



By Lauren Pidot

Photos by Sue Shafer/DEC



It was an ordinary Saturday morning at Five Rivers Environmental Education Center in Delmar. A few families perused exhibits in the display room, several retirees kept watch over the bird feeders through a large picture window, and the more intrepid visitors walked the nature trails under cloudy skies.

As an intern at Five Rivers I am familiar with the variations in the daily rhythm of activity, but on this particularly gloomy morning I had arrived to participate in a pursuit quite beyond the normal routine. My companion and I stood in the parking lot under gathering clouds, preparing to search for hidden treasure. Using a small device, signals from space, and our own sharp wits we would spend the next half hour making our way through the forests and fields of Five Rivers searching for our cleverly hidden quarry.

## New Outdoor Activity

My morning activities might have seemed somewhat odd to the uninitiated passerby, but they were hardly as absurd as they might have appeared. I was being introduced to geocaching (pronounced “geo-cashing”), the Global Positioning System (GPS) adventure game that has won legions of enthusiasts since its inception five years ago. Five Rivers recently became one of a growing number of public properties playing host to one or more of the caches—or hidden containers—sought by the game’s participants. Many officials responsible for these public lands are still grappling with how this new recreational activity fits into

existing management plans, but most agree that geocaching has about the same impact on the environment as hiking.

My initiation into this game of high-tech hide-and-seek was graciously facilitated by the individual responsible for the Five Rivers cache. Chet King, a Delmar resident who has been visiting Five Rivers for more than 40 years, was already an avid outdoorsman when he learned of the game just over a year ago. Intrigued, he quickly joined the thousands of devotees who spend some of their free time seeking the more than 90,000 caches now hidden in nearly 200 countries around the world.

## Birth of a Pastime

Geocaching was born on May 3, 2000, just two days after the Clinton administration unscrambled GPS satellite signals that were previously reserved for military use. A few adventure lovers in Portland, Oregon quickly realized that, in addition to its usefulness for civilian navigation, the new access could also be used to create a game for those who love both technology and the great outdoors. The sport has grown rapidly; geocaches can now be found in every state in the union, with more than 2,300 tucked away into the nooks and crannies of New York State alone.

## Geocaching 101: Basic Vocabulary

**Cache:** A hidden container holding a log book, pencil, and a few “treasures.”

**Global Positioning System (GPS):** A series of satellites that can help you determine your location.

**Virtual Cache:** A geocache for which the coordinates describe a noteworthy location rather than a hidden container. Some land managers use virtual caches in areas where actual caches are forbidden.

**Way Point:** A set of named longitude and latitude coordinates that describes a location. Way points, such as the location of a cache or a trailhead, can be stored in a GPS unit for future reference.

The heart of this technology-driven adventure game is, appropriately enough, a website. By visiting [www.geocaching.com](http://www.geocaching.com), players can obtain coordinates of caches located in their region. With a free membership, enthusiasts can also register the coordinates of their own caches, log their finds, and discuss all things geocache with those similarly enthralled.

Though I had scanned the website the day before, I required a crash course in GPS technology before I could embark on my hunt.

Chet guided me through the functions of his GPS receiver, which runs on AA batteries and is the approximate size and shape of a cell phone. While waiting for the receiver to lock on to the satellite signals, Chet showed me how to enter coordinates and make an arrow appear to point me in their direction. The device also reported my distance from the target, although it offered no clues to navigating obstacles I might meet on the way.

During this orientation, Chet mentioned that he had found purchasing this small device more challenging than buying a car. A portable GPS unit can run between \$100 and \$1,000, with the price depending on the features and precision desired by the buyer. Receivers can be customized for road navigation, hunting, and even golf! Units must be able to pick up the signals from at least three of the two dozen GPS satellites currently in orbit in order to determine, with any accuracy, the distance and direction of a desired destination. The better the unit, the more easily signals are picked up, and the more precise the reading.

## Treasure Found

After 20 minutes of following the receiver's arrow while attempting to stay on the Five Rivers' designated paths, the distance reading dwindled to 50 and then 20 feet. As we neared his cache, Chet admitted that his fixation on the technology has occasionally proved a handicap when it comes to actually finding the "treasure." While his eyes tend to remain on the receiver, his wife, who is his frequent companion in the game, will watch the scenery, and is very often the first person to locate the cache. A GPS unit will bring you accurately within a few feet of your goal, but from there you must do the rest. According to convention, caches may not be buried, but may be concealed in numerous other ways. The actual cache can also vary from an old army



A log book entry left for future geocachers.

ammunition box to a tiny film canister.

When I finally located the cache's devilishly clever hiding spot, I pried open the lid to find an eclectic array of trinkets and, most importantly, a well-used log book. The "treasures" are available on a take-something, leave-something basis, with the initial trove supplied by the creator. While not every cache is stuffed with prizes, all contain a notebook or sheet on which a triumphant player can record his or her success.

I flipped through the 20 or so previous entries in the log book,

before settling on a blank page to scrawl my own declaration of victory. While several writers described Five Rivers as a lifelong favorite natural space, many noted that geocaching had brought them to the grounds for the first time or for the first time in many years. Geocachers consistently expressed an appreciation for the scenery as much as for the cleverness of the cache. The thrill of the game may be the hunt, but all seem to agree that one of its greatest benefits is the opportunity to discover new places of natural beauty.

## Preventing Conflicts

As the number of caches on public lands increases, many property managers are attempting to balance resource protection while accommodating a new audience. While most geocachers seem to understand land managers' responsibility to protect both sensitive natural areas and public safety, they are concerned



Just like satellite dishes, hand-held GPS units receive satellite signals from space.



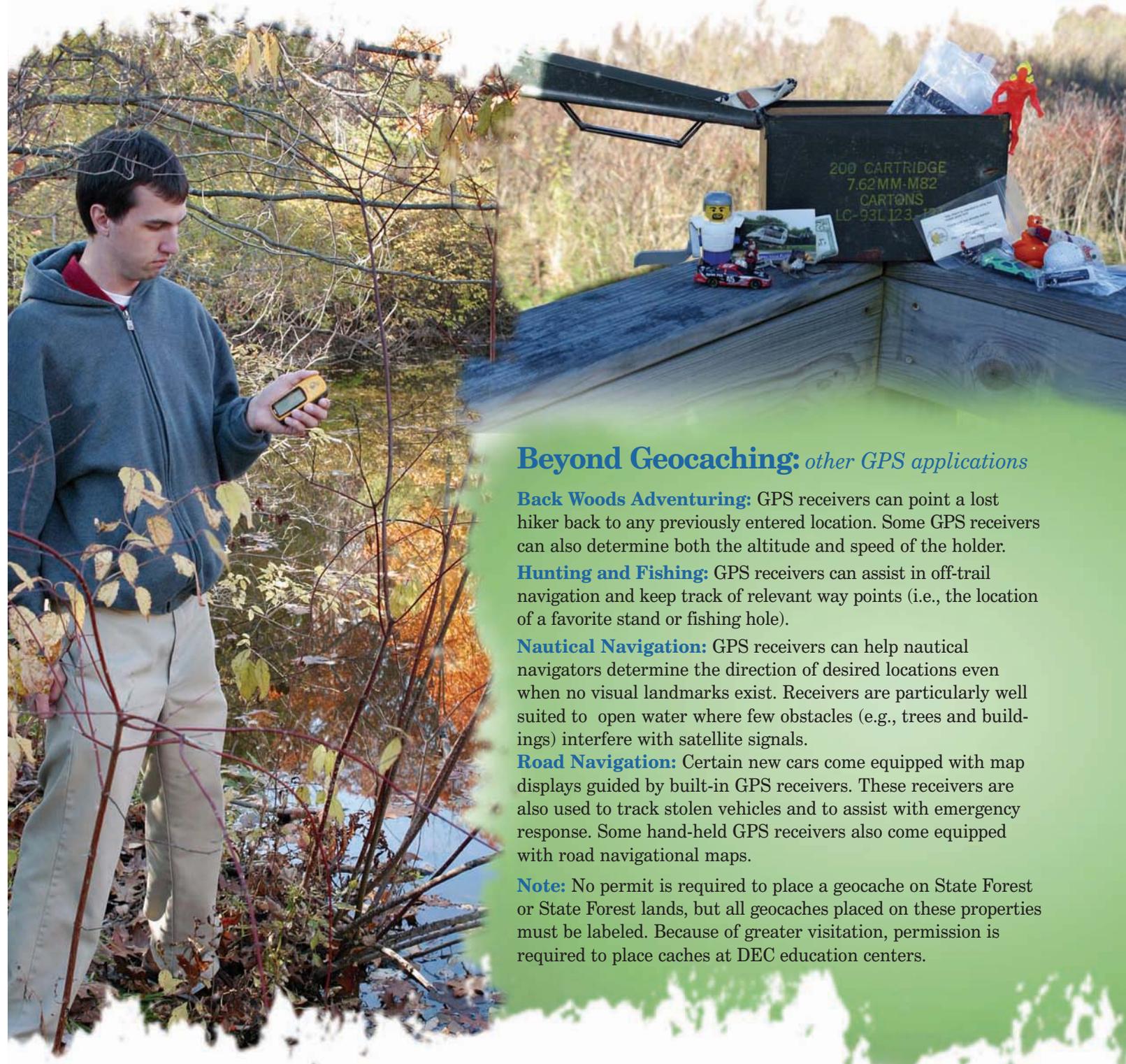
that their hobby could be prohibited altogether. Five Rivers' Director Craig Thompson is working with other DEC educators to address placement of caches at all DEC Environmental Centers. According to Thompson, "When properly managed, geocaching is compatible with our stewardship and public use goals."

My log book entry complete, we began our return journey, the receiver's arrow pointing steadfastly toward the coordinates I had entered for the parking lot. Even on a gray day it is easy to appreciate the

diverse landscape through which we wandered—a landscape Chet has been able to share with others through his cache. A growing legion of fans ensures that we have not heard the last of geocaching. Someday soon, it may be common to see whole families out for a weekend adventure, enjoying the great outdoors and searching for hidden treasure.

Formerly a Student Conservation Association intern at Five Rivers Environmental Education Center, **Lauren Pidot** is currently an intern in Washington, D.C. for the National Council for Science and the Environment.

Hand-held GPS units lead participants to the "prize," known as a cache.



## Beyond Geocaching: *other GPS applications*

**Back Woods Adventuring:** GPS receivers can point a lost hiker back to any previously entered location. Some GPS receivers can also determine both the altitude and speed of the holder.

**Hunting and Fishing:** GPS receivers can assist in off-trail navigation and keep track of relevant way points (i.e., the location of a favorite stand or fishing hole).

**Nautical Navigation:** GPS receivers can help nautical navigators determine the direction of desired locations even when no visual landmarks exist. Receivers are particularly well suited to open water where few obstacles (e.g., trees and buildings) interfere with satellite signals.

**Road Navigation:** Certain new cars come equipped with map displays guided by built-in GPS receivers. These receivers are also used to track stolen vehicles and to assist with emergency response. Some hand-held GPS receivers also come equipped with road navigational maps.

**Note:** No permit is required to place a geocache on State Forest or State Forest lands, but all geocaches placed on these properties must be labeled. Because of greater visitation, permission is required to place caches at DEC education centers.