

## Hi-Tech Hide and Seek

Geocachers search for coordinates and "treasures" throughout Northern Virginia's parks.

[By Erika Jacobson](#)

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It is just after 1:30, Sunday afternoon and Claude Rountree and Ken Moss are in the woods of Algonkian Regional Park, turning over fallen branches, reaching into hollowed tree trunks and brushing aside piles of dead leaves, wet from the recent rains. They are searching for a cylinder about the length of quarter and their only clue for locating it is the coordinates they have entered into their global positioning systems.

Five minutes pass, then 10, before Rountree picks up a piece of wood sticking out of a knot in a fallen tree. The bottom of the loose piece has a hole just large enough for a small cylinder to fit into. Rountree turned to Moss in triumph, only to learn that Moss had found the cylinder minutes before.

"You were standing right next to it," David Prebeck, who was sitting on a nearby log, having found the cylinder on another trip to Algonkian, said. "Some of these things are really well hidden." Prebeck, Rountree and Moss are all members of the newly-formed Northern Virginia Geocaching Organization, also known as NoVAGO, made up of enthusiastic geocachers from across the area. Prebeck serves as president, Rountree vice president and Moss does the public relations. As often as possible, the three men go out geocaching, heading into parks and areas across Virginia, and the nation, to search for items hidden by other geocachers.

"Geocachers are some of the most active users of parks," Ken Moss, a Burke resident, said.

"This just gives you a reason to get out of the house and out of the office," Prebeck, an Ashburn resident who said he sometimes caches for as many as 14 hours straight. "It takes you places you would never know were there."

**GEOCACHING BEGAN** in 2000 when President Bill Clinton announced that the United States would stop the intentional degradation of the global positioning system (GPS) signals available to the public, allowing people to pinpoint locations up to 10 times more accurately than they did before.

On May 3 of that year a computer consultant in Beaver Creek, Ore., decided to test the accuracy. He hid a black container in the woods of Beaver Creek and noted the coordinates on his online community. Quickly people used their GPS to find the container and geocaching was born.

Now there are more than an estimated 300,000 caches in more than 200 countries across the globe and geocachers from across the country can connect through the Internet, where people post their

For More Information  
The Northern Virginia Geocaching Organization will hold its first meeting Saturday, Jan. 14, at 1 p.m., at the Ashburn Library. To learn more about the organization, visit [www.novago.org](http://www.novago.org). To get more information about geocaching, visit [www.geocaching.com](http://www.geocaching.com).



Photo by Erika Jacobson/The Connection  
Claude Rountree, left, Ken Moss and David Prebeck map coordinates to the next cache on their global positioning systems.



Photo by Erika Jacobson/The Connection  
David Prebeck spreads out

hidden caches.

"Every time I go somewhere from work I'll note some caches in the area," Prebeck said. "If a meeting gets out early or I have some free time, I'm off."

the items he found in a cache in Algonkian Regional Park.



THE CACHES THAT are hidden range from tiny cylinders filled only with a small piece of paper for hunters to write their names on. Other are larger Tupperware containers or ammo cans filled with items such as McDonald's toys, small cars, coins or other trinkets for cachers to trade out.

"Some cachers will leave prizes for the person who is first to find it," Moss said. "The logs run the gamut as well. Some will just have room to write your name. Others are voluminous, where you write something about the cache or what you thought of the hiding place."

Participant also trade Travelbugs or leave Geocoins in larger caches. Geocoins can be purchased or made by participants and are tracked from location to location.

Travelbugs are items that move from place to place, often with a goal location or series of places it wants to go.

"If you know you are going to a place listed on the Travelbug, you take it with you and leave it in a cache you do there," Rountree, who lives in Ashburn, said. He picked up one Sunday that wanted to "go to the Capitol." "Some people will take a photo of themselves with the bug in whatever place it wanted to go and post it online."

JUST LIKE THEIR items, caches differ depending on the person who hid them. Traditional caches are ones that simply give the coordinates to the hidden item. Multicaches have several steps to them. The coordinates listed on the Internet will lead participants to an item with new coordinates, which will either lead to the item or to yet another set of coordinates.

"Multicaches really make you go out and see different parts of the park," Prebeck said. "The coordinates will get you close, but then you just have to search."

Puzzle caches are a favorite of the three men because they require some work before you can even set foot in a park or outdoor area.

"Puzzle caches will obscure the coordinates," Rountree said. "Some use high-level mathematics." Rountree, Prebeck and Moss have seen puzzle caches that use the Periodic Table, atomic weight, computer codes, poetry, phonetics and even one based on the Navajo code talkers.

It is not unusual for people to search for one cache over multiple days, Prebeck said. Prebeck himself has a cache hidden in a shelter at Algonkian Park that only one person has found and only after searching for 50 hours.

"They completed renovated the shelter and didn't disturb my cache once," he said.

WITH SO MANY people spending their free time searching through public parks, geocachers are very aware of their impact on natural areas. There is a set of national guidelines posted on the geocaching Web site that all caches must follow.

"You can hide caches in downed trees or hollow trees," Prebeck said, "but we don't disturb anything. You can't dig a hole and bury anything."

"We don't want to destroy the natural environment," Rountree said.

Caches are not allowed near schools and most caches have stopped being placed near bridges.

"Since 9-11 bridges have become a safety concern," Prebeck said.

There is also a guideline that no two caches can be closer than 500 feet apart, Moss said, to avoid over saturating an area.

Some park organizations, such as the Northern Virginia Park Authority, which oversees Algonkian, have a blanket policy about geocaching.

"They have looked at our Web site and approved our guidelines," Moss said. "As long as we adhere to [the site's] guidelines we can have free range."

Some areas, such as Fairfax County, are working on creating their own policy about geocaching, which participants would have to follow in order to use the county's parks.

A volunteer reviewer must approve each cache before it can be published for the public to search for.

"There is a lot of self-policing in our community," Moss said. "We rely on cachers not to put things in dangerous places. Cachers will take note of bad caches and make suggestions or site concerns over the location. It is incumbent on the owner [of the cache] to know the guidelines."

CACHING AND geocachers are also important partners in keeping the park clean. Moss brought a garbage bag with him and all three men picked up any trash they found along their way.

"Most of us really enjoy the outdoors and want to keep the parks clean," Rountree said.

Geocaching is not limited to adults, either. Families, older couples and young children all take part in caching, helping each other out as they meet on the path and communicating with each other on the Internet.

"We are a very close community," Rountree said. "We really get to know each other through caching."

After four hours of hiking through Algonkian Park and almost 10 finds, the three men head back to their cars. Rountree plans to go home to his family, but Moss and Prebeck are making plans to head out to another cache that Moss has not found yet.

"I've found all of the caches in this park," Prebeck said with a laugh. "But I will always go out again. This is more than a hobby. It has really become an obsession."