillside at 8,000 feet but walking more than a few steps was a challenge at 14,000 feet. So take it slow, take deep breaths. I had heard that there were oxygen feeds in the Visitors Center at the top. So I looked around inside, but I found none.

I am especially proud of finding geocaches in SD, ND, MT, WY, NE, and CO all in one day while driving from Deadwood SD to Denver in 2016. Those are gigantic states. It took some planning to make it work. US 85, known as the Can-Am Highway, and US 385 were very valuable. I started at 10 AM in Deadwood, drove north to North Dakota, west to the Montana border, ate lunch there after finding a cache, back to North Dakota, south to I-90, west to Wyoming, found a cache, and ate dinner there, south to the

western edge of Nebraska, found one there, and found the first Colorado cache at 11:30 PM. Along the way, in Wyoming, I was able to shoot good photos of antelopes, which are known as Pronghorn in the West.

My son and daughter came along on a trip to a family wedding in Boston in 2017. We drove up and back on I-95. On the way back, we found caches in seven states in one day: MA, CT, NY, NJ, PA, DE, and MD. That is the most I have done in one day so far.

There is one cache in southern Utah that my family found at night on the same day we visited the Painted Desert Inn in Petrified Forest National Park and the ancient fire truck in Arizona. We arrived at 9:30 PM, well after dark, and parked the minivan at the bottom of the Utah hillside. I had a battery-powered 160 LED flood lamp that I used to light up the hillside. We found the ammo box hidden among huge dusty boulders because that flood lamp did its job so well. When we departed, the dogs in the neighborhood were gossiping about us like crazy. That was my first find in Utah.

Also, when attending Geowoodstock in May 2018 in Cincinnati, held in an amusement park on the banks of the Ohio River, I found 52 caches in one day, including the oldest active cache in Ohio.

There is one cache in Dolly Sods that I hiked 2.7 miles solo to find and then 2.7 miles back, all at about 4,100 feet above sea level. I thought that particular one was quite a challenge. Unfortunately, the trails are not especially well blazed or marked, and I got off track on the way back. I was lucky that I had good cell phone service on that ridge. I used the online map to figure out my location and find my way back to the trail. Now I have offline maps that can help me do the same thing without cell phone service.

My daughter found a cache with me at night, roughly 10 PM, in Bethany Beach, Delaware, that was unusual in several ways. First, the cache commemorated a bowling alley that once operated in the businesses located BELOW the beach boardwalk. Second, when we arrived, several other cachers were there to find the same cache. Finally, I think I found it, hidden below the boardwalk. My daughter loved the opportunity to talk with other cachers.

She attended Geowoodstock with me when that event was held in May 2015 in Maryland, an hour away from where we live, so the event was simply a day trip for us. So, she got a full day of nothing but geocachers that day.

I have found a number of FTFs during an annual geocaching contest sponsored by Virginia State Parks (VSP). EACH YEAR, the VSP puts a new theme cache in most state parks, and awards are prized for finding those caches in 5, 10, 20, and all 41 of the state parks. I found them all in 2017, back when there were 39 state parks. It took me about five months, mostly weekends, and a week of vacation combining a trip to Tennessee to photograph the total solar eclipse followed by 6 days in southwest Virginia. I visited seven different state parks. Unfortunately, in Lake Anna State Park, the cache had been stolen by the time I arrived, and I had to come back three weeks later when the stolen cache has been replaced.

On the first day of each contest, I visited at least six parks along I-95 and Virginia Route 3. Often, I am the First to Find new theme caches in at least two parks on the first day of the contest.

Due to the pandemic, the current theme, "Wild About Water," has been active for more than 12 months, and the VSP had told me by email that VSP has yet to decide when they will start another theme cache contest.

Q. Bill: You hinted: Are there geocaching conventions? I guess they would be announced on geocache.com

A. Yes, there are local and regional events. There are even events devoted solely to trackables; those are called GeoCoinFests.

Geowoodstock is the best-known event, also the best-attended event, and draws its attendees from the US, Canada, and a smattering of other countries. Google Geowoodstock to learn more. The next one will be held in 2022 outside the US for the first time, in British Columbia. Unfortunately, Geowoodstock was suspended in 2020 and 2021 due to the pandemic. So the Canadian organizers have been waiting a very long time for their turn. And fortunately, the Canadian government has recently decided to permit US tourists to resume visiting Canada.

Q. John: Who gets the premium money, and what do they do with it?

A. The owner of the geocaching.com site is Groundspeak, a company. The company gets the money. The company also sells geocaching supplies, trackables, and clothing. Much of the revenue pays for acquiring the merchandise, salaries of the Groundspeak company staff and the web site designers and maintainers, and the cost of the server farm space on which geocaching.com is hosted. Web sites with as much online data as geocaching.com cost a lot of money to operate.

Q. John: What Android app should I use?

A. C:GEO

If you need help to enter your geocaching account name and password established in C:GEO, contact me at the email address below. I wrote a complete illustrated explanation of C:GEO uses for the presentation but had to cut it out due to time constraints. I saved those slides and can send them to you.

Q. John: Should I report the full and best lat/long?

A. You need to do that if and ONLY if the coords provided by the CO are seriously off, at least 40 feet or so in flat terrain with no trees or buildings (like the desert), and maybe 60 feet in the situations described in the following paragraphs.

Note that GPS reception is sketchy in some situations, especially in forests, because cellulose somehow weakens radio signals at the frequency used for GPS radio signals. So, give the CO some credit; high accuracy is simply not possible in forests. In addition, the CO may have used different GPS satellites in other parts of the sky at different times of day. All of those factors can impact accuracy.

It is also true that ridges and tall buildings block part of the sky, and therefore some of the satellites transmitting GPS radio signals. So GPS can be less accurate in those conditions.

I identified another type of place where GPS accuracy can be severely impacted. I have found geocaches in two forested parks, one in Delaware near I-95 and another in West Virginia just south of I-68, where the parks were former iron mines. There is enough iron left in the ground in both places to act as a diffuse antenna and soak up a great deal of the GPS radio signal strength. Wow, those sites made finding geocaches quite difficult.

COMMENT: Paul - The relatively small Detroit suburb of Saint Clair Shores has 4746 geocaches "around that area."

John's reply: Well, that depends on how "the area" is defined. Geocaching.com uses a 10-mile radius for most searches. From the center of Chicago, much of the area in that radius is in Lake Michigan and has no geocaches. Choose a larger radius or a center that is many miles away from a Great Lake, and more caches will be included.

COMMENT: Judy - My son used to set up geocaches when he and his family and other families spent Memorial Day at a Ventura Beach campground and the desert (California City) at New Years. He went to the site a day before everyone else to set up everything, and they had a great time searching. At CC, they rode motorcycles while searching - even the kids.

John's reply: I first found myself in parks and forests frequently when I was a Boy Scout in the mid-60s. Even Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts can earn a merit badge (or the GSA equivalent) for geocaching. I am glad it has become a family activity for so many people. In my family, we started before smartphones and had only one hand-held GPS receiver for many years.

Smartphones in the hands of family members make it possible to do what Judy described: anyone can hide caches privately for family, and family members can use smartphone apps to find those private caches.

It is critically important that the hider knows how to capture map coordinates accurately for each private cache. That takes careful thought and practice. To be honest, capturing coordinates accurately is easier with the assistance of a magnetic compass. And the hider should give out a good description of the location.

My kids are grown up and scattered, but we still go find geocaches when we get together.

Diane: Wow, that was really interesting. Thank You

Paul: Very cool presentation!!!! Thanks.

Jane: What a fascinating presentation! I've got to try geocaching

John's reply: I always aim to communicate why the topic can be interesting or valuable, and my own enthusiasm. I appreciate your feedback; sounds like I hit the mark this time.

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Known as Dreamer of Pictures on geocaching.com; "never one word when five will do" - read my online logs to find out why that statement makes sense.