"Caching"

In on the Treasure:

Geocaching Goes to the Dogs

by **Janet Winikoff**



Geocaching is a flexible sport, matching the pace of each participant. During a trip to Willow Creek, Kelli and Leo pause to appreciate the moving Utah landscape.

Leo is a seven-year-old Dalmatian who has summited mountains in his native California, traveled to glitzy urban destinations like Las Vegas, Nevada, and explored the vast and rich landscape of Idaho. Thanks to his dog parents, Kellie and Joe Connolly, Leo shares in the fun as they take part in an exciting, canine-friendly game called geocaching.

Geocaching is a pastime that everyone—and every dog—can play. It's a treasure hunt where participants download cache coordinates to a GPS or smartphone in order to seek out hidden containers called "geocaches," or simply "caches." Some geocachers like to hide caches, others prefer seeking caches, and some enjoy both. Unlike most canine-human games, where the dogs exert themselves as people watch, with geocaching the humans do all the work while the dogs tag along to offer companionship and moral support.

Some caches are hidden to attract players to exceptionally beautiful destinations while others are placed in spots that may have historical or personal significance. But most caches are left behind merely to challenge and entertain folks who relish a good puzzle.

Caches are often camouflaged to blend in with their surroundings but should never be buried. They may be smaller than a pill bottle or larger than a steamer trunk, and inside every cache is a logbook players sign as proof of their "find." Geocacher Judy Sutherlin, of Covington, Louisiana, signs logbooks she locates with Cache, her Yorkie. Some caches also contain trinkets, tools, books or toys called "treasure." If you take a piece of "treasure," game etiquette encourages you to put something else in the cache for the next player.

All you need if you and your dog want to give geocaching a try is access to the Internet for downloading cache coordinates, a GPS or smart-

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The LoPrestos know that the real treasure in geocaching is "cashing in" on time spent together on the trail with Koyuk and Rohn, their Alaskan Klee Kais.

phone, and an adventurous spirit. Coordinates are accurate within fifteen yards, placing players in the cache's vicinity without giving away its exact location. Many are concealed so cleverly that players sometimes wind up searching for a cache that's in plain view.

The most popular website for finding cache coordinates is Geocaching.com. Anyone can create a free account and search for caches by zip code, city, state, or country. The site also provides important information regarding terrain, how difficult a cache is to locate, and if dogs are allowed to trek to the cache's location.

Players can also post comments and photos of their excursions on the Geocaching.com website. "Always post pics of your dogs and a cache. We love to see them!" says Utah resident Paul Wyman, who geocaches around Salt Lake Valley with Hua hua, his three-year-old female chihuahua.

Since almost any public area makes for a great cache hiding spot, it's not surprising to find people of all ages and from all walks of life peeking under picnic benches, rummaging around shopping mall parking lots, and scouring rural state parks for hidden containers. Just as some dogs enjoy doing scent work, humans get a thrill from locating caches. With more than two million geocaches stashed around the globe and six million players worldwide, there's no shortage of places to search, treasures to find, or friends to make.

Players are constantly exploring new locations and meeting new people in their travels, even when they prefer staying close to home. After locating more than 7,500 caches together, Haughton, Louisiana's Titus and Nerae Haynes discovered their greatest "find" two years ago. The two came across a pet adoption event while looking for caches, fell in love with a dog named Rudy, and adopted him into their geocaching clan. Now the two-and-a-half-year-old Shetland sheepdog-dachshund mix is a constant caching companion. "He knows when geocaching days come and he is the first up and about," Titus says.

Most states have geocaching clubs that hold regular meetings. Old friends can chat about exciting finds while those new to the game can learn tips and tricks from more experienced players. Geocachers are a notoriously jovial, canine-loving bunch, and dogs are often welcome at special events. Titus Haynes fondly

Geocaching can put an end to monotonous dog walking routines.

Quick Fact
There are over 2 million active geocaches and more than 6 million geocachers across the globe.

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Geocachers often hide caches in locations with significant meaning—personal, historical, or social—depositing caches in such diverse places as a local park, the seaside or even underwater.



Kelli Connolly poses with Leo on one of their geocaching adventures. Many geocachers mark their finds by posting photos to social media.

recalls attending a geocaching event in Warm Springs, Georgia, where organizers went out of their way to make "geopups" feel welcome with fun signs, safety messages, and a watering area for thirsty canines.

Geocaching can put an end to monotonous dog walking routines. Rolling Meadows, Illinois couple Megan and Rick LoPresto started geocaching two years ago so they could share a fun activity with their two Alaskan Klee Kais, Koyuk (a five-year-old female) and Rohn (their three-year-old male). Bored by what Megan describes as "the same old walks," The LoPrestos took up geocaching with their dogs and have racked up more than a thousand finds throughout Illinois and Wisconsin. The couple is so enthusiastic, they even started teaching classes on how to geocache with your dog.

Caching can quickly become addictive, as the Connollys are well aware. Known fondly by friends as "The Leo Trio," Kellie and Joe Connolly have geocached with Leo throughout nine states and acquired more than 4,100 finds together. "We've climbed mountains, played in the snow, camped in the forest, and hiked on every kind of trail there is. Leo can hike with us for miles or just go around the block if that's all we have time for," Kellie says.

Although they are prolific geocachers, Joe admits that he and Kellie prefer taking things more slowly so they can spend quality time with each other—and Leo. "We tend to be more selective in where we go and what kinds of geocaches we find—ones that are more about sharing the day together versus 'numbers,'" he explains.

Geocachers Jim Greene and Sarah Chisholm of St. Louis, Missouri, say their English setter, Blue, is known in geocaching circles as a "travel bug"—a traveling cache that players can claim as a find if they meet the fourteen-year-old former show dog on the trail. Like

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Blue, Leo and Rudy are also "travel bugs" and wear tags on their collars denoting their special status.

Experienced players advise newcomers and their dogs to start off close to home and tackle easy caches then gradually work up to more challenging adventures. Megan LoPresto believes smaller dogs enjoy the game as much as larger canines. "Just because your dog is tiny shouldn't hold you back," she says. Paul Wyman agrees, claiming his dog Hua hua can easily traverse the trickiest terrain.

An added benefit of geocaching is that it can improve socialization. "Exposing dogs to the outdoors, other dogs, and people is also part of good dog training," Jim Greene emphasizes. Of course, pet parents can always accommodate canines who feel anxious around unfamiliar people or dogs by avoiding heavily trafficked paths or events that may be overwhelming.

Like any other sport, players need to take safety seriously for themselves and their dogs. A leash can be a lifesaver, whether geocaching in a big city, suburban neighborhood, or wooded area where wildlife is abundant. Joe Connolly says he, Kellie, and Leo have encountered coyotes, deer, rabbits, moose, and mountain goats while geocaching. "We have never hiked anywhere where Leo has been off-leash. This helps us keep him safe, on the trail, and under control when we see other animals," Joe explains. "Having him on leash also makes him an integral part of our hikes, as he steps along the same paths we do." Plenty of water, collapsible bowls, treats, waste bags, a comb, tick key, and a small pet first-aid kit are also important supplies for geocaching canines. In states where venomous snakes may be prevalent, dog parents should consider aversion training or rattlesnake vaccinations.

Most players emphasize that geocaching creates a special bond between dogs and humans. Judy Sutherlin loves how her Yorkie, Cache, is a great companion on the trails, while the Connollys describe a different kind of bond when they're out with Leo. "Trust comes to mind for me. Leo trusts that we are going to take care of him when we go out, and that we'll bring him back," Kellie shares, adding that the trust developed while geocaching is a two-way street. "If we come to a tricky part of a trail or have to maneuver around an obstacle, Leo is an equal partner with us in getting through those places. He has complete confidence in our actions to keep him safe, and he shows relief knowing we are safe too."



Neither dog size nor cache size matters, as Cache, Judy Sutherlin's Yorkie, demonstrates. All dogs, regardless of breed, can enjoy geocaching.

What is Geocaching?

Geocaching /jee-oh-kash-ing/ is an adult version of backyard treasure hunting, where the entire world is the backyard, a GPS device is the map, and you can play with geocachers from neighborhoods around the globe.

History of Geocaching

In the year 2000, the GPS craze unfolded with the government's pledge to remove "selective availability" on GPS technology. Privately-owned GPS technology improved intensely. With pinpoint accuracy available to citizens, GPS enthusiasts brainstormed new uses for their technology. Computer consultant Dave Ulmer put the technology to the test, hiding a bucket filled with prizes (books, software, videos) near Portland, Oregon, and posting the GPS coordinates on a GPS users' internet group page. The experiment, which he initially called "Great American GPS Stash Hunt," was an immediate success and the name of the "sport" changed to *geocachaching*, a combination of the prefix *geo* (for Earth) and *cache* (signifying a hiding place for treasured items).

For more information about geocaching opportunities visit Geocaching.com.

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Summer_2014.indd 47 4/16/2014 12:11:24 PM